

# A Visit to an Old Country

By Brian Judge

I took a room at the Haja Hotel near the sea. I had arrived at the port around mid-day and was now sweating and tired after trailing through the old town trying to get a place to stay. This one had a room available and after I saw it I realised why. I think the previous occupant had been an elephant, judging by the deep depression in the middle of the bed. Come to think of it, the lingering smell was not unlike the pungent smells that pervade parts of the zoo especially on hot days. The hotel was quaintly described in the leaflet on the table in my room, (stained by the rim of a coffee mug I suspect) as ‘Olde-Worldly, cosy, traditional and pleasantly located in the centre of the old town’ – Translation – Old Building, Old furniture, old staff, noisy and cheap.

Well it would have to do and as I was only to be there for a couple of nights I could manage to put up with the deficiencies. I unpacked my bag and hung the shirts and trousers in the wardrobe. Well I would have done if there had been any hangers so of course they just lay on top of each other as they had been in the bag ensuring that the creases would be there when I put them on. I then stripped and entered the shower. This had obviously been modelled on an airplane toilet where any one bigger than a slightly built dwarf would be in serious danger of being wedged in there for ages. I took a shower in the brownish water which came trickling out of the nozzle. There was a bar of soap which seemed to be cemented to the soap dish but eventually I managed to prise it off, at the same time taking one of the tiles with it. And the hand towel was so thin I could have watched the Television through it, if there had been a TV in the room, that is.

Well, I thought – enough of all this frivolity and fun – let’s get out to see the place as I love to do. On descending the stairway I placed my hand on the banister which someone had lately varnished. Any sign to alert the unwary guest? What do you think? Mind you, had there been a sign declaring ‘Prodivskep Tubaantol’ it would not really have been effective. After all I was in Croatia. But nothing daunted, I was soon out on the street fairly unscathed by the hazards lurking in a No star hotel.

I always get a kick just exploring a new town. The architecture, the looks of the locals, how they dress, the food in the shop windows, the paving stones, the traffic, buses, trams, everything. I am a culture buff in

a very downmarket way. I want to see life as it is. That is why I rarely visit museums, castles or churches or take canal boat trips nowadays. All are similar and usually packed with tourists eagerly listening to the group guide who is either speaking in an unfamiliar tongue or, despite my admiration for their outstanding multi-lingual talents, - on the boat - repeating the same boring facts in four

different languages and if yours happens to be the last, you can be sure that by the time he/she has described the Statue of King Stanislaus the Earcutter, you will be about half a mile past him.

I hadn't eaten since mid-morning when I had managed to get a decent cup of coffee and a fresh croissant with cheese and ham on the ferry bringing me here. I spotted a very attractive little café opposite the pier where the local small passenger boats unload their human cargoes who come to buy in the various markets situated in the port area. I sat outside at an unoccupied table. In fact they were all unoccupied except one other where three white bearded men sat scowling at each other and who occasionally would take a sip of their beers. They drank so slowly that I felt that perhaps to finish the glass might signal that death was imminent.

The waiter appeared and said something that sounded like 'G'dye myte'. I laughed out loud at the thought that an Australian waiter should be employed in this out of the way place. At that point the three dinosaurs turned slowly to look at me with looks of such alarm as if laughter had been banned many years before. The waiter was of course saying, like his breed throughout the world in his own language 'What ya for, you fat foreign twit?' I asked for the menu, signalling with my hands, to which he produced the local newspaper. I decided to simply point to the glasses on the old men's table and say clearly 'beer!' This had the required effect and soon a large frothy beer was dumped down on the table by the waiter saying with a wink and what I took to be a smile, 'Zivjeli!' which could have meant anything from 'Enjoy your drink' to 'My sister will be upstairs waiting whenever you are ready'.

Well I did enjoy the drink just sitting in the sunshine and watching all the activity at the nearby harbour. There were fishermen unloading their catch which looked like prawns or shrimps, I never know the difference. A bunch of school children passed by led by their teacher who looked as if she herself had only left school a few years previously. When I was at primary school, I remember the teacher had her hair gathered into a 'bun' at the back and to our 7 year old eyes she seemed to be a contemporary of our grandmothers. Perhaps she was. Certainly she was much older than our mums. Well, life goes on.

Then I heard a crash to the left of the café where a pedal cyclist had collided with a barrow loaded with water melons, or perhaps it was the other way round. Anyway, the two parties started berating each other. A crowd then appeared. It always amazes me that on an occasion like this, people appear as if from nowhere to transform what had been a tranquil setting. Well, the crowd formed a circle around the combatants who now, each addressed the throng in turn by I presume, giving their version of what had happened and why the other was to blame. After about 5 minutes I noticed the cyclist limping away with his bike over his shoulder and the watermelon vendor picking up those lying on the ground and placing them back onto his barrow. An old woman was the only one who helped him. The people now dispersed and I wondered if this was how justice is delivered in this part of the world. No expensive court buildings or lawyers needed. Put your case to your peers who form

the jury completely at random, and who then give their verdict. Very sound arrangement, - Instant justice and at no cost. These peasants could teach us a thing or two, that's a fact.

By now the sun was going down so I paid my bill as it was time to go and find a good restaurant to sample some of the local grub.

**The End**