Serbia, Montenegro & Croatia

Tuesday - Day 1

A leisurely 4.30pm departure gave us plenty of time to get to the airport. The usual pre-boarding champagne was a welcome respite from a hectic few weeks (this seems to be the norm these days).

We were top deck on the A380 and have decided this is the way to travel whenever the opportunity arises. So quiet, so much legroom, so few people in the cabin. After a couple of hours layover in Singapore we board a jam packed 747 for the 12½ flight to Frankfurt. Another layover of 5 hours before our connection to Belgrade. All in all, our trip is 36 hours door to door.

It's now Wednesday morning... - Day 2

Reason for this trip: Dave has an AIMS board meeting in Belgrade on Friday/Saturday this week. We've arrived Wednesday to give us a full day to recover and have a look around Belgrade.

The flight from Frankfurt to Belgrade is a little under 2 hours, with stunning views over the alps along the way. As we commence our descent into Belgrade, the landscape is covered with snow – in fact, there is snow as far as the eye can see to the east. I assume this is the northern parts of Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. The snow becomes less thick on the ground but is still prevalent as we land in Belgrade, just south of the city.

We are met at the airport by Milan, who drives us to our hotel, the Moskva (Moscow). The view from our 4th floor room shows a very eastern European city and there is plenty of snow on the ground. Milan advises that we will be taken to dinner tonight and to meet in the lobby at 8.30pm. While we are grateful for their hospitality we are left wondering how we will cope with a late dinner.

As he enters our room, Dave announces "it's very European", ie hotel speak for small! It's actually a reasonable size, small by Australian standards, and has a lovely bathroom, at least enough cupboard space to hang our clothes (although is their *ever* enough coat hangers) and a comfy bed. That's all we need. It's 3pm and we've had it, so we bed down for a kip.

We meet our host, Dejan, in the foyer at 8.30pm; he has booked dinner in the hotel restaurant and we're all quite relieved that we don't have to go too far. Everyone is worn out from travel and hoping for an early night.

Dejan fills us in on a lot of the history of Serbia and Belgrade over dinner. Beograd means "white city", with beo meaning white and grad meaning city – this is the local spelling of the city. It has been destroyed on 66 occasions! Dejan tells the story of the 1999 marathon which was to be held on 17 April. NATO had started bombing Belgrade, with the intention of getting rid of Milosevich. The organisers of the marathon wrote to NATO and told them the marathon was to be held on the 17th and that the runners had been contacting them saying they wanted to, and would, run. The city was bombed on the 16th but the marathon went ahead on the 17th..... with no bombings. The bombing resumed on the 18th. Subsequent to the event they contacted NATO and asked if they had received their letter – they advised yes and that the bombing was halted to allow the marathon to take place. Needless to say, the marathon is seen to be a major part of the city and the organisers have forged a strong bond with city officials.

Dejan is a fountain of information with regard to the history of Serbia and was here during the bombing. He tells us about NATO bombing the hospital..... NATO had information that members of the army were in the hospital so the killed many innocent people to get rid of the few. The horrors that the innocent people were subject to were vast, all (purportedly) in the pursuit of Milosevich.

Dinner is too many courses that take too long a time but it is lovely none the less. We start with a hearty borscht with plenty of meat and vegies. The soup would be quite sufficient for dinner on its own but still have to make our way through the next three courses! By the end of dinner, we are struggling to stay awake. It's 11pm and we drag ourselves off to bed.

Thursday - Day 3

A beautiful clear day as the sky lightens. We go out for a run and the city is quiet and only a few people are on the street. We run through the shopping mall, down towards the fortress. There is a wonderful park adjacent to the fortress and it is covered in snow. The temperature is crisp and just about perfect for running. We do a lap of the fortress, which affords views down over the Danube. There is a military museum in the fortress and many tanks and cannons, from various times in history are displayed in the grounds.

Our plan had been to have a 'free day' to explore the city but you know what they say about the "best laid plans". Dave is to go off to meet the Minister for Sport and Tourism, the head of Serbian athletics, the head of the Serbian Olympic Committee and the Mayor. I spend a quiet time in the room, catching up with some work, before heading downstairs to join the visit the mayor.

Dejan meets us at noon and we're driven to the mayor's office, which is literally a few hundred metres away! It's a former palace that was built by the king about 120 years ago and it's very grand. We meet the mayor and sit around wile pleasantries are exchanged. The mayor is a former national water polo player. The head of the Olympic Committee is a former Yugoslavian basketball player who also played in the NBL for quite a while, before returning to Belgrade with his family.

We walk back to the hotel and agree to meet in 15mins to walk down to the fortress for a further look around. During our walk back Dave recounts the many sites they passed this morning that were bombed and have not been rebuilt.

We only get part way down the mall when we come across a lovely cafe, so we pull up a seat and sit in the sun. The chairs have inviting blankets on them and it's cosy to wrap one over my legs while we watch the world go by. We order a couple of sandwiches and Irish coffees. Dave settles for hot chocolate. The coffees are fabulous and the hot chocolate is typically European, ie you can nearly stand your spoon in it.

We continue onto the fortress and enjoy the views over the river and the military displays. There's a beautiful cathedral a few blocks away and we can see its very Russian inspired spires so go to investigate. It's a lovely church with magnificent chandeliers, gold work and stain glass windows.

We are heading in the general direction of our hotel when I see a "hole in the wall" and stick my head in. It's a bar in a basement and I have a chat with the staff there. Seeing as we are there, we have a local wine and the staff inform us they've just opened in the past two days, we are their first customers.

We solve the problems of the world over a couple of wines and make our way back to the hotel.

We freshen up with a shower before meeting in the foyer at 8.30pm. We have transport but Dejan informs us that it is a 10 minute walk to the restaurant, which is down in the old part of town. We opt to walk as the night is crisp and the streets are quite busy with people. More arrivals have joined us.

Our restaurant (Two Deer or Dva Jelena) is crowded, hot and smokie. Luckily, we walk through the throng, out the back and downstairs to a private, non smoking room. The staff suggest we start with a digestive of plum brandy and it's handed out. It's like rocket fuel and brings back memories of Mongolian vodka. As they are not particularly favourable memories I put mine aside after the first sip.

The meal takes a while to come out but is plentiful – platters of smoked meats, tomatoes and fetta; more salads with peppers, capsicum and olives and a wonderful clay casserole of mixed grills.... chicken, pork neck, meat skewers and the most wonderful roasted potatoes. I choose a piece of pork and potatoes and it is divine. The pork cuts like butter and has the most amazing taste, as do the potatoes. Dessert looks like baklava; I don't partake as enough is enough.

Towards the end of dinner we are joined by the musicians who serenade the table. There's lots of singing, clapping and merriment and they entertain us for 30 minutes or so. The night has flown by and by the time we walk back to the hotel it's 1am.

Friday - Day 4

Another crisp morning and we go for a run down through the old part of the city. The city has a great feel to it, very European, wonderful architecture. Down for a quick cafe au lait, Dave goes off to his board meeting and I am catching up with the major news item of the day, an earthquake and tsunami in Japan.

The sun is beaming down as I leave the hotel to have a walk about town and hopefully find some information about interesting places to visit. First stop is the front desk – not particularly helpful but I manage to obtain a map. The tourist info centre is just down the mall but they don't seem to be that interested in providing tourism services – "could you recommend any day trips?" 'no'; "could you recommend places of interest around Belgrade?" 'no'; but then he points a disinterested finger to a board which displays a trolley car trip around the city at 7pm. So I get a map from Mr Happy and explore a few of the local back streets running off the mall. It's a glorious day to be walking around and the temperature climbs to 15 degrees.

I meet Dave back in the room and they are off to a press conference (back at the mayor's office) so I join in. It is professionally done and the media is attentive.

We saunter back to the hotel and decide to eat in. We order goulash soup all round, the perfect filler to tide us over until another gastronomic adventure tonight. I have just noticed the name of the restaurant, The Tchaikovsky, appropriate for this very Russian influenced country.

Dave returns to the board room and I decide to have a relaxing time with a book in the room. Our room faces west and the sun warms the room beautifully in the afternoon. I laze on the bed, read through maps and info that we've received in a 'welcome pack' today and plan to seek out the local markets tomorrow.

Dinner tonight is in a restaurant in the fortress, Restoran Kalimggdanska Terasa, which I assume is something to do with a terrace. Belgrade is situated on the confluence of the Danube and Sava Rivers and the fortress sits high on the hill with views in all directions.

The setting for the restaurant is stunning.... the fortress is lit up and we walk along the cobblestone entrance, not without a certain amount of difficulty when you're dressed to the nines with the high heels on! Dinner comes out much quicker tonight and we start with a plate of smoked ham, tomato, fetta and olives. Second course is another salad with tomato, cucumber and fetta. Main is the mixed grill again.... seems to be the dish you serve to visitors when they want to sample the local fare. Dessert follows and I have a smidgeon of what seems to be a vanilla slice. I've had my fill so pass on the dessert.

We walk home and it's really refreshing... the night is bracing without being uncomfortably cold and the walk is welcomed after all the food.

Saturday - Day 5

We are both blocked up - the after effects of a smokie restaurant, Dave's previous cold, stuffy room, etc.

Toda we settle on a walk, rather than a run. There are markets close by the hotel so we go down for a look. They are 'green markets' ie produce markets and there's row after row of tempting goodies. Some of the produce seems quite cheap, ie 6 apples come to about 135 dinar (less than $2) while the potatoes work out about $1 per kilo, which isn't a lot different to home.

We walk down towards the river and we seem to have found the slot machine and gambling area. It's a fairly depressing area apart from the train station which is quite majestic and has an olde world look about it. We take a left back towards the CBD and, as we turn back into our street, the remnants of two bombed buildings fill our immediate view. They are either side of the side street and look to be held together by not much more than electrical cabling. One has taken a hit from the side and the other has been blown apart from above. On looking at the buildings they are the same design, same structure, same building material.... I notice the entrance of the closest building and wonder if this might be the hospital Dejan had referred to. It certainly looks as though it could have been.

Dave's board meeting continues today and I decide I'll go to the other markets, down in the old part of town. On the way, there are three policemen standing at the end of one of the streets (a very short street) and there's a gathering of people in the block; policemen are stationed at the other end as well. I do what any tourist would do and walk through the middle of them... they seemed fairly quietly behaved.

The markets were a further couple of blocks along and were a lot larger than the one we visited earlier. There was lots of fresh produce and I spend ages wandering up and down the aisles looking at the options..... lots of winter veges, all as fresh as fresh, along with spices and assorted fruit. The produce took up half of the area and the rest held flowers, antiques, jewellery and other useless items. I found a lovely bracelet which was fine silver with red stones in it.... except for one of the stones which was white (glass?) but didn't look that much out of place. I thought it would be a lovely souvenir to remind me of our trip to Belgrade so asked to have a look at it. I was thinking that a nice trinket from the markets would really be quite neat. A gent at the stand explained that it was this kind of gemstone and that type of silver (not just plain old silver) and said it was 20 euros..... so they still have their trinket and I still have my 20 euros! Five maybe, because I was feeling in a generous mood, but twenty?

I roamed a bit longer through the various stalls before turning for home. Back to the gathering up the road and there was now many more people and I noticed that quite a few of them were carrying single stem roses. A funeral maybe? I recognised the photographer from the media conference the other day (Predrag Djurovic) so approached him to ask what was going on. He explained that it was 8 years since the assassination of the leader of the Liberal Democrat Party, who was Prime Minister at the time, and the people were walking to his graveside. He said I could join them! The walk is going past our hotel, so I was keen to get home and get a bird's eye view.

The weather has really taken a turn for the better. Having watched it for the past two weeks and seen temps of around 3-4 degrees, day after day, we packed for the cooler climes. Today is now 20 degrees and absolutely beautiful – Belgrade has cast off the shackles of winter and dived into spring head forward.

Once back at the hotel I went downstairs and perched myself on a large flowerpot out front of the hotel. There were police stationed at the intersection and eventually they started to redirect the traffic and close the roads. The usual chaos turned into absolute chaos quickly

but the traffic was eventually stopped and the walkers came into view. I was surprised to see that the hundreds of people I saw an hour earlier had now turned into thousands. They just kept coming and coming and the mood was quiet, peaceful and respectful. I saw my new photographer friend and gave him a wave.

Of course, of all the people standing taking photos, the police single me out for some special treatment. An officer came over, pointed to the camera and rabbited on in Serbian. I give him my brightest smile and say "good morning" at which time he gives up and finds someone else to harass.

It's now 2.30pm so I decided to get a quick bite to eat. I went down to the cafe and ordered goulash soup – no sooner had it turned up than Dave appeared, having finished for the day. Others have adjourned to the cafe across the road so I finished the soup and we go to join them. It was a lovely afternoon and we sit and chat in the sun.

Back in the room Dave sent off some emails to his friends in Japan. He has a number of good friends whom he's worked with over the years and is concerned for their welfare following the earthquake and tsunami.

Tonight's dinner is on a boat, which then became a boat that is moored and not going anywhere and finally ended up being a restaurant on the water!

Another dinner of cold meat with cheese, tomato and cucumber salad, and roast meats. I struggled through the cold plate, picked at the tomato and couldn't face another plate of meat. There was a lovely fillet and I had a couple of mouthfuls but that was it for me. I donated the rest to Dave. I am 'meated out.'

Back at the hotel we adjourn to the bar for a nightcap, given it's our last night together. Most of us fly out tomorrow so there's lot of hugs goodbye at the end of the evening.

Sunday - Day 6

More farewells at breakfast. On departure our driver puts the pedal to the metal and goes flat out. We tell him we're not in a hurry but it doesn't make any difference. Our flight to Tivat (Montenegro) is just under an hour and we're flying JAT Yugoslav Airlines. It's a two-prop job but looks in quite good condition. The trolley dollies are really pleasant and the views are mainly of snow topped mountains for most of the trip. The flight comes in midway down the Montenegro coast and we have a spectacular view of the coastline as we fly north to land at Tivat.

We collect our rental car and, at this point, I realise that the guy at check in didn't return our e-tickets for our flights. I can only assume this will be an issue when we go to check in for our return flight.

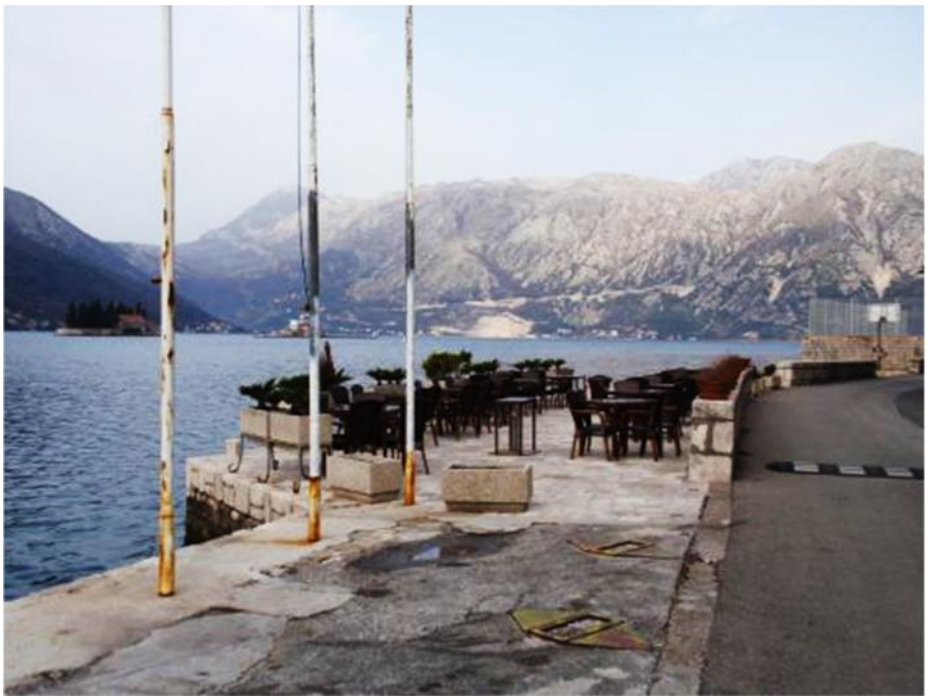
Our rental is a red Yaris; we've been 'upgraded' and that suits us fine as Yaris is our favourite rental car. As we drive along there are lots of bunches of flowers on the side of the road, as if to mark a road accident. On more careful examination we notice that there are not just flowers but headstones, with inscriptions and, in many instances, photo. We can only assume they are to mark accidents but there seems to be so many of them. Not that surprising as they drive like maniacs.

The scenery along the fjord is stunning. Amazing limestone mountains which go right into the fjord. The white grey of the mountains contrasting starkly with the blue of the fjord.

It's about a 30 minute drive along the shore of the fjord, the deepest in southern Europe, to the **Hotel Conte**, in **Perast**. Perast is a small town, made up of fabulous buildings with

Mediterranean charm. Our room is up a few flights of stairs and has a wonderful view over the fjord. The bell tower, from the church in front of us, is right outside our window and I comment that I hope it's not in working order. We have a lovely view to Our Lady of the Rock, a manmade island in the fjord that houses a Monastery.

We decide to have a quick bite to eat, at the hotel dining room on the water.... just because we can!



Our waiter isn't that thrilled with us sitting next to the water and is quite insistent that we should sit inside as it's too cold. We say it's not cold, it's lovely, so he suggests we sit at another table, further away from the water. We decline. It's a bit breezy but nothing uncomfortable, until the wind really picks up and blows a gale for just a short time. In that time, a whole lot of black bits lands on the table, sticking to the butter. It seems to have just somehow 'blown in' across the water. Our waiter comes back and says' "I told you so".... we laugh.

I have mussels 'buazzara', which is Montenegrin for "tomato, wine and garlic" and they are divine. There are mussel farms all along the coast here and they are a popular dish. Dave has grilled octopus and receives a large slab of ocky. We enjoy a glass of white wine and the day is as perfect as it needs to be. On the way back to the room Dave notes that the clock on the tower isn't working so hopefully the bells aren't either!

We opt for a small nap before dinner.... I have booked us into the restaurant here at the hotel for dinner tonight as I didn't think we'd want to venture too far after a few hectic days in Belgrade.

We wake and it's dark... very dark. Dave checks his watch and it's 9pm! We've managed to oversleep by just a few hours. We dress and go down to the restaurant..... no one is there, bar a guy sitting by himself in the half light, who informs us the restaurant is closed and we'll have to go to Kotor if we want dinner at this time.

There is nothing else in the town. Dave says he's up to a bit of a drive although neither of us wants to go to Kotor as it's about 30 minutes away.... and 30 minutes back! I remember researching a restaurant, Stari Mlni, not far down the road so we decide to give it a try. It's a 10 minute drive and it's open.

We enjoy a lovely meal of fish stew, for two. It's after 11pm when we get back and we're beat. Our room, while really large and comfortable, is freezing cold. The walls are two foot thick and the floor is tiled and absolutely icy to stand on. We don't like warm rooms to sleep in so snuggle under the doona to shiver our way to sleep.

Monday - Day 7

Good news – THE BELLS WORK! 6.30am and we are woken by a bone shaking chiming of the bells. Having recovered from the noisy start to the day we go back to sleep!

It has rained overnight. We shower and go down for breakfast around 9am. Once again, the restaurant is closed, except for the cleaning lady. She lets us in and we ask about breakfast.... I am sure our tariff was on the basis of B&B. The lady is really helpful but doesn't speak a lot of English. She makes a phone call and tells us the restaurant opens at 11am. We thank her for her help.

We decide we will head south today, along the coast. We stop for a coffee at a small cafe and are the only customers. It's 10am and still a bit early for the locals to be doing too much.

The coastal drive along the fjord is beautiful. Yesterday, we cut through a tunnel between Tivat and Kotor but today we follow the water all the way along. **Tivat** is a lovely place and we get out to walk around. The weather is a bit chilly but the temperature gauge in the car shows 16 degrees. There's a lovely harbour and the city centre is a mixture of old architecture and tasteful new additions.

We come across a pizza place, **Galija Pizzeria**, which is small and homely looking. Inside is warm and toasty but also full of smoke. There's only about eight tables and one of them has a no smoking sign above it. We decide to sit outside..... it's under shelter and we can watch

the world go by. We order a pizza and it's super..... hot salami, cheese, green peppers. Pizza plus to bottles of water comes to 6.80€.... bargain.

We continue our drive down the coast. **Budva** is the next major town and it's a nice enough spot but the quality of the towns decreases the further south we go. Many of them seem to be closed down for the best part. We go as far as **Bar**, a port town with the best feature being that you can catch a boat to Italy from there. We decide to turn around and head back home.... it's now 4.00pm and about an hour back.

Along the way there are many signs to Monasteries and they are usually situated above the towns and villages. They are not monasteries as we know them, ie places that house monks, but are the local churches of the villages. They are small and made of large stone blocks and all feature a bell tower.

Tonight we manage to get to the restaurant before it closes! I order grilled mushrooms and seafood buzzara, same as the mussels but with scampi, prawns and vongole added. Dave has fish soup to start, followed by spaghetti marinara. Both meals were enjoyable although Dave said that his wasn't hot enough.

Tuesday - Day 8

Dave sleeps through the bells.... I hear them but go back to sleep immediately. It's raining when we awake but it looks to be brightening on the horizon.

We were able to order breakfast in our room, rather than hang around until 11am, and are delivered a tray with prosciutto, ham, cheese, bread, jams and honey, along with a large fruit bowl.

Today we're driving up through the mountains, to **Cetinje**, the old capital of Montenegro. We go back through Kotor and then head upwards. The road climbs steeply, through several switchbacks, and before we know it we're looking down on Kotor and the fjord from an amazing height. The road narrows and keeps winding ever upward, barely wide enough for Yaris, which doesn't really matter as we're the only car on the road, in either direction.

The snow gets thicker on the side of the road and the views more majestic. We can see most of the fjord and a lot of the coastline. And still we climb. We stop at a cafe for a cold drink before continuing to **Lovcen**. On the mountain's summit is the mausoleum of Njegos. On a clear day you can see the coast of Italy from the summit.... the downside being there are 461 steps to climb to get there. While having our drink a bus whizzes past and we see it's the "Romantic Tour Bus", which we find rather hilarious that the words "romantic" and "bus" could possibly be used in the one name.

The snow gets deeper and deeper and the road narrower and narrower. We have chains in the back but they aren't necessary as there's obviously been a snow plough through the place. The clouds have also disappeared and the mountains are bathed in sunlight. It's only 8 degrees but the sun coming through the window is hot.... we have the windows down to let the fresh air in and it's exhilarating. We get to the place where you climb to the summit but the place is covered in snow. There's not a chance of getting anywhere near the 461 steps. Somewhat disappointed, and somewhat relived, we decide to drive on.... it's a decision we don't take lightly as this is serious snow and there's not many places to turn around. We are rewarded for our persistence!

We pass villages of half a dozen homes, in snowed in valleys; a school camp where the students are tobogganing down the gentle slopes as well as the snow covered forests that surround us.

We get to Cetinje, park and go for a walk around. It's a lovely town of 20,000 people which sits amid the tallest mountains in Montenegro. The former embassies have been turned into schools for the arts and museums.

We take the back road on leaving **Cetinje** and descend into **Rijeka Crnojevica**, which is at the end of **Lake Skadar**. It is situated along the river, a quiet town that is undergoing renovations of older buildings. It is a beautiful setting and we find a cafe on the river to have lunch. It's 19 degrees, even up in the mountains, and the sky is cloudless. We have a green salad and fish soup, a light lunch before trekking onwards.

We cut through the national park and the scenery continues to be dramatic at every turn. Time is marching on though and we cut back down to the coast, via a 4km tunnel, and take the quick route home.

This drive today rates as one of the best I've done, right up there with our trip to Interlaken and Jungfrau, in Switzerland and our hike up the mountains adjacent Lake Louise in Canada. The scenery was extraordinary and the drive an enormous amount of fun.

We're home just before sunset and take up our place at the outdoor dining on the water. Our happy waiter once again tells us that it's cold, we should sit inside, etc. It's still 16 degrees and there's no way I'm sitting inside! We can get an internet connection there so Dave catches up on his emails. Mr Happy is obviously going to ignore us so I go inside to get some menus. He tells me we should sit inside as "I'm the inside waiter". I tell him that's fine, I'll come back inside to order and we'll pick up the meals when they're ready. He says he'll be out in 2 minutes!

We order some gorgonzola and a bottle of local chardy. I explain that we'll order our meals later but he's not interested. So be it. It's beautiful out and we enjoy the quietness of it all.... we're the only ones out here.

We eventually order mussels and Mr Happy grumps about, as if he's doing us a great favour. He's actually quite nice but he just feels the need to force us inside. Eventually he smiles... I think he's given up as we've worn him down!

The mussels are great. We retire, happy and contented after another wonderful day.

Wednesday - Day 9

We go out for an early run. Dave is a bit stiff as he's managed to strain his back somehow, most likely lugging the ports up the endless steps to our room. The road into town is far too dangerous to run on so we just go up and down the waterfront.

We take breakfast in the room again.... we open the front door and sit at our outdoor setting, overlooking the water. Brekkie today isn't so inviting.... the bread isn't fresh, the cheese is hard (from being refrigerated) and the fruit is looking sad. We decide to give it a miss, for the best part, and find a place for a nice lunch.

Today we're driving north, to **Herceg-Novi**, the town closest to the Croatian border. It's only 30 minutes away along the coast of the fjord, another lovely drive. We do a few laps of the town to get the layout of the place and understand the parking. It's all pay parking and seems like you buy a coupon then SMS the coupon number via a local call. We don't have a local SIM card so parking could get expensive this way. We find a parking lot and this seems to be the best bet.

It's started to rain and we make the town centre just as the rain gets heavier. We stop for a coffee and hot chocolate, at **Cafe Trg,** to pass some time and watch the locals. Once the rain eases we head into **Stari Grad** (the old town), the walled part of the city. Many places here have Stari Grads and they contain the wonderful buildings and past history. The rain starts to pelt down as we go into the church of **St Michael the Archangel**. It's small and beautiful but I'm not sure if they could have a service in there as there's only a handful of seats around the perimeter.

There's not much else to see and it's getting wetter and wetter. We find some stairs and follow them down in the direction of the seaside. We get down to the marina.... I've read of a restaurant that gets great wraps down here and hope that we can find it. Funnily enough, I turn around, look across the road and here is said restaurant, **Konoba Feral.** It looks lovely and cosy so we head in.

The owner greets us and takes our sloppy umbrella and coat, then leads us upstairs. It's absolutely gorgeous and homely and there's only one other couple in the restaurant.

We order Filet House, a pork fillet wrapped around ham with a mushroom sauce. We ask if it comes with vegies as we've had a distinct lack of them of late. Lunch arrives and there are seven vegies on the plate *plus* chips. The meal is really, excellent and by far and away the best we've had in terms of meat (the mussels are hard to go past!). Our waiter has brought out the mandatory bread basket and comes back to suggest we partake, explaining it is "domestic bread," ie cooked in their kitchen. We have some of the dark bread and it is up with the best bread we've ever eaten. So fresh, still warm from the oven and so morish. We sit for ages, watch the rain, enjoy the ambience.

The rain eases just after we leave and we decide to drive home by taking the inland route, over the mountains. As we drive back through the town, there are police everywhere. One of them stops us and speaks rapid Montenegrin. Dave explains we speak English so he tells us again, in perfect Monenegran, something about the prime minister..... 2 (hours?).... park here. I ask if we have to stay here for 2 hours? He smiles, does some more talking, then laughs and gestures us to continue. He's obviously figured that nobody as stupid as us could pose any threat to the prime minister so the easiest option is to get us out of the place.

Once again we are rewarded by amazing views over the fjord. Rather unfortunately, the road we're on finishes suddenly and turns into limestone rubble. It also becomes the location for the rubbish tip, which is unbelievable given we're at about 1500m and have come up a road barely wide enough for Yaris. The rubbish is on fire and a large grader works away at the bottom of the hillside. Amazing what you find in the remote parts of the world. We continue for a bit, hoping the road improves, but Yaris bottoms out on the limestone rocks.

We have to turn around but that's a bit of a challenge given the width of the road! Dave reckons he can get around and does a perfect six point turn to point us in the opposite direction. We whizz down the mountain and take the unexciting but still lovely route home along the water.

We don't need any dinner tonight so retire to the room to relax and read.

Thursday - Day 10

We had violent storms overnight – the night air roared and the rain thumped down. This morning the wind picked up even more and is blowing like a gale. A glance out the window shows white tips on the fjord and the palm trees bending from the wind. Around 7.30am we have a blackout – which makes it very dark as we've pulled the shutters on the already small windows and there's very little natural light in the room. There's not a lot we can do so we renjoy the wrath of nature that is going on around us.

We decide to have a quick shower as we weren't quite sure where the next hot water supply would come from. There's a small hot water heater in the bathroom and we fell into the trap

on the first day of being thrifty and turning off all switches in the room, not aware that one of those switches actually heats the water. Around 9am, the power comes back on. Our plan today was to go to **Dubrovnik**, which is about 1½ hours drive. The weather up north looks foreboding, while to our south it is brightening.

We change plans and decide we'll go to Kotor today and do Dubrovnik tomorrow. On the way out I do a quick internet check of the weather and it shows thunderstorms up north, sun with the possibility of showers down our way.

Whilst on the subject of internet, it is once again highlighted what a backwater Australia is in terms of internet access. Our hotel in Belgrade.... free wireless internet. Our hotel here in Perast (a town of a few hundred).... free wireless internet. We walk through towns and sit at cafes.... free internet, either via the cafe or by virtue of the fact there's any number of city provided hotspots around town. And it's fast internet with solid connections. Same as in Athens where the city centre is a hotspot that you can log onto anywhere. Puts Australia to shame, especially with the way our hotels charge up to $30 per day. Enough said.

We drive to **Kotor**, about 20 minutes away, a town that is Heritage Listed. The old town, Stari Grad, is behind walls which stretch all the way up the mountain to the ruins of what was once the fortress. Walking through the arched entrance is like walking into another world. It is remarkable – the architecture is old world European. Stone buildings, towers with clocks, churches, outdoor cafes, life meandering by. We take only a few steps before I decide we'll sit down and have a coffee. I love the European way of people watching, sitting casually drinking coffee and generally leading the slow life.... whatever the Montenegrin equivalent of "la dolce vita" is.

We sit for ages before making our way through the labyrinthine streets that make up the Grad. There are hotels, boutiques, restaurants and living quarters for the permanent inhabitants. The atmosphere is intoxicating and it is easy to lose yourself in a whole new lifestyle where vehicular and other white noise no longer exists.

We stop at **Cesare** for lunch. The skies have cleared and the warmth of the sun comes through – it is 18 degrees but variable, depending on whether the sun is out or not. We order a pizza to share and a red wine. There are many locals about plus the odd smattering of tourists, even a small smattering of Euro trash types with flashy clothes, jewellery and wives. The **Hotel Astoria** is immediately opposite – I have read much about the hotel and decide to ask if we can inspect a room.... or two. They are most obliging and we go to a Junior Suite,

150 euro per night, with the most amazing view across the bay, a lovely lounge/sitting area and a bathroom out of vogue. The Superior Double is 120pn and overlooks the square where we've just had lunch. It too is quite large and comes with a designer bathroom. Noted for a future visit!

Another hour or so passes and we take a walk through the yet undiscovered streets within the walls. There are many churches and we stick our head in each one as we pass. No matter what your religious inclinations, European churches are beautiful in both structure and fit out, with gold, marble and silver prevalent. Christian Orthodox is the main religion (37%) of the area (former Yugoslav states), followed by Catholic (25%), Muslim (25%) and the remainder (13%) mixed. The Church of St Luke has two altars, one Catholic and one Orthodox. Confusion is avoided by having masses at different times!

Things are starting to slow down a bit and we notice that many of the shops close at 2pm, reopening this evening. Kotor is reputedly the most beautiful town on the Montenegrin coast, set against the brooding mountains and the indigo blue of the sea, and it has lived up to, if not surpassed, its reputation.

It's mid afternoon and we return to our car, only to find we have a flat tyre.

After yesterday's drive through the rubbish dump it's not that surprising but certainly a nuisance. Dave checks the spare and it's not a 'real tyre' ie only made to get you over the hump until you get the original tyre repaired. We also empty the boot and can't locate the jack. The tyre isn't totally flat and Dave feels it's best to limp up to the service station (not far up the road) and give it some air. The airport is only another 5 minutes along the road and we'll call back to Europcar and get their advice. *If they were there.....* Mr Europcar isn't at the counter; in fact he's not in the country it appears. But the message is that the tyre *is* a real tyre so we decide to change it.

We find a park in the airport and are retrieving the tyre when a policeman approaches us and berates us for parking where we are. We explain we have a flat.... bad luck, get out. There are cars parked all over the place around us but I guess the tourists are easy marks. Dave does check the tyre again though and confirms, as he thought, it isn't a real tyre.

We drive back to the service station and Dave asks the chappy if there is a 'Vulcanizer' close by. We've noticed them in our travels, the equivalent of our tyre places back home. He says there's one just down the road so off we go. It is literally 100m down the road.

We pull in and Dave tells them we have a flat. Our man calls over his English speaking assistant and when they look at the tyre they immediately see a nail. Within a minute they have pulled out the nail, plugged the hole and we're ready to go. That will be 3 euro. I fall about laughing as Dave had a nail in the Honda just recently and they charged $29 to fix it! We give them a €2 euro tip and get on our way.

On the way home we stop to pick up some cold drinks and I notice bottles of Stella for 89 euro cents. It's a lovely afternoon so we buy a couple to take home and have a late arvo drink by the water. Perast is peaceful as the afternoon drifts into evening. Our favourite waiter, Mr Grumpy, is now our very best friend and can't do enough for us. We tell him we'll eat later... a few times..... and he smiles continually when chatting.

We sit until well after dark and go inside only because the temperature has dropped. After the first few nights of freezing in our room we did relent and now use the air con to take the chill off before retiring of a night and before jumping out of bed in the morning!

We're eating in tonight and are relieved to find only a few people in the restaurant, none of them smoking. We enjoy a lovely meal..... Dave has fish soup and seafood risotto and I have seafood salad and squid stuffed with risotto. We enjoy a Montenegrin red and are happy campers when we return to our room.

Friday - Day 11

Today is **Dubrovnik** day and the sky is overcast but it's not raining. We leave by 9am for the trip north. The drive is lovely and the scenery around the fjord continues to captivate us. We have a few sprinkles of rain along the way but nothing to bother about.

The border crossing is easy..... they speak in Montenegrin (on the way out) and Croatian (on the way in, 200m up the road) and we smile and hand over documents. Driving into Dubrovnik is breathtaking, as we look down on the walled city, again set against the

iridescent blue of the Adriatic. The road winds along the coast, until finally descending into Dubrovnik and down to the old city. Dubrovnik is also Heritage Listed.

We go to a parking station, which is easier that trying to work out the system of paid street parking. We walk down a few hundred stairs into the old city. The Placa is the main thoroughfare, with a melange of cafes and shops and monuments placed at either end.

Things are obviously 'off season' here.... whilst many businesses are still operating, many more are closed or having renovations. We find a quiet cafe, **Glam**, in an even quieter side street, which has three tables outside and three inside. The lady running the cafe is bright and sparkly and speaks good English. We order a cappuccino and a hot chocolate and it is only then I realise how bad the coffee has been to date! We also indulge in a piece of cheesecake, to share – it is a light sponge with a ricotta chess mix in the middle and is, I can shamelessly say, unbelievably good!

We walk around the city, in and out of alleyways, and in and out of many churches. As is our want, we find ourselves in streets in which we're the only occupants. It's so quiet, with the occasional local popping into our space as we walk the backstreets.

Lunch is at **Oliva Pizzeria** – another place I had researched, which was recommended as "the best pizza in Dubrovnik." There is an obsession with pizza and pasta in this part of the world and we're happy to go along with it. We order a pizza Oliva to share, prawns with fresh tomato and olives. I find it amusing that 'olives' means three olives on top of the pizza; same with 'chillies' which means two chillies which appear nearly as a side dish. What is good is they are not obsessed with making super huge pizzas weighed down with a multitude of toppings, which makes them perfect for a light lunch.

I decide I'll have a 'kava sa slagom' (coffee with cream, something I haven't had decades) and practice my Croatian to see if I can order and be understood. Success! Only to have the waitress return to advise they have 'run out of sa slagom'. She asks if I would like something else..... I explain it is not possible as I haven't practised pronouncing anything else! Thankfully, the waiter appears at the door and I pick up that he will go and buy some more sa slagom.

The huge positive about being in Croatia is that smoking is banned in cafes and restaurants. We ask our waitress, having noticed the no smoking sign in the window, and she explains it is law here. She adds that some cafes and bars do not abide by the law but if an inspector calls by they are fined. On that point, Croatia scores points above Serbia and Montenegro where you would almost think the law says everyone *must* smoke.

We walk on for a while longer, visiting the museum to take in the atrocities that are so recent in this part of the world. It is sobering to see the photos of the devastation caused by the invasion of Serbia and the resultant loss of lives. All this only 20 years ago.

There are few people around by the time we leave and we decide to take a drive around the coast and down to the marina to see more of the local life. It is a beautiful area; Dubrovnik has a real Mediterranean feel to it although, comparing Dubrovnik and Kotor I would fall in favour of Kotor solely due to the lack of the 'touristy' feel about it.

On the way home we call into **Cavtat**, which is 16km south of Dubrovnik. Now *this* is the real gem of this part of the world. Stunningly beautiful with cafes and restaurants along the waterfront, a wonderful Mediterranean feel with clear, azure blue water lapping the shores. I am already making a plan for the next time we visit this part of the world – fly into Dubrovnik (the airport is 5mins from Cavtat), stay at Cavtat for a few days, then island hop up the coast. I have the plan, now it's just a matter of turning it into a reality. Cavtat is my idea of paradise..... there is absolutely no chance that I will not return.

Dave has been talking about Kanoba Feral ever since we had lunch here the other day and, as we approach Hercig-Novi he is making plans for dinner. He says it's too early (only 5.30) to stop here for dinner, so maybe we'll go into Kotor, to another restaurant that comes highly recommended. I know he is busting to have dinner at Feral so suggest we find a place to sit for a while, until dinner time.

We park and head up towards Stari Grad – there is a lovely cafe with a terrace that overlooks the bay. Perfecto! It is just starting to get dark and I take photos of the bay from the terrace. We sit and have a beer while darkness descends. It's a tad chilly but still too nice outside to bother venturing inside.

We descend the hundreds of steps to the harbour and return to Feral. There is only one other table occupied upstairs and a group of four men come later. The restaurant is quiet and the one woman who smokes leaves, which is a relief!

Dave orders another variety of pork and I settle for the seafood buzara.... 9.50 and 12 euros respectively. The food is once again divine and the atmosphere and service flawless.

We potter home, arriving just on 9pm and go to settle our bill. The staff her are delightful and enquire as to whether we've enjoyed our stay. We booked for two nights and have stayed for six, which is indicative of how much we've enjoyed it.... we pass these sentiments on.

We had intended to pack tonight but can't be bothered! We retire to read before again dropping off into another blissful sleep. Both of us have slept the sleep of the innocent while here.... I can't remember the last time I've had such long, deep sleep. It has been wonderfully restorative.

Saturday - Day 12

Up, packed and ready to go just before 9am. The day is overcast but dry, although it looks to be raining further along the coast.

Our flight isn't until 12:40pm so we'll stop for breakfast/lunch on the way to the airport. The flight was originally scheduled for 4.30pm and I'd planned to have a leisurely lunch before our departure. The flight then got re-scheduled and pulled back four hours which is a real inconvenience as we wanted to spend the best part of the day here... such is life when travelling.

We stop in Tivat and go to the same cafe we visited earlier in the week. I have a cappuccino while Dave finds a parking spot, easier said than done but free in this part of the world. As this will suffice for breakfast and lunch we, once again, share a pizza. Hot salami, chillies, olives. The day is rainy and cool and it really hits the spot.

Off to the airport.... check in takes about 3 minutes and there is absolutely nothing in Tivat airport once that process is over. We have an hour until our flight so head for customs. They make us strip down every additional bit of attire that is not covering our private parts.... jackets, scarves, bangles, watches, shoes (in Dave's case). We are the first ones through and, as Dave says, they must be bored. I have to empty my bag to show them my tripod... it's all of about five inches long and hardly a deadly weapon. I also have to undergo a 'pat down' as something went off when I went through the scanner.

The flight is only an hour and I am entertained by the trolley dolly who fits the archetypal "eastern European" model. Very tall and solid lass, maybe in her forties (but maybe in her twenties) with shoulder length black hair, straight fringe and screaming red lipstick. She reminds me of one of the Maudlin Sisters, on Spicks and Specks. It also adds to the demeanour that she is chewing gum. Frightening sight but ok unless she has to administer mouth to mouth.

Back to the **Hotel Moscow**. I'm in for an easy afternoon of reading and relaxing. It's bleak, raining and six degrees in Belgrade. Seems that we got the best part of the weather when we were here last week

Tonight is going to be in house.... some goulash soup or the like. We're out at 5.30am in the morning for a 6.55am flight to Frankfurt. Midday out of there for the trek home.

***Epilogue**:*

We take dinner at Restaurant Tchaikovsky, a table with a view of the street to enable us to watch Belgrade on a Saturday night. Not that gratifying as the weather is miserable and passers by look cold. Dinner is hearty though and we enjoy goulash soup.... Dave has spaghetti bol and I have artichokes with a glass of red wine.

It's been a sensational time.... Belgrade is interesting and Montenegro and Croatia lovely. I'm not sure we'll ever get back here to Belgrade and I don't think I'd come on my own steam but the coast is a different matter. Croatia has been on the hit list for a while and the visit yesterday has only hastened my enthusiasm.