

The Great Train Journey - First week's travels (sent 27 April 2009)

Our travels have been good so far. Dorinda and Roger started us off in style with a lift to St Die, where we took trains to Stasbourg then Offenbourg. The German trains were all very punctual, so all our first day's 10 minute connections worked smoothly, via Munich and Vienna. The Hungarian express was very new and swish, and felt the right way to travel internationally. From Budapest to Romania was not so stylish, and our sleep in the station waiting room just over the Romanian border was fitful. The second morning our 1st class upgrade on the Romanian train northwards was the shabbiest we'd been on, with smelly loos with only occasional water. It was a dreary start through the drab, uncultivated plains north of Arad with seedy concrete blocks of flats even in the middle of the countryside, rusting old gas pipes and derelict industries. Later the landscape in Transylvania was pretty, with its mountains and small plots of land still being ploughed with the aid of horses. It seemed to be the day for sowing potatoes, just before St George's Day (maybe he protects potatoes as well as beautiful princesses).

We spent 3 mainly sunny spring-like days in the north of Romania, based in Suceava, within travelling distance of the painted monasteries of Bucovina. The paintings are all over the outside as well as the inside walls - all the Bible stories and lives of gruesomely martyred saints, many we've never heard of, were there in wonderful colour and we had a very enthusiastic guide, who loved the monasteries and their paintings (though I think she was a bit disappointed that we weren't in the league of Michael Palin who she also showed round for his New European programme). And St. George's day was being celebrated at the first, Voronet (no dragon, though, just a special service with the Archbishop of Suceava). We had Romanian food one night and another day we had lunch at one of the monasteries (excellent blueberry aperitif!).

Then, it was up for the 5 a.m. train to Bucharest, and the last leg of the journey on to Istanbul. Alas the fake Orient Express was way beyond our means, but the serviceable old Romanian sleeper we were on, which kept getting hooked onto other trains in Bulgaria, was a great night's sleep, apart from the obligatory stop and descent at the Turkish border around 3 a.m. to obtain visas and police stamps.

We arrived in Istanbul reasonably on time, the train running between the sea and the old city walls for much of the time - very picturesque. The stylish old Orient Express restaurant on the platform alas didn't stoop to morning coffee, with its tables all set with damask cloths and wine glasses beneath the portrait of Agatha Christie and film stars. But we found a great patisserie cum Turkish Delight shop a short distance from the station and treated ourselves to coffee and pastries in its blue tiled splendour to build up our strength before cramming into a tram (almost as bad as Indian transport - but no one on the roof) and then lugging our cases along cobbled

streets to the Hotel Alp, (in the Sultanahmet area below the Hagia Sofia mosque and the Topkapi palace), perched on the edge of a rock face overlooking the port in the distance. Then the rain started.

We had various practical things to check in the afternoon, but after doing those, our footsteps almost inevitably led to the huge covered grand bazaar, with its carpets, lamps, antiques, fabrics, leather goods, ceramics etc. Great fun. And there's still the spice bazaar to try another day. We hadn't meant to buy anything, but we were forced to linger over the men's shoes as John's feet were feeling very wet and he realised the sole of one of his only pair of shoes had split right across, and the rain was getting harder. What timing! However the slim pointy turquoise or silver patent contemporary styles didn't appeal to him! We saw one or two more sensible shoes on the way back here, but had had enough by then. Off shortly to look for food. More later.

http://picasaweb.google.co.uk/helen.and.john.go.travelling/FirstWeek?authkey=Gv1sRgCMqqwqTl8J-_dA&feat=directlink#