



**7 EUROPE**





Europe covers approximately 10 million square kilometers (3,930,000 sq mi), and in size it is comparable to the permanently uninhabited and virtually uninhabitable continent of Antarctica (14 million square kilometers or 5.4 million sq mi). Spreading from the Atlantic to the Urals, Europe boasts a population of 731 million inhabitants living in 50 independent countries.

The Eastern Mediterranean, between Europe, Asia and Africa, was the cradle of famous ancient civilizations: the Minoan (in the Aegean islands, established 5,000 years ago) and Hellenic (established 3,500 years ago). The Hellenic civilization was followed by the Western civilization (formed in Western Europe 700 AD) and the Orthodox civilization (the Anatolia region in today's Turkey, 700 AD, and later, around 1000 AD, also the European part of Russia).

In the 8th century BC, ancient Rome was founded on the Italian Peninsula. It gradually expanded until it created the then most powerful united Roman empire (*imperium sine fine* – the empire without an end). At the peak of its power it stretched along the Mediterranean Sea all the way to Gaul and a large part of Britain to the northwest and to the Black Sea to the east.

The Roman, or the Western Roman Empire to be more precise, fell apart in 476. From then on civilization was influenced by the spreading of Christianity. Followers of Christianity were persecuted until Emperor Constantine I issued the Edict of Milan in 313, legally recognizing the Christian Church that preached faith in one God and the teachings of Jesus Christ, but also brought new methods of soil cultivation and the establishment and management of settlements (see the motto of the oldest known religious order, the Order of St. Benedict, "pray and work").

Europe has therefore been built on the legacy of earlier civilizations: the foundations of Christianity (as well as Judaism, from which Christianity stems), Greek philosophy, and Roman law.

A major problem Europe may face in the future is that Europe is slowly giving up Christianity and replacing it with "secular humanism", where humans are the creators of the rules and standards of conduct. This vacuum could be filled with something that we will not like.

Since the Roman Empire, Europe has not seen another equally powerful and important empire, which is probably a good thing because it is diversity that drives natural as well as cultural and social development forward.

In the 18th century, England, followed by the rest of Europe marked the rise of a development method that we term industrialization. This is a development based on science and technology and the "endless" source of cheap energy – fossil fuels. Step by step Europe gained control over almost the whole world for no one was able to withstand its military might for long. Britain did not create "an empire without an end" like the Romans did in Europe, instead it built "an Empire on which the sun never sets". Similarly, other areas (although on a smaller scale) were seized by France, Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, and Germany.

The late 19th century and early 20th century were full of optimistic expectations and it seemed that thanks to science and technology we had "paradise on earth" within reach. Then came the cruel disillusionment – World War I. Not only did people kill each other, the killing was impersonal, wholesale, in effect "industrial". Machine guns, tanks, and chemical warfare gases were invented and used extensively. Twenty years went by from the end of World War I and Europe found itself in a yet more terrifying conflict that would leave 50 million dead (in World War I it was 15 million). The center of economic and civilization development shifted from Europe to North America.

In the developing countries in Africa and Asia the white man ceased to represent development and unassailable authority, ceased to be the "Sahib" (in Arabic the term Sahib means lord or master, while in the Indian environment it is a common polite form of address).

In addition, for the next 40 years after World War II, Europe was divided into western and eastern parts by the "Iron Curtain". This only changed in the late 1980s and early 1990s. A new era began, free of the communist totalitarian regimes that had been vassals of the Russian Communist empire (the Soviet Union). However, the late 20th century and early 21st century have not been easy either. It is as if Europe has lost its "inner drive", its vision, a European dream that would be worth following and pursuing. Materially, Europeans are generally affluent but, as the Bible puts it, our hearts have grown fat. There is no need to despair but it would be naive to believe that the 21st century will be a walkover. This would be as naive and childish as the ideas our ancestors had in the late 19th and early 20th century. No doubt the 21st century will bring a lot of good for Europe, Europeans and the world, but it will also bring problems and challenges of a depth and scope we probably cannot even conceive. Such difficult periods will, however, produce great personalities, brave and wise men and women, "knights of good hope", who will provide European civilization with a new meaning and goal.







## 7.1 Western Europe

Europeans are quite familiar with their continent. It is characterized by natural, historical, and cultural diversity. It is out there if we want to get to know it. Cheap trains or buses run everywhere; money is not a major obstacle to travelling. Compared to many other regions it is safe, and if you find yourself in trouble while on the road, you will find help and protection. In short, it is a great place to live.

In Europe some places are very well-known and some less so. Let us have a brief look at some of the most interesting sites. If this should not be enough for you, I recommend taking a backpack and hitting the road.

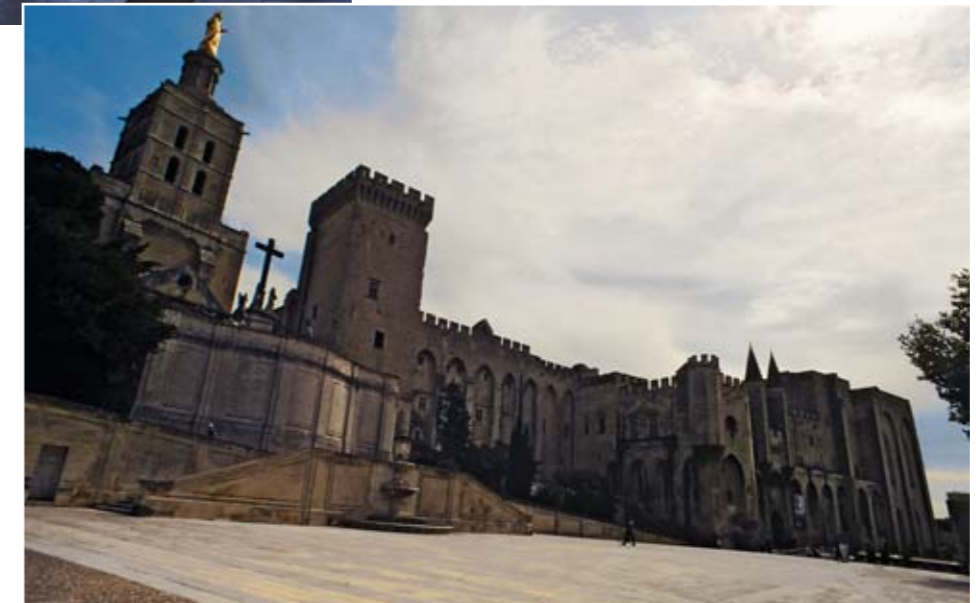
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In the ancient world the center of civilizational development was the Mediterranean. Following the collapse of the Roman Empire, it would gradually shift to western, central and northern Europe. In modern history, when most of eastern and central Europe fell under Moscow's ruthless rule, only the free West was considered "Europe".

A symbol of Paris and France as a whole, which provided the world with "freedom, equality, fraternity" (*liberté, égalité, fraternité*) is the Eiffel Tower. In 1889, when it was completed and opened to commemorate the centenary of the French Revolution and the World Exhibition, many people thought it was a "steel monster". Since then people have become used to it, and now neither the Parisians nor tourists could imagine the city without the tower.

Monuments of the Middle Ages and the gradual formation of western civilization. The ancient city of Avignon in Provence, southern France. From 1309 to 1377 it served as the seat of popes forced to leave Rome, and later on also the seat of "antipopes". The pictures show the Palais des Papes and the Pont d'Avignon.







*Carcassonne, one of the best preserved fortified towns in Europe. The site has been inhabited since as early as the 6th century BC, when Celts settled here.*



*The foothills of the Pyrenees hold the small but famous town of Lourdes. In 1858 a simple young girl Bernadette Soubirous had a Marian apparition here, and since then the site has been witness to occasional miraculous healings. That is why Lourdes is one of the most important places of pilgrimage in the world.*



*Paris lies on the Seine. The capital of proud France, a superpower once but not anymore. It would like to restore its old position but times are changing.*







The entrance to the Louvre, one of the largest museums in the world. It is the former residence of French kings. The glass pyramid at the Louvre was built only in 1989, to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the French Revolution.



Corsica is a beautiful Mediterranean island that belongs to France. About 300,000 inhabitants live on its 8,681 square kilometers (3,352 square mi). The island is well-known for its beaches and clean sea (with a coastline of 1,047 kilometers [650.5 mi]) but it offers much more.











The highest mountain in Corsica is Mount Cinto. It rises to 2,710 meters (8,890 feet) and is quite easy to climb in good weather.

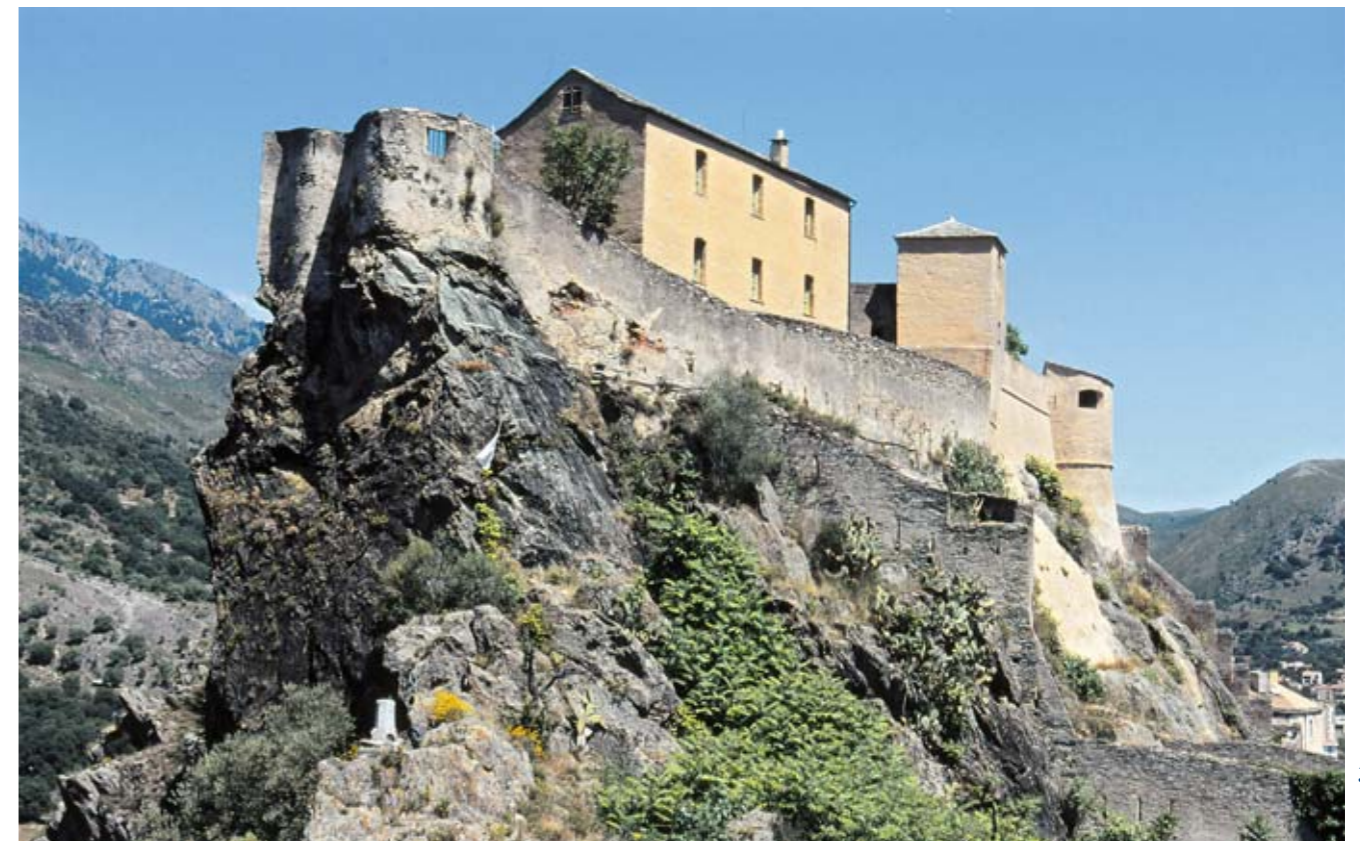


The Corsican capital Ajaccio is the birthplace of Napoleon Bonaparte, whom the natives are duly proud of.



Considered the unofficial capital of Corsica, Corte is the center of the Corsicans' national patriotism. This is where the first democratic constitution in modern Europe was drafted in 1731, and this is where the father of the Corsican nation, Pasquale Paoli, established the first democratic government.

The Citadel dominates the town of Corte.







*A peculiar, rather outdated sewer system.*

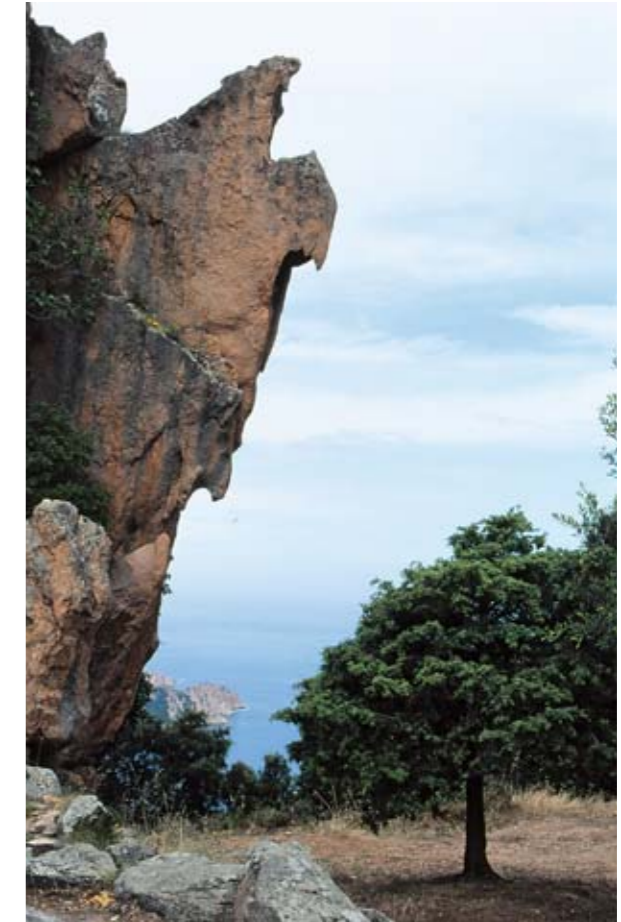


*Calvi is supposed to be where Christopher Columbus was born, at least the local people believe so. While he was obviously a citizen of Genoa, there are still doubts about his birthplace.*

*Many Corsicans would like to become independent of France but the government in Paris will not let it happen. This is also an important reason why the famous Foreign Legion is based in Calvi. In addition to training, the soldiers carry out dangerous but extremely useful work for the island. They help in fighting forest fires. I once knew a man who had served in the Foreign Legion and he told me that to extinguish a forest fire in the summer heat was hell, worse than the military training and combat operations he had experienced in Africa.*



*The archaeological site of Filitosa features interesting ancient menhirs. People lived in caves in this area as early as 5,300 years ago.*



*Les Calanques are rock formations that rise more than 400 meters above sea level. The writer Guy de Maupassant, who visited this place in 1880, compared the natural formations to "a fantastic people out of fairy tales, petrified by some supernatural power".*



*An ancient road in Les Calanques.*







*From north to south the island is crossed by a mountain ridge that a good hiker will walk within three weeks following the GR20 route. Few, however, decide to do the entire route.*

*This is what trail signs may look like, too. Compared to this, the Czech Republic excels in trail marking.*



*Permanently inhabited by a mere three thousand inhabitants, Bonifacio is in summer flooded by tourists who come to enjoy its beauty and charm. It lies on top of a steep cliff. On the other side it is offset by a bay that makes a perfect harbor.*



*The whole of Corsica is dotted with quaint villages with narrow streets climbing the steep slopes of the island's hills and mountains.*







*The narrow streets provide shade at all times and during the summer months they offer a surprisingly tolerable climate.*

*Corsicans often used to die young, not only because of the difficult and laborious work, but also because of the vendetta. Their relatives would build them tombs that were far beyond their status and means.*



*Bonifacio is a starting point for a six-kilometer (4-mi) walk to the Pertusato lighthouse at the southern tip of the island.*



*Sardinia is just "a stone's throw" from here across the sea. Although Sardinia is said to have beautiful beaches, it certainly does not have as diverse nature as Corsica.*

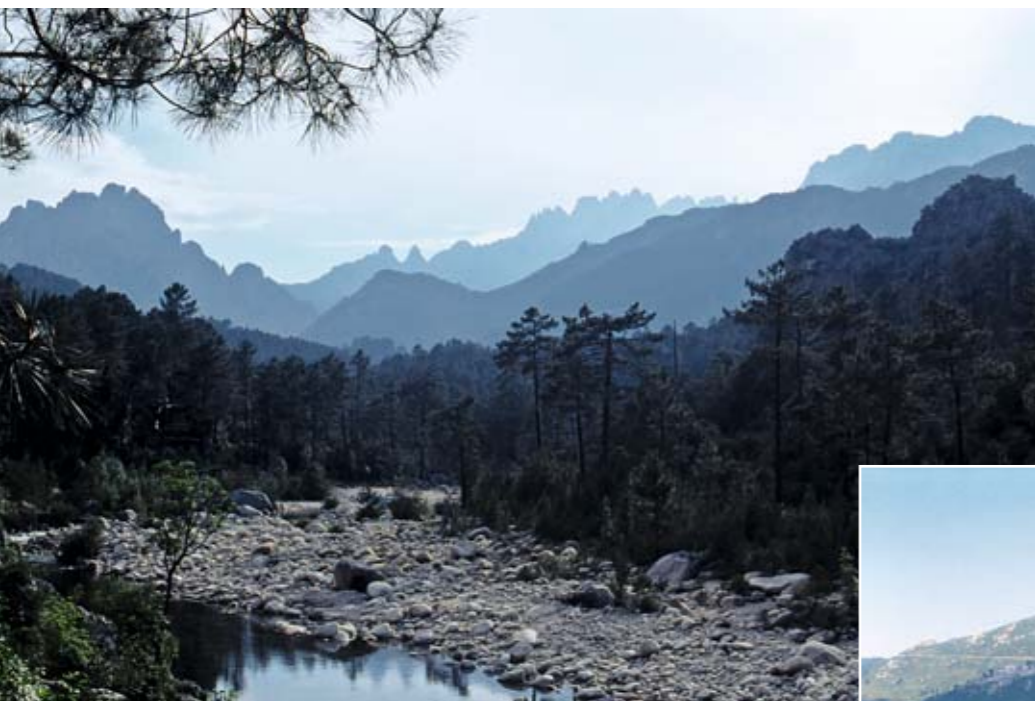
*Rondinara Beach in the southeast of the island ranks among the most beautiful and most popular. I recommend visiting outside the main tourist season.*



*In the morning we went for a swim, and look what we saw – the local cows had been faster. I remembered a fragment of a poem: "Fatigued with work, nearly dead, time for cows to head for the cowshed". Here, following the demanding grazing they most likely go to relax on the beach.*







On the east coast, near Zonza, one simply cannot miss visiting the Bavella Pass (1,218 meters (3,996 feet) above sea level). Sharp granite spikes rise against the sky to more than 1,600 meters (5,900 feet) high. It is popular with climbers but even less active tourists will definitely be pleased with the views.

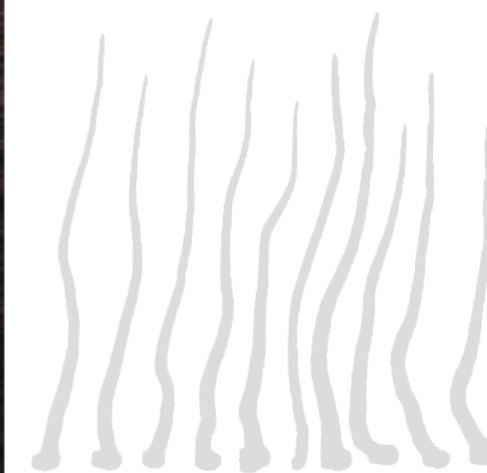
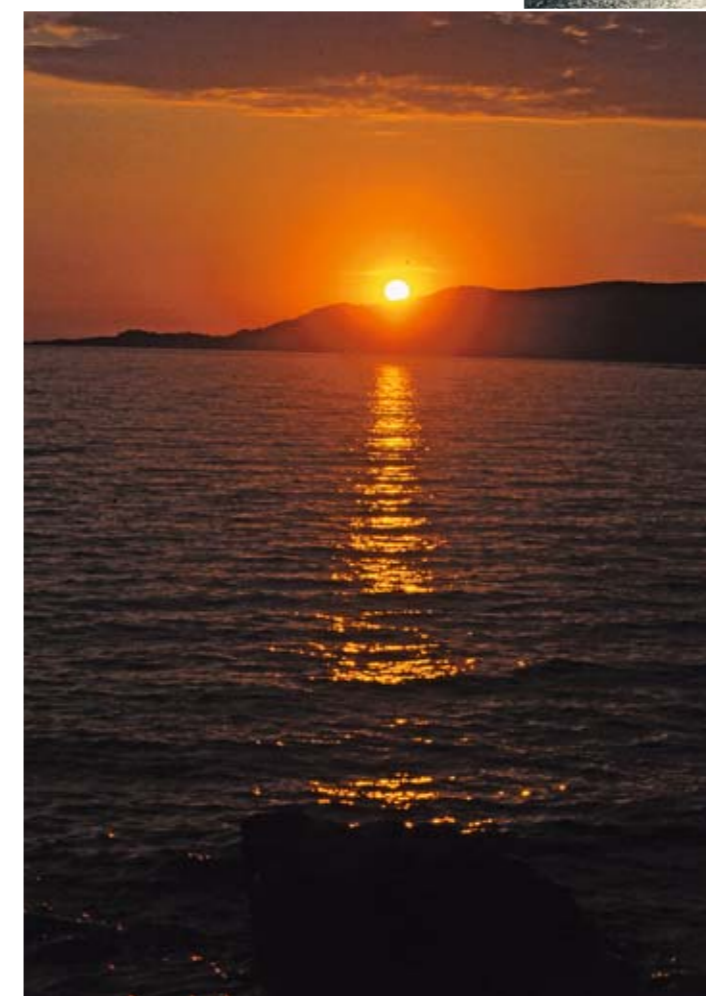
Some Corsicans are not too bothered with maintaining their houses. Sometimes the buildings look shabby; the roof is not what it used to be either. This is not important though as people live in the front part of the house. It can very well rain in half of the house, but a satellite dish behind the chimney is simply a must.

The coastline of the island features an occasional historical watchtower, built to warn against invaders from the sea. The towers were constructed as small fortresses, so that the garrison was able to resist even a significant numerical superiority for a long time.



The landscape on the northwest coast of the island, near Saint-Florent.

What is most beautiful in Corsica is perhaps the sunsets. I visited this island when I was nearly fifty, and I had expected it would be beautiful. However, the reality surpassed my expectations. For someone who lives in Central Europe like me it is surprising that we should have this exotic beauty so close at hand. We only need to take the highway to Livorno, Italy, which takes twelve hours, then board the ferry and in four hours we are in Corsica.











From France we take a ferry over the Strait of Dover until the White Cliffs of Dover welcome us to good old England. Separating Great Britain from continental Europe, the strait was most likely formed by erosion and is only 33 kilometers (21 mi) wide at its narrowest point.



The present St Paul's Cathedral is the fourth. The first cathedral was built of wood by the Saxons. It was destroyed by fire in 675, later restored, and still later looted by the Vikings. Afterwards the second cathedral was built, this time of stone. The third cathedral was constructed by the Normans after the previous one burnt down in 1087. The work took over 200 years. In 1136, while under construction, the cathedral was again destroyed by fire, but in 1314 the magnificent building was finally completed. In the 16th century the cathedral fell into disrepair; during the reigns of Henry VIII and Edward VI the interior decoration suffered damage. The cathedral was once again destroyed in the Great Fire of London in 1666. In 1675 work on the fourth cathedral commenced and did not finish until 1708, when the building acquired its present look.

Tower Bridge, one of the symbols of London, is a suspension bridge over the River Thames. It is 244 meters (800 feet) in length and was opened in 1894. Right next to it stands the Tower of London, with the official title Her Majesty's Royal Palace and Fortress. The Tower was last used as a palace by King James I (1566–1625). The last person to be held prisoner in the Tower was the German Nazi politician Rudolf Hess during World War II.



The English countryside, characterized by regular-shaped fields. As the plots are bounded by hedges or walls, it is not possible to roam the countryside freely.



The Changing of the Guard at Buckingham Palace. The palace is the official London residence of the British monarch (currently it is the residence of Queen Elizabeth II).







Hyde Park is one of the largest parks in London. It includes a "Speaker's Corner," an area where you can say what you want (unless you insult or swear at someone) and discuss any subject.



Thirty kilometers from London is Windsor – the second longest occupied castle in the world. It is one of the official residences of the British royal family. The University of Oxford is the oldest university in the English-speaking countries and one of the best known in the world. The first mention of it dates back to the 12th century.



In 1948 the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxemburg formed a customs union, later transformed into an economic union, which is now known as Benelux. The Netherlands is a low-lying country, with about a third below sea level. It is crisscrossed by a network of water channels.





The Dutch, in contrast to the Czechs, have access to the sea. Once they were a naval power with their own colonies. This openness to the world may have helped to shape their mentality.

Another symbol of the country – the bicycle. The 17 million inhabitants of the flat Netherlands own the same number of bicycles. The Dutch have around seven million automobiles and on top of that they boast an excellent public transport system. The bicycle is ideal for short distances, especially in flat areas. It has one huge advantage – it does not produce greenhouse gases.



One of the symbols of the Netherlands – a windmill. Its modern version, a wind turbine, is a rapidly growing renewable energy source in Western Europe.



Brussels hosted the first major world's fair after World War II, EXPO 58. Its symbol was the Atomium, the 110-meter high model of the atom.

In Belgium, as well as elsewhere in the world, the efforts to enhance the beauty of nature sometimes go too far. It seems as if these trees, deformed by humans, reflected our subconscious desire to tame nature, to conquer and "sculpture" it into regular shapes.





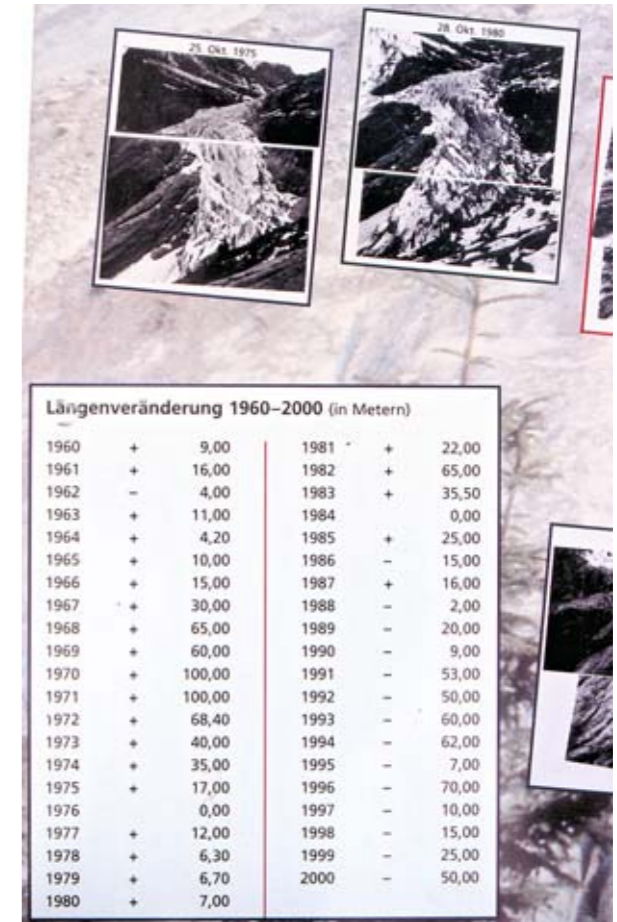


## 7.2 Alpine Countries

If I ever had a distinct feeling that people take care of and appreciate the landscape, it was in Switzerland. For me this picture is an example of a balanced low-mountain landscape.



The best-known symbol of Switzerland is the 4,478-meter (14,692 ft)-high Matterhorn. It is probably starting to show the effects of global climate change. At an altitude of 3,500 meters (11,500 ft) the permafrost (permanently frozen ground) is melting, causing rockfalls. The mountain is therefore more and more often closed to climbing.



The glaciers, in the Alps as well as elsewhere, are melting. A few decades ago the place I am taking the photo from was still covered with a glacier. Now the mass of snow is a few hundred meters away. The black and white picture shows how the glacier grew from 1960 to 1983, and its retreat ever since.

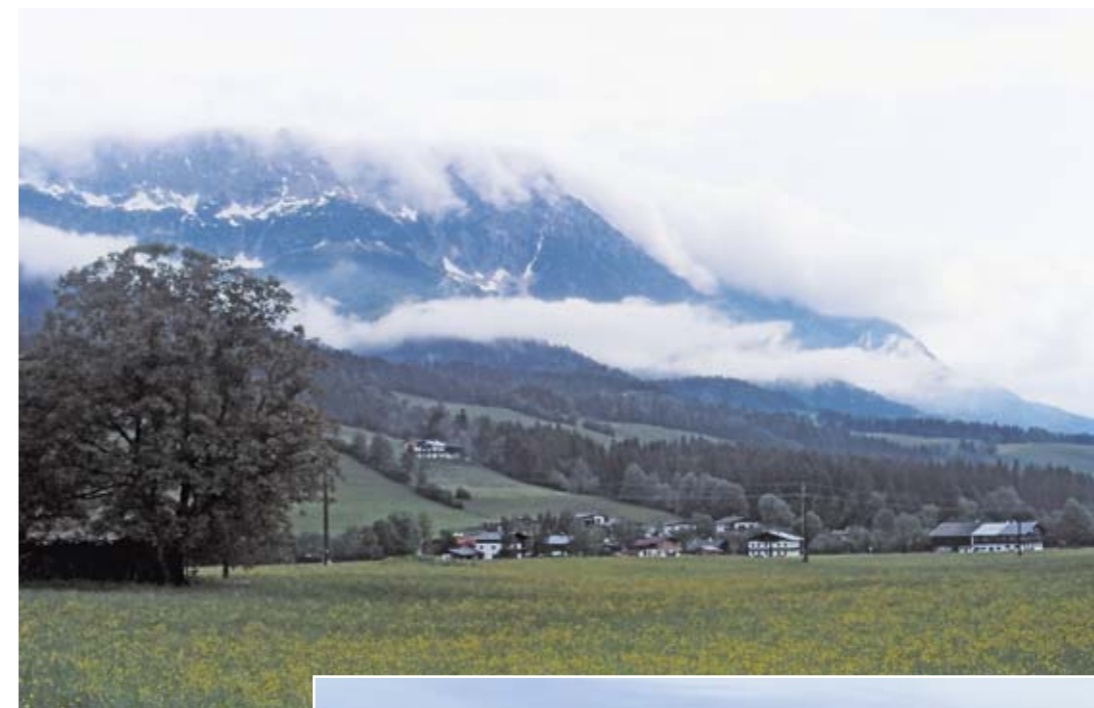


Seeing a rescue dog with a barrel of rum always makes one happy, even though this time it is just a tourist attraction.





While the Czech borders were closed in the former communist Czechoslovakia, the majority of mountain lovers would opt for the Tatra Mountains in Slovakia. However, while the main ridge of the High Tatras is 26 kilometers (16 mi) long, the Alps stretch to a length of 1,200 kilometers (750 mi) and cover 180,000 square kilometers (112,000 sq mi). They can spend all their life going for holidays in the Alps and yet stand no chance of getting to know them as intimately as the Slovak mountains. On the other hand, there are always places to discover.



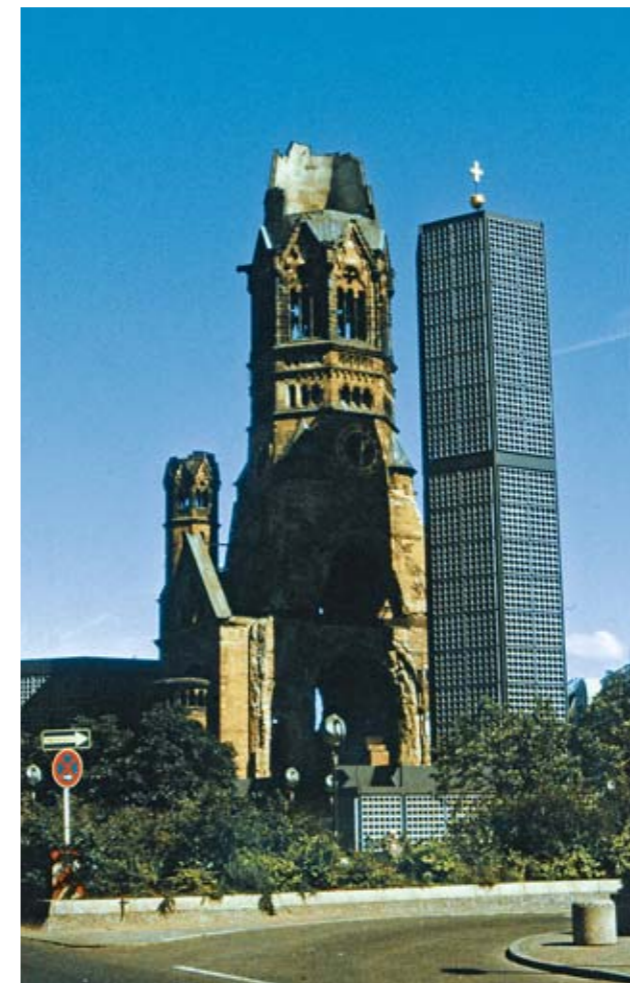
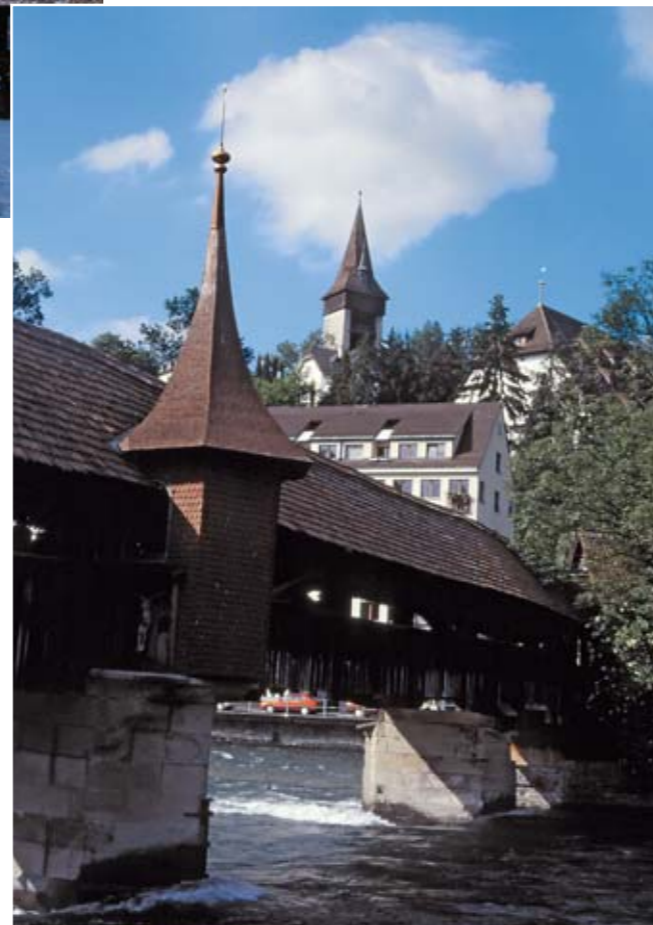




A great number of international organizations (for example, the World Health Organization and other UN agencies, and the International Red Cross) chose Geneva as their base. In 2008 the city hosted the UEFA European Football Championship. The beauty of the city is enhanced by Lake Geneva and in good visibility it is even possible to see the eternally white mountain – Mont Blanc (4,810 meters [15,771 feet] above sea level). Mont Blanc is considered the highest peak in Europe. However, as there is no clear consensus as to where the boundary between Europe and Asia runs, the Caucasian Elbrus (5,642 meters [18,510 feet] above sea level), Russia, also claims this primacy.



When visiting Switzerland, do not forget to go see Lucerne. In 750 a Benedictine monastery was founded here (the Benedictines are thought to have played a major role in spreading Christianity and civilization in general from the Mediterranean to the north following the collapse of the Roman Empire in 476). The city was established in 1178. The image shows the well-known Chapel Bridge with the Water Tower. The 170-meter (558 ft) bridge is all made of wood and has been standing here since 1332. In 1993, most of the bridge was destroyed in a fire but was quickly renovated again. Both the Bridge and the Water Tower used to form part of the city walls.



Germany is an alpine country, falling in both central and western Europe. Together with France, Germany has been and still is a driving force behind European integration. It will probably remain a mystery how such an advanced and cultural nation could have fallen into the Nazi madness during World War II, inflicting so much pain on others as well as on itself. For more than 40 years after the war Germany and the capital Berlin were divided into the western and eastern (Communist-controlled) parts. For the entire duration of the Cold War, this demolished church (Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtniskirche) in West Berlin reminded the passers-by of the consequences of World War II.

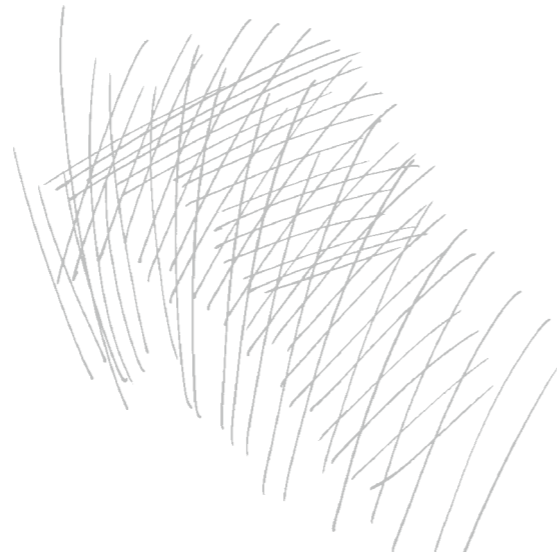
The Berlin Wall became a symbol of the "Iron Curtain" and the divided Europe. These shots are from 1988.



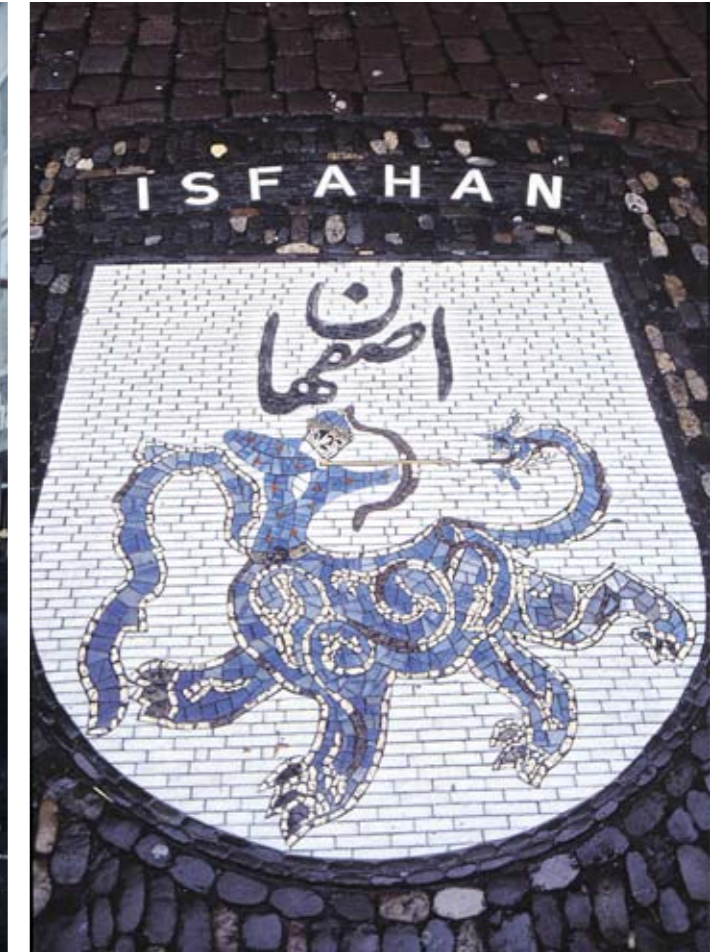




In the eastern part of Berlin the streets along the Berlin Wall looked dismal – evacuated and crumbling houses. This is how the Communist Party prevented people from voting “with their feet” – that is, running away to the West.



The war wounds (at least the material ones) are now long healed and German cities are flourishing. The picture is of Frankfurt.



It is perhaps the greenest city of not only Germany but the whole of Europe is Freiburg, set near the Swiss and French borders. It has a population of more than 200 thousand and one of the oldest universities in Europe, which was founded in 1457. A source of embarrassment for Freiburg residents is one of the cities it is twinned with – Isfahan, Iran.







*I think that the neighborhood of Vauban is a very interesting part of the city as it was designed as a "sustainable city". Construction began in the mid 1990s on the site of a former French military base and was completed in 2001. Then two thousand inhabitants moved here. Today there are five thousand inhabitants living in the neighborhood, with many others wishing to move in but there is no space. It is virtually impossible to enter in a private car, even for the locals (they do not have one or leave the cars in multi-story car parks on the edge of the neighborhood). The houses are very well insulated; most energy comes from renewable sources. There is vegetation planted wherever possible, including the space between the tram tracks.*



*"Drowned in greenery", the neighborhood consistently sorts and recycles waste.*

*Although this house looks quite ordinary, it was the first in Vauban to become in terms of energy basically independent of its surroundings. It is very well insulated and the energy is supplied by solar panels installed on the roof.*



*It is interesting that the first impulse to build alternative eco housing came from a community that resembles the 1960s hippie movement. They still live in the heart of Vauban, usually in mobile caravans, but none of the "respectable" citizens in the area seem essentially to mind.*





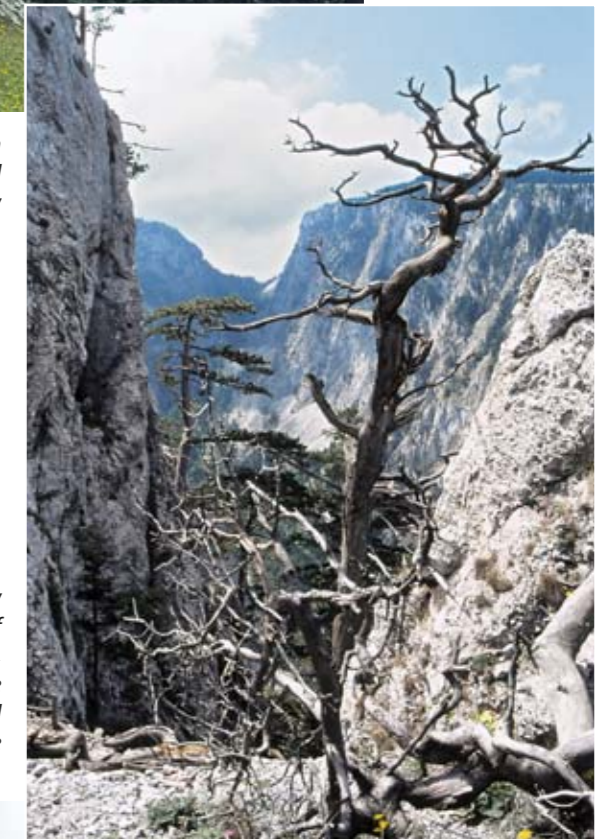


*Austria used to be part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The empire included Brixen in the Tyrol, which the Czechs are familiar with from school, because from December 1851 to May 1855 Karel Havlicek Borovsky, a Czech writer, lived here in relatively comfortable exile (he rented a small house with a gazebo; the family came to be with him at the expense of police headquarters). After World War II Brixen was annexed by Italy.*

*The Alps cover a large part of Austria. Tourists take advantage of them primarily in the winter. The local nature, services, and prices provide ideal conditions for skiing.*



*Not more than 70 kilometers (43 mi) southwest of Vienna is the Rax mountain range, composed of a high limestone plateau with steep edges. It is an ideal location for short (weekend-long) summer holidaying and you can even try climbing via ferratas (well-secured mountain climbing routes).*



*The interventions our ancestors made in the landscape would often be very successful and last for centuries, for example, the building of a network of fishponds in South Bohemia, Czech Republic. In Austria this is, for example, Salzburg, Mozart's birthplace, and its surroundings. The photo shows the Salzburg palace, leased by Americans, who made it the seat of their renowned educational institution called Salzburg Global Seminar. In the background we can see Hohensalzburg, a huge castle complex.*







The dark side of the Austrian and human history in general – concentration camps. It defies human reason what one human being is capable of doing to another. During our life on Earth we are able to become almost angelic or, equally possibly, we can become beasts. Concentration camps remind us of, among other things, the existence of evil.

About 20 kilometers east of Linz is a former concentration camp, Mauthausen. First there was only one camp, which then gradually expanded to a complex of four main camps and more than fifty branch camps, where prisoners were used for forced labor. In January 1945 about 85,000 prisoners were working here. The total number of victims is estimated to range between 123,000 and 320,000 people.

In the south of Austria the Karavanke and the Savinja Alps form a 120-kilometer (75 mi)-long border between Austria and Slovenia. Where a number of important trade routes ran in the past, now motorway and rail tunnels connect Villach, Austria with Jesenice, Slovenia. This limestone mountain range with peaks rising to around 2,000 meters (6,500 feet) above sea level and gorgeous views is ideal for summer hiking.

Geographically, Slovenia lies on the border of central and southeastern Europe, which has mirrored in its history. From the end of the World War I until 1991 it was part of Yugoslavia, but historically and "psychologically" it is certainly closer to Austria and northern Italy.



My first experience with Slovenia was somewhat unusual. After three failed attempts at obtaining a permit that would allow me to travel to the West when I was still a student, in 1987 I and a group of friends finally acquired the first permit to travel to the "semi-West", to Yugoslavia. We headed to the mountains, to the Vršič Pass in the Julian Alps. Once we arrived, fog set in and it rained for four days. We spent the time cooking and doing nothing in a World War I bunker. Then we gave up and went to Velebit (a mountain range in today's Croatia). This was not what I had pictured my first and perhaps last trip to the West to be (no one knew that the communist regime would fall within two years). I might as well have spent the holidays at home in the basement and saved the cost of the trip.











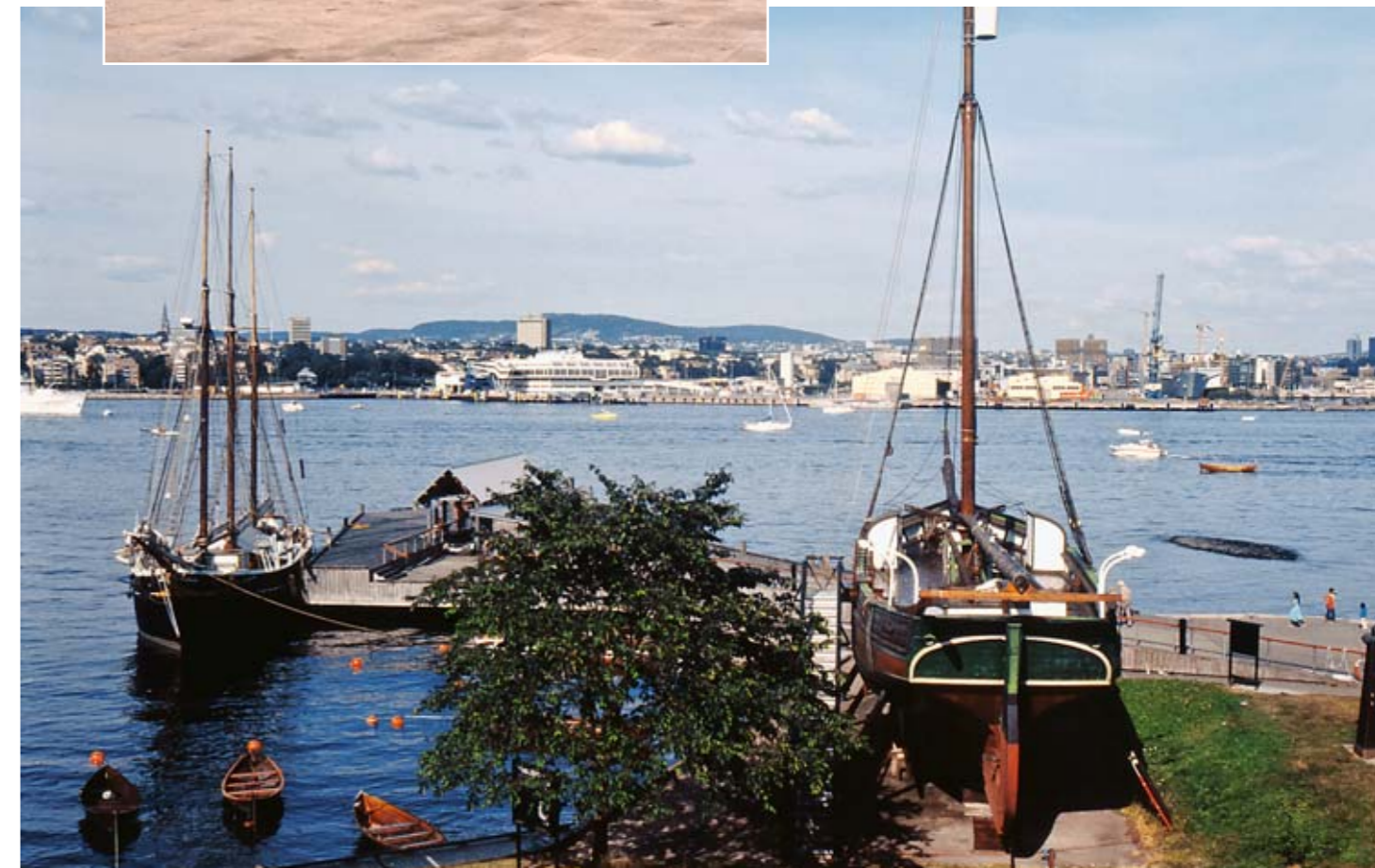
### 7.3 Nordic Countries



Mountains are not the only option when on holidays. At the foot of the Julian Alps you can make a pleasant visit to Lake Bled with Bled Island (with the pilgrimage Church of St Maria and an ancient Slavonic cemetery) and occasionally a chateau, castle or some other historical monument.



*It is interesting that all the countries of northern Europe are among the most advanced countries in the world. In addition, in comparison to the southern countries, the region has very low corruption and high levels of social capital, or, simply put, of trust between people. People in these countries are typically very willing to feel sympathetic to one another as well as to developing countries. The most generous donors include Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. Together with the Netherlands and Luxembourg they are the countries whose spending on development aid on a long term basis exceeds 0.7% of gross domestic product. I find it remarkable that it is in these countries with the harshest weather and natural conditions in general that such advanced societies have developed and prosper. Oslo, a pleasant city of six hundred thousand is situated at about the 60th parallel north. The nearby sea plays a role in temperature moderation throughout the year. In the past, it provided a connection with the world.*







Being outstanding voyagers, the Vikings could undertake numerous invasions into other countries. They colonized Greenland for some time and even reached North America, although they did not stay very long. The picture shows a Viking ship in the Viking Ship Museum.

A well-known Oslo sight is Vigeland Sculpture Park with its 212 bronze and granite sculptures designed by Gustav Vigeland, spreading over 32 hectares (79 acres).

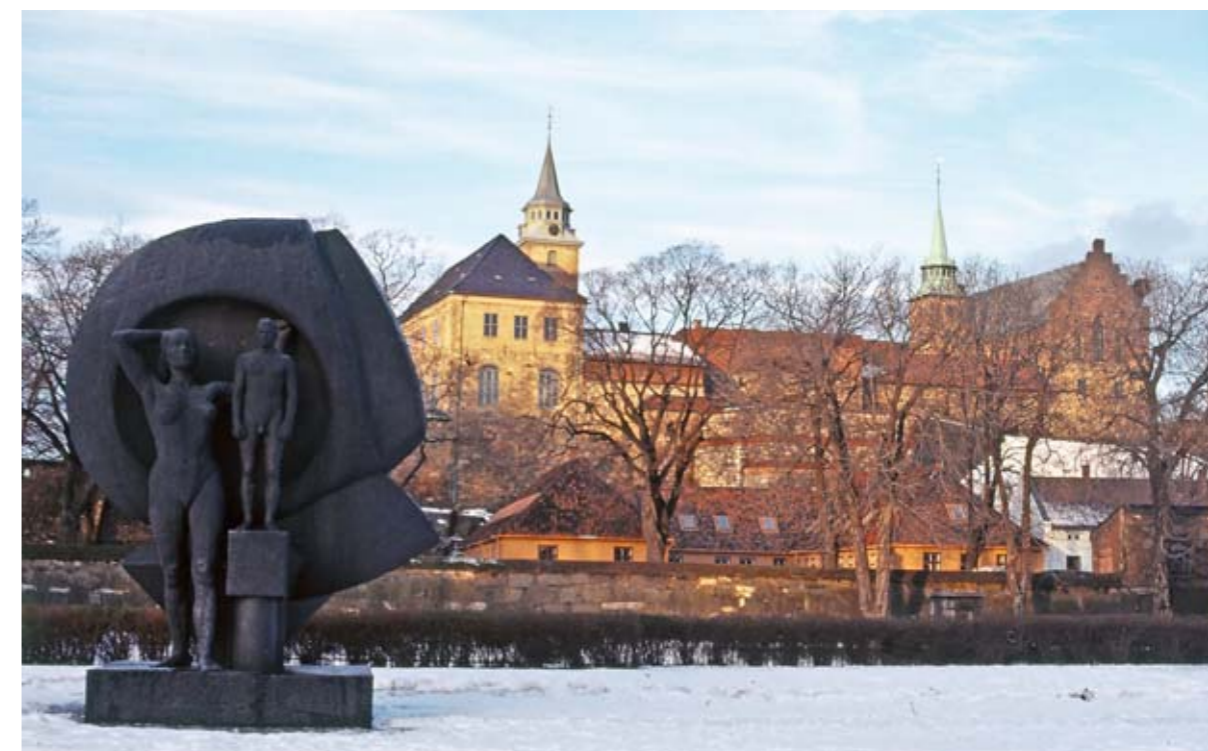


The highest point of the park holds the Monolith that looms 14.1 meters high, depicting 121 human figures that gradually rise in a "life cycle" up to the sky, which symbolizes the human desire for spiritual things and coming closer to salvation. Three sculptors worked on the Monolith for nearly 15 years, from 1929 to 1944.



The granite block that towers 604 meters (1,982 feet) high above Lysefjorden is called Preikestolen (Pulpit Rock). It is one of the most popular natural sites in Norway.

Akershus Castle in Oslo dates back to the 14th century.





Norway is predominantly characterized by breathtaking natural scenery (that is, if it is not rainy and foggy). These shots were taken during the ascent of Galdhø Peak, Norway's highest mountain (2,469 meters [8,100 feet]).



The Tvindefossen waterfall.



Another of the many waterfalls you will see while travelling around Norway.

Simply follow the road and look around, there is so much going on.







*Supphelle Glacier in the Jostedalsgreen National Park. The most popular and probably the most beautiful hiking in Norway is along the Besseggen ridge in Jotunheimen National Park. Within the three months it is passable, it sees 30,000 tourists. It is definitely worth it. The dark blue lake is called Bessvatnet, and five hundred meters lower, there is the 18-kilometer(11 mi)-long Lake Gjende, colored green thanks to the glacial silt the Memuru River carries here.*





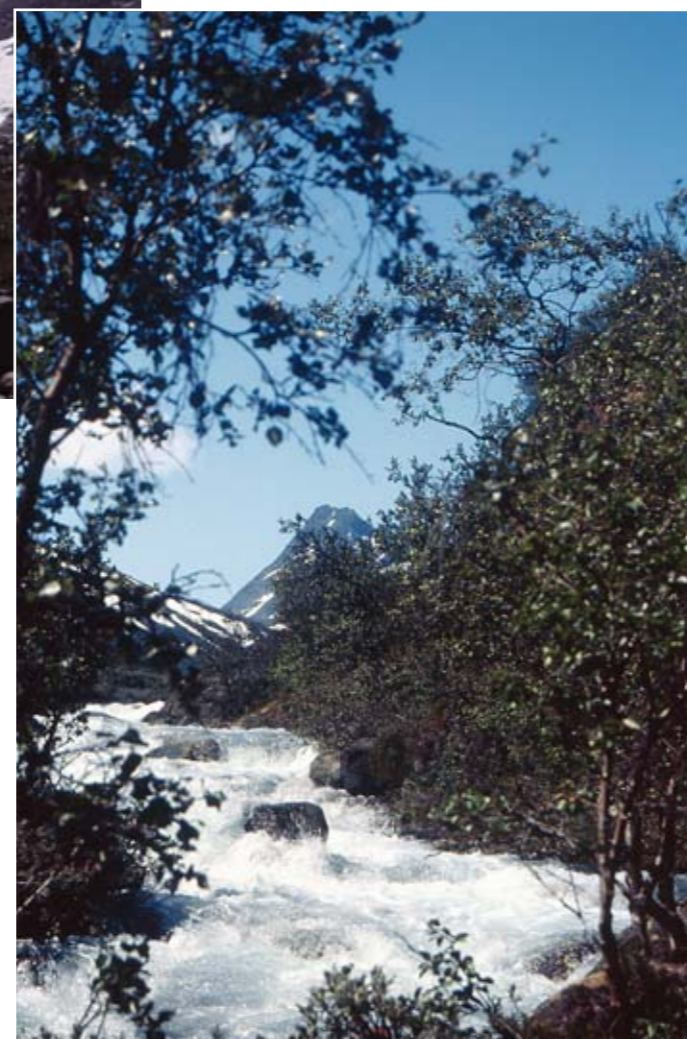


Apart from cars, it is surprisingly the bicycle that is used extensively in mountainous Norway as a means of transport for shorter distances. Chiefly thanks oil and gas deposits in the North Sea the Norwegians are very rich, but unlike other oil producers they do not ostentatiously show off their wealth. They live a rather modest lifestyle and invest in the future, for example, in the support of education or the development of the transport infrastructure.

Bergen is Norway's second largest city, founded as early as 1070. It is considered perhaps the rainiest city in Europe. On average, it rains here 213 days a year. We were lucky – it was sunny and there was not a cloud in the sky.



Day two of hiking, from the Memurubu cabin to the Gjendebu cabin.







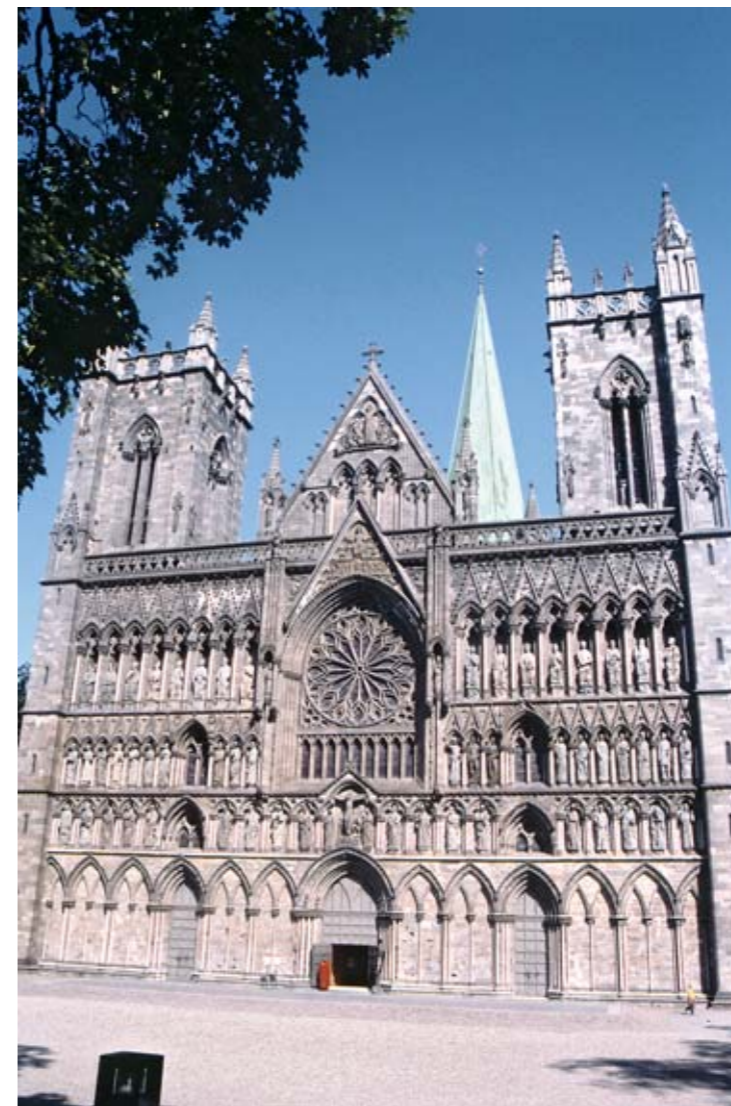
These ancient wooden churches are typical for Norway. The major hazard for them was fire, which many times in the past changed these beautiful buildings into a jumble of charred beams, rubble, and ash within a few hours.



Trondheim, Norway's third largest city (170,000 inhabitants), is considered the "gateway to the north" as the Arctic Circle is not far away. The city was established in 997 by King Olav Tryggvason. He brought the country to Christianity and had the first church in Norway built in 995.



The further north you go, the scrubrier the trees, with the trunks distorted by adverse weather in winter. In the Arctic Circle there is mainly tundra, an ecosystem with no tree vegetation; at best you will find here stunted willows or birches.

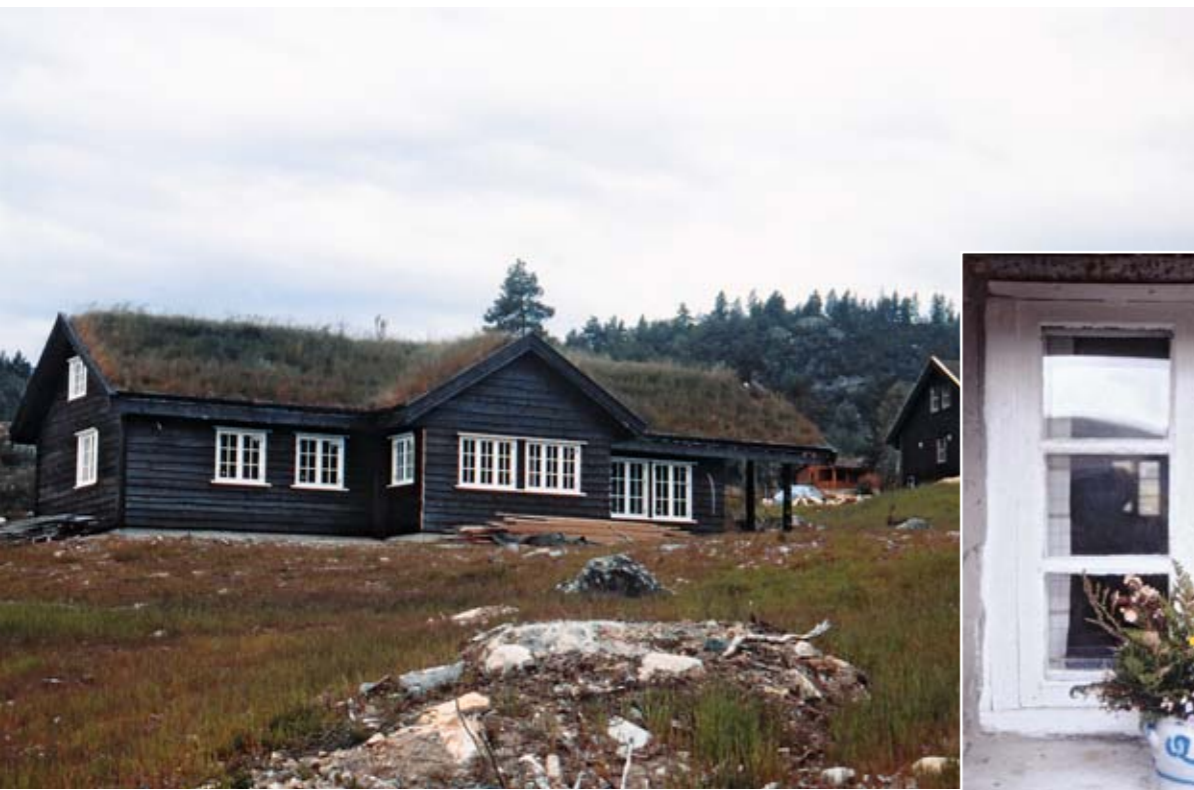


The city is dominated by Nidaros Cathedral, the most magnificent Gothic church in Norway and the whole of Scandinavia. This architectural gem hosts the coronation of Norwegian kings.





Rondane National Park was established in 1962 as the first Norwegian national park. It is a mountainous area set at around 1,400 meters (4,500 ft) above sea level, with ten of its peaks higher than 2,000 meters (6,500 ft). Worthy of mention is that the park is home to the reindeer. Due to the high altitude the local climate resembles the northern areas around the Arctic Circle or beyond and that is why this wonderful animal can live here.



In the past, people adapted to the harsh climate very well. For example, the roofs were thoroughly insulated with a layer of clay, which was covered with a permanent grass growth preventing the warmth inside from escaping. If you cannot have a garden full of flowers decorating the area around your house, in summer you can at least set up a mini-garden in a pot directly outside the window.



It is really hard to believe that in 1994 the tiny Lillehammer (25,000 inhabitants) managed to organize the winter Olympic Games and subsequently also the Paralympic Games. The town provides excellent skiing conditions, and perhaps every citizen likes to use the perfectly maintained trails in the area – in winter on cross-country skis and in summer without them.

On the outskirts of the town is an interesting outdoor folk museum with 130 historic buildings, covering the entire history of Norway until the 1980s. In summer the museum employs dozens of students, who put on period costumes and start cooking, cleaning, and selling, creating thus a perfect example of what life used to be in the different historical epochs.





Sweden has about 10 million people and a lot of space – nearly 450,000 square kilometers (174,000 sq mi). It is a happy country. Thanks to its generous social policy (and high progressive taxation) it provides citizens with a high standard of living. In addition, it is an eco-friendly country. The capital, Stockholm ranks among European countries with a top quality of life.



The second largest city Gothenburg boasts a standard of living as high as Stockholm's. It has nearly half a million inhabitants but also 60,000 students studying at two universities. Thanks to them the city is "younger", more intellectual, and has quality cultural events. This is also a substantial source of income for local businesses because students spend their money on food, clothing, housing, books, movies, local transport, and so on. Imagine how many rolls 60,000 students plus, let us say, 6,000 academic staff have for breakfast every day. Certainly it is a happy thought for bakers.



Large parts of the city "drown" in green thanks to the numerous city parks.



A reminder of what life here used to be. Only a hundred years ago, nobody predicted that at the beginning of the 21st century this poor Nordic country would be one of the most successful and most developed in the world.

If you want to take a break from civilization or avoid it for good, in Sweden you will have no problem. The endless forests and lakes will become your home. The further north you go, the more wilderness there is.





The situation in Finland is very similar to Sweden. The capital Helsinki is in the south, then several other major cities (Turku, Tampere, and Lahti), and then thousands of lakes, islands, and forests everywhere.

After World War II, Finland lay in the "grey zone" between the West and the Soviet Union, which exercised considerable influence here until its collapse in 1991. In 1995 Finland joined the European Union and the country's economic success has found its symbol in the telecom giant Nokia (it produces a third of mobile phones worldwide).



Located in the southwestern part of the country, the medieval city of Turku was founded in the late 13th century and is the oldest Finnish city. It served as the capital until Finland became part of the Russian Empire in 1809. Since 1812 the capital has been Helsinki. The picture shows the medieval Turku Castle.

The fourth and smallest Scandinavian country is Denmark. Sixty percent of the five and a half million population live in the Copenhagen metropolitan area. Copenhagen itself has only half a million Danes and the city is, similar to other Scandinavian capitals, a great place to live.



The North Sea coast is characterized by beaches with sand dunes stabilized by grass.







Permanent west winds provide optimal conditions along the coast for wind power plants. The present installed capacity of the wind power plants in Denmark is more than 3,000 megawatts, the equivalent of three large nuclear reactors.

An example of a country house from the past. The 18th century saw Denmark go through an industrial revolution, which was helped by the reforms of enlightened absolutism. The Danish folk high schools established mainly thanks to Nikolaj Frederik Severin Grundtvig (1783–1872), one of the most influential persons in Danish history, had a major impact. With the development of education Danish society was prepared for the industrial revolution and the industrial revolution significantly improved living standards.



The Kingdom of Denmark includes the Faroe Islands and Greenland. Greenland is the largest island in the world (2,166,000 square kilometers [836,330 sq mi]), with not more than 56 thousand inhabitants. Only 15% of the territory is free of ice. If the Greenland glacier melted, the sea levels would rise by seven meters.

Greenland may be one of the winners in the climate change that will probably take place in the 21st century. A part of the glacier will melt and uncover significant deposits of minerals, including gold. More and more people in Greenland are therefore proposing the country becomes independent. It is a classic story. While the inhabitants of Greenland were for decades receiving subsidies from the Danes, they did not object to being part of Denmark. The moment they learnt about the wealth, they became unwilling to share it.

Greenland was already settled 5,000 years ago by the Inuit people, who traversed the Bering Strait from Asia to Alaska, continued across North America from west to east and then over the frozen sea until they reached Greenland. Around 875 AD this island was discovered by the Vikings and in 986 Erik the Red began to colonize the southwest of the island. Around 1550 the last settlement of the Normans (descendants of the Vikings) disappeared as a result of climate change (cooling).







Iceland has an area of 103,000 square kilometers (39,769 sq mi) and a population of a mere 317,000. Only a fifth of its territory has agricultural potential.



At many places the contact zone of the two tectonic plates is clearly visible. The plates are moving apart from each other in the Atlantic at a rate of about two millimeters per month; one day in the distant future this ocean will be larger than the Pacific.

At this site, now Thingvellir National Park, the chiefs of the local villages gathered in 930 to form an assembly with legislative and judicial powers on the island. This makes the Icelandic parliament probably the oldest in the world. Sometime from 999 to 1000 the Icelanders adopted Christianity.



As early as the end of the 9th century the first settlers sailed to the island – they were Norwegians and Irish and Scottish Celts. In the 13th century Iceland was under Norwegian leadership and in 1397 it fell under the sovereignty of Denmark. It was only in June 1944 that Iceland became an independent republic. Icelanders are still very proud of their Viking roots (the photo shows a pub in the capital Reykjavik).

Iceland lies on the rift zone where the Eurasian and North American tectonic plates touch, forming the Mid-Atlantic Ridge. You can stand here with one foot in America and the other in Europe. What is more important is that the island is volcanically very active. A third of all lava that has spilled on the Earth within the last thousand years is of Icelandic origin.





Tourists come to Iceland for its natural wonders, of which there is an incredible amount. Primarily these are of course mountains and glaciers, such as Skaftafell National Park.



Watercourses can be very tricky, especially during the spring snow-melt. Many a tourist has drowned their car when fording where they should not have.



Therefore it is good to respect even these seemingly pointless entry bans.







Strokkur Geyser shoots hot water about every five minutes 20 meters (66 ft) high. This area also features Geysir (Stóri Geysir), which spouts water up to 80 meters (262 ft) high, but very irregularly and is currently inactive.

Gull Falls is probably the most beautiful and certainly the most popular waterfall in Iceland (located only 90 kilometers [56 mi] from Reykjavik).

It is not the only waterfall worth seeing, far from it. Similar large waterfalls can also be found in the northern part of Iceland.



In the north of Iceland, just below the Arctic Circle, is the fourth largest city on the island, Akureyri (17,000 inhabitants), with a surprisingly pleasant climate. The city lies on the shore of a fjord, protected by mountains. The first written mention of Akureyri dates to 1526, when the town comprised several buildings used as the shops and warehouses of the Danish merchants. Now it is a very nice small town immersed in green and yet offering all the luxuries of modern civilization.



Lake Mývatn (Mosquito Lake) in the northwestern part of Iceland. It has a number of volcanic islands separated by craters.



Iceland used to have forests but they were destroyed by the settlers. Due to the excessive grazing of sheep the land suffers from erosion. Currently there are attempts at planting and reforesting the island.





*Icelanders will never suffer from a lack of energy. Geothermal energy alone produces more than enough to cover their needs for heating and electricity production. Iceland may perhaps become the first country to replace gasoline-powered vehicles with hydrogen-powered vehicles. Hydrogen is obtained by separating water into hydrogen and oxygen.*



*Reynisdrangar – basalt sea stacks on the south coast, near the village Vík í Mýrdal.*



*Lake Jökulsárlón is the largest glacial lagoon and the most beautiful place I saw in Iceland. Due to a melting glacier the lagoon has increased fourfold since 1970, covering now 18 square kilometers (6.9 sq mi). The lagoon is more than 200 meters (657 ft) deep and is in the southeast part of the island, only 1.5 kilometers (0.9 mi) from the ocean coast.*



*Iceland is a stunning and rich country. Based on the Human Development Index (which combines the gross domestic product, education, and life expectancy at birth) it even ranks among the most developed countries in the world. This has not always been the case. In the past, the volcanic activity or harsh winters with subsequent famines would claim thousands of human lives. For example, in 1783 dozens of smaller volcanoes erupted in the southern part of the island. Famine ensued, killing up to a quarter of the population. Something similar happened in 1875, when the eruption of the Askja volcano had a disastrous impact on the economy and led to a famine. In the following years, one fifth of the island population migrated to North America. It is remarkable that even under such adverse natural conditions, the local residents have managed to build a prosperous society that can serve as an example and an encouragement to the less successful countries determined to change their future.*



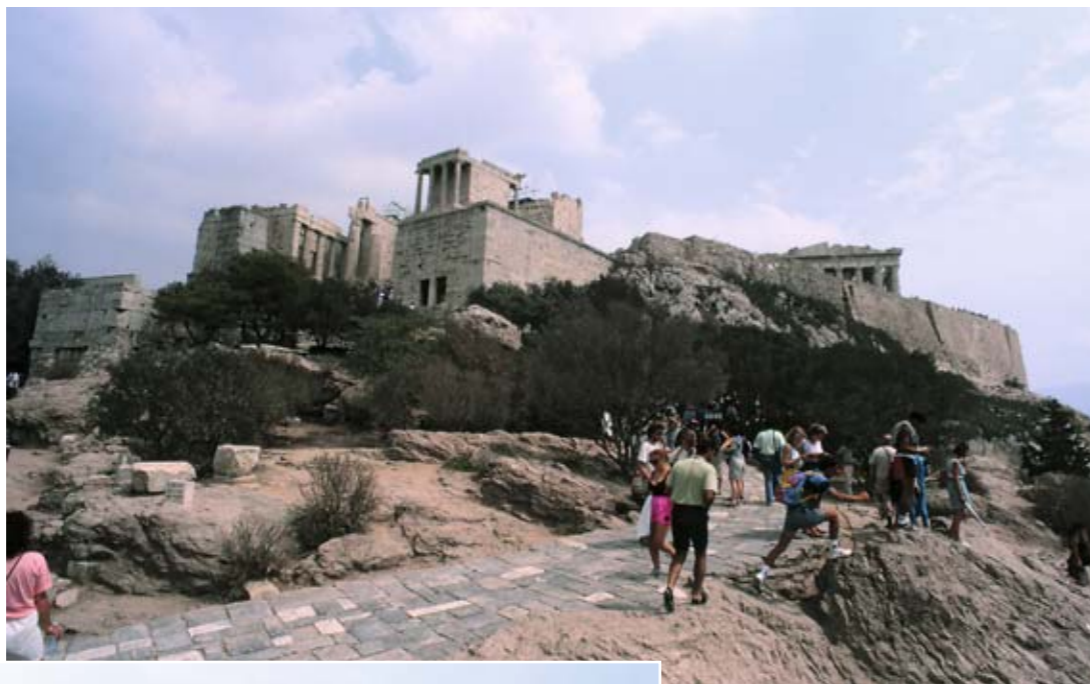




## 7.4 Southern Europe

Our Western (Euro-American) civilization is based on the legacy of Hellenic civilization, which was born in present-day Greece and the adjacent Mediterranean islands 3,500 years ago. The first democratic cities (democracy – rule by the people) emerged in Greece in the 6th and 5th century BC. Ancient Greek philosophy is still one of the fundamental pillars of Euro-American civilization. Ironically enough, it might happen that Greece will be where democracy will perish or at least come under a major threat. The country is hopelessly in debt and ordinary people have the feeling that it is all the fault of greedy domestic elites and international financial institutions. Clashes between protesters and the police are becoming more and more frequent and intense. This may result in anarchy and chaos, and there will eventually be only one way out – the heavy-handed rule of an autocrat or downright dictator.

The pictures show the Acropolis in Athens, a political, religious, and cultural center of ancient Greece from the 13th to the 5th century BC.



Thessaloniki, the second largest city in Greece with more than one million inhabitants, is considered the unofficial capital of Greek Macedonia. It was founded as early as 312 BC. I find it interesting that the later president and founder of the Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, was born here. Central Europeans appreciate knowing that this is where the brothers Cyril and Methodius, known as Apostles to the Slavs, came from. They are the Christian patron saints of Moravia and co-patron saints of Europe.



The hard-to-access Meteora monasteries in the Thessaly region were established in the 14th century, even though monks had settled in this area from as early as the 11th century. A total of 24 monasteries were built here, of which only five are now lived in by monks.

The Delphic oracle was the most famous oracle and a sacred site in ancient Greece. The best known and most popular sibyl was the Pythia. Her prophecies, however, were often somewhat ambiguous. One of the best known examples is when Croesus, the king of the Lydians, wished to know the result of a war against the Persians he was planning and the answer was: "If you cross the Halys River, a great empire will be destroyed". The prophecy came true, but not in the way Croesus had expected. He crossed the river and was defeated by the Persians, destroying thus his own empire.











*In ancient times there used to be forests here, but people cut them down to build cities and ships or utilize at home (for heating and cooking). Today, unless irrigated, farmland may only be used extensively, to graze sheep or goats. Modern people are not the only ones capable of destroying their environment. Even our ancient ancestors could do it on a local or regional scale.*

*Most tourists come to Greece only to see the beaches and the sea. What a shame, for this country offers much more, especially in terms of history.*



*Rhodes, a small island (1,398 square kilometers [540 sq mi]) in the Aegean Sea, is located only 10 kilometers (6.2 mi) from the coast of Asia Minor. It has a population of 110,000 and many visitors consider it the most beautiful island in the Aegean Sea. It has been inhabited since the Stone Age.*



*From Greece we take a boat to Rhodes and then through Cyprus on to Israel (the photo was taken on my expedition to Israel in 1990).*



*In the course of history, Rhodes was settled by the Minoans of Crete, Persians, Romans, Arab invaders, and others. The Crusaders also left a distinct imprint on this area, having built here forts that were unconquerable at that time, palaces, churches, and hospitals. The rule of the Knights Hospitaller, or the Order of Saint John of Jerusalem, lasted 213 years, until 1522, when, following a six-month siege, the island was conquered by Suleyman the Magnificent, Sultan of the Ottoman Empire. Emperor Charles V acquired a new home for the Order in Malta, giving rise to a name that is in use even today – Order of Malta.*

*The remains of the Colossus of Rhodes, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The Colossus of Rhodes was a stone statue of the Greek god Helios, erected between 304 and 292 BC. The statue perhaps straddled these two pillars over the harbor, with boats sailing underneath. The statue was destroyed during an earthquake in 226 BC.*







Further east of Rhodes lies the island of Cyprus (9,251 square kilometers [3,572 sq mi]) with its 1,099,000 inhabitants. For a long time (since 1983) it has been divided into Greek and Turkish parts separated by the "Green Line" patrolled by UN troops. The island was nearly united in 2004, when in a referendum 65% of people in the northern, Turkish part voted for a United Cyprus Republic, which would have subsequently been accepted into the European Union, but 76% of the population in the Greek part turned the unification of the island down. The picture is from the Greek part of the island, from the port city of Limassol.



The Colosseum is the largest amphitheater ever built in the Roman Empire. Its construction was completed in 80 AD. It sat 50,000 spectators and was used primarily for gladiatorial games. It symbolizes the phrase "bread and circuses". We should take the ruins of the Colosseum as a warning against what the above type of government and lifestyle may end up in.



Built by Emperor Hadrian in 135–139 AD, Castel Sant'Angelo was several times destroyed and reconstructed. It also used to serve as a papal fortress connected to the Vatican a tunnel. Nowadays it houses a museum.

Trevi Fountain was built from 1732 to 1762, in the late Baroque style. It is seen as one of the symbols of Rome.



Italy is the heir to one of the most powerful empires in history, the Roman Empire. One of Europe's oldest cities, Rome was founded more than 2,700 years ago and formed the center of the Roman Empire for many centuries. A number of ancient monuments commemorate this period, among others especially the Roman Forum, the center of public life.







Monument to Victor Emmanuel II (1820–1878), the first king of a united Italy.

The modern Italy is certainly not an example of peaceful, stable governing; a snap election has become almost a tradition. Demonstrations are common and, likewise, protests often include strikes. The photo captures a 2006 demonstration in Rome against the government of Romano Prodi.

A part of Rome is the State of the Vatican City. This is a sovereign state and the seat of the head of the Catholic Church, the Pope. Five hundred and seventy two people, including 32 women live on an area of a mere 44 hectares (110 acres). It was founded in 1929.



The Vatican City is dominated by St. Peter's Basilica, where according to tradition St. Peter was buried after his martyrdom. This monumental building, which can hold 60,000 worshippers, includes the Sistine Chapel with Michelangelo's fresco of the Last Judgment.



The Vatican Gardens take up more than half of the Vatican City. They have been a place of peace and meditation for the Popes since the 13th century.







The famous city of Venice is an island city, the historical center of which lies in a shallow lagoon. In the Middle Ages the city was a center of wealth (thanks to trade) as well as of the influential Venetian Republic. Today, Venice with its network of canals and typical gondolas is so overcrowded with tourists in the summer months that there is hardly any room to move.



The most important monument is Saint Mark's Basilica, an example of Byzantine architecture. The original church was built as early as 828–832, when Venetian merchants stole the remains of the saint in Constantinople. St. Mark's Square with the Doges' Palace (left).





The island of San Giorgio Maggiore with a basilica of the same name dating to the 16th century.



Venice is potentially at risk from rising sea levels that climate change may bring. At present, 54 times a year on average it faces "acqua alta" (high water), when the sea levels rise by 90 centimeters.

Assisi in central Italy is a small historic town (27,000 inhabitants), known as the birthplace of St. Francis of Assisi (1182–1226). In his youth he was part of (as we would now say) the "gilded youth" and wanted to become famous as a knight. In captivity he turned to God and decided to live in poverty. He tried to reform the then extremely corrupt Church, not through rebellion but through a personal return to a simple life and the ideals of the original Christianity. He is the founder of the Franciscan Order (officially the Order of Friars Minor), which primarily focuses on preaching and missionary activities.



The picturesque island of Capri near Naples. The Roman Emperor Tiberius (42 BC–37 AD) spent the end of his life here.



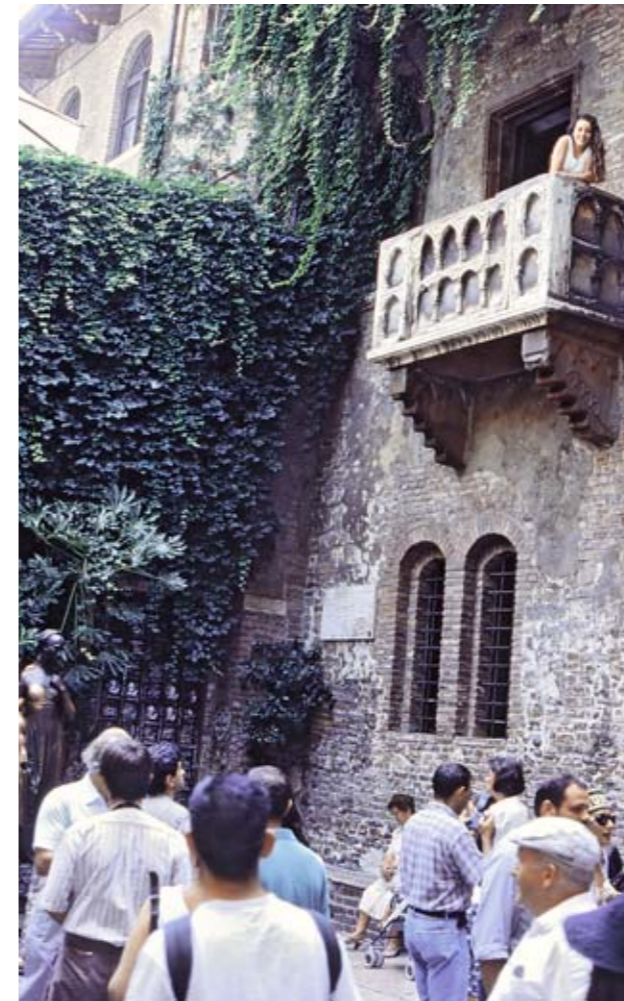
Sunset over the Italian Peninsula.







*The island of Elba (the third largest Italian island with its 223 square kilometers [86 sq mi], after Sicily and Sardinia) belongs to Italy. The Etruscans, and then the Romans mined iron ore and smelted iron in furnaces at Elba. The island is primarily known as the place of Napoleon Bonaparte's enforced exile (1814). The British treated him very generously, as at Elba Napoleon had his birthplace Corsica in sight (it is 50 kilometers [30 mi] away) and enjoyed a comfortable life (he was even appointed the emperor of the island). After nine months, however, Napoleon escaped, and following the Waterloo defeat in 1815, he was interned on the remote island of St. Helena in the Atlantic Ocean, where he died in 1821.*



*Verona is a beautiful city on Lake Garda between the Alps and the Po Valley. William Shakespeare set the plot of his famous tragedy Romeo and Juliet here. The picture shows Juliet's house and balcony.*

*The city of Pisa is located in Tuscany and has a little less than 90,000 inhabitants. It was founded probably in the 13th century BC, 550 years before Rome. While in Roman times it was one of the centers of the rule over the Mediterranean, in the Middle Ages it became an important trading port. It is now known mainly thanks to the Leaning Tower, the construction of which started in 1174. The sixth floor was added in 1350, despite the tilt. In 1990, it was displaced horizontally over five meters and the tower was therefore closed to the public so that rescue work could commence. Today the lean is a mere three meters and the tower is again open to tourists.*







*Italy is not just a country of remarkable history and beautiful beaches but also a land of mountains, especially the Alps in the north. One of the most beautiful mountain ranges I have visited is undoubtedly the Dolomites, a paradise for mountain climbers and tourists, and skiers in winter.*



*Thanks to vie ferrate (paths secured with fixed ropes), it is possible to safely hike to places where only climbers would otherwise have access.*



*Tre Cime di Lavaredo is the best known symbol of the Dolomites. The middle Great Peak has an elevation of 2,999 meters (9,839 ft). Until 1919 the peaks formed the border between Italy and Austria.*





*In World War I the Dolomites witnessed fierce battles between the Austrian and Italian armies. Most of the soldiers did not perish in battle but died of the consequences of harsh natural conditions.*



*The symbol of the fighting in the Dolomites is the Monte Piano. While the southern part of the mountain was in Italian hands, the northern part was occupied by the Austrians. The fighting lasted two and a half years and the front line never moved. A total of 10,000 soldiers from both the sides met their deaths here in four square kilometers (1.5 sq mi).*

*Between 1979 and 1981 the members of the "Friends of the Dolomites" built here an open air museum with an educational trail. The photo shows the Bell of Friendship.*



*The highest peak of the Dolomites, Marmolada (3,343 meters [10,812 ft] above sea level), photographed from Tofana di Mezzo (3,244 meters [10,643 ft]).*

*They say that in the mountains, people die either very young or very old. Young if they suffer a fatal injury while working in the woods, become buried in an avalanche in the winter, and so on. However, if no such tragedy overtakes them, the natives often live to a ripe old age because they live (or at least did so until recently) a simple life in a healthy and clean environment, filled with sufficient physical work.*





*Rather than looking at the pictures of such stunning mountains it is better to visit them in person. If you set out from the Czech Republic, like I did, it is about a ten-hour drive and the local villages and towns offer plenty of affordable guesthouses. The great advantage is that the Dolomites boast 300 sunny days a year, so if you stay for a week you are basically guaranteed to have good weather. However, the mountains can be treacherous and a storm may come very quickly. The wet and slippery limestone then turns even a quite easy hike into a very dangerous one.*



*Croatia is an extremely popular destination for Czech tourists. Up to one million of them head there every year. In the communist era, Yugoslavia was one of the countries people could visit given they were patient and lucky enough.*

*In ancient times, before Christ, the land was settled by Illyrian tribes, who later left for today's Albania. Then Croatia became part of the Roman Empire. This impressive amphitheatre in Pula in Istria serves as a reminder of the era. From the 7th century the Slavs began to settle the area.*







Croatia has an advantage in its long and jagged coastline with many islands, which can fit in hundreds of thousands of tourists without making them feel they were the victims of the "tourist industry". The feeling is intensified thanks to the less developed infrastructure, which in comparison with, for example, the neighboring Italy I consider an advantage.



From 1945 to 1990 Croatia was a republic within the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. In 1991 it and Slovenia declared independence, unleashing a war that continued with interruptions until 1995. For many years after ceasefire the traces of the war were still visible on the buildings.



The war hit the beautiful city of Dubrovnik hard. Thanks to having been inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List since 1979, the city has been quickly and carefully reconstructed. In the past, Dubrovnik was a city-state benefiting from maritime trade and representing a serious rival to Venice.



By building a new transport infrastructure the Croats want to make the Croatian coast accessible for hundreds of thousands of tourists from further north in Europe.



Croatia is best known for its coast. Life in the interior is different, much simpler and poorer.





The national parks, of which Croatia has eight, are definitely worth a visit. The largest and best known is the Plitvička Lakes National Park (295 square kilometers [114 sq mi]). It features 140 waterfalls.

Lovers of mountain hiking will enjoy the limestone Velebit Mountains. During the Croatian-Serbian war The Republic of Serbian Krajina was declared in the northern part of Velebit in 1991, only to be reconquered by the Croatian army in 1995. 3,000 civilians were killed. About 250,000 Serbs were forced to leave their homes and go to Serbia or other countries. Later on, about 40,000 of them returned. To this day, tourists are recommended not to walk off the main Velebit ridge down into the valley as the Croatian army mined the area during the war to prevent the Serbs from accessing the sea.



Korcula is the name of an island and a historical town standing on it in the southern part of Croatia. The island boasts a rich history. Excavations revealed Neolithic burial mounds dating to the time of the Phoenicians, who were replaced later by a Greek colony. In the 7th century Slavs began to settle the island. It is reportedly the birthplace of the Venetian merchant and traveler Marco Polo (1254–1324), who became famous for his travels to East Asia and China.



Brač Island (396 square kilometers [153 sq mi]) is the largest Dalmatian island and the third largest Adriatic island. It is popular with tourists, who like to spend their entire vacation at the beach.



The island of Hvar has a little over 4,000 inhabitants, with 3,600 of them living in a town bearing the same name. The town is a popular stop for luxury yachts that sail around the Mediterranean.







*The highest hill on Hvar is Sveti Nikola. Its height of 628 meters (2,054 ft) is not that negligible as the climb starts directly at the seaside. It provides breathtaking views. However, it is not very easy to find the way up to the top, and it is definitely not recommended to descend it in the dark.*



*The place I love most in Croatia is decidedly the island of Rab. It has 91 square kilometers (35 sq mi), less than 10,000 inhabitants, and if you travel from the Czech Republic, it is an easy drive of 12 hours (unless you get stuck in a traffic jam in the summer). Even in Roman times it was a popular destination.*



*The island has large beaches crowded with tourists, but also dozens of small beaches that are accessible only on foot, where you can be alone or almost alone.*



*As the town of Rab has only 600 inhabitants, it is possible to swim directly below the town walls, while at dusk it is pleasant to roam the narrow streets of this ancient town.*

*I have visited the island of Rab four times and will be happy to go back again if an opportunity arises.*







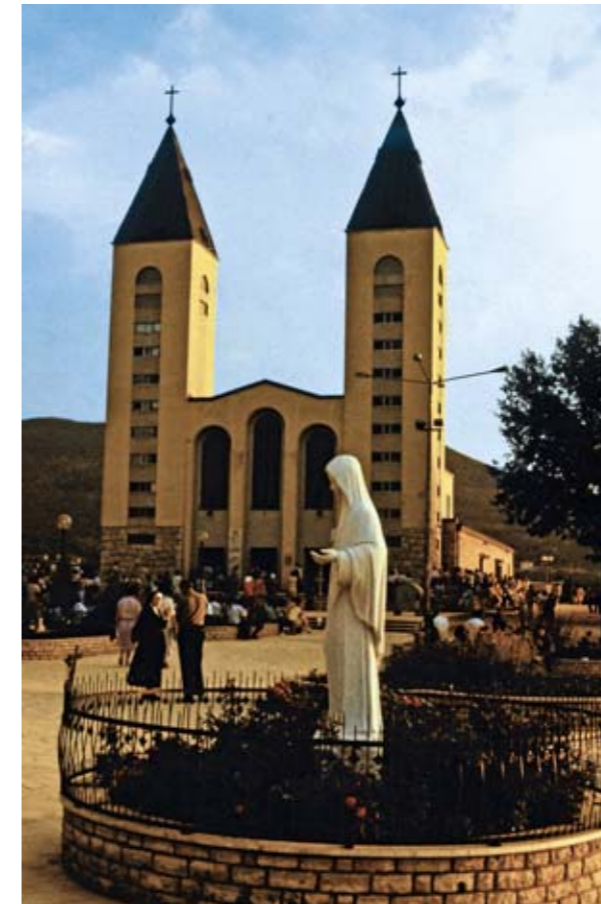




Bosnia and Herzegovina formed part of Yugoslavia until 1992. A narrow corridor through Croatian territory connects it to the sea; the coast is home to Neum, a town of two thousand. Bosnia and Herzegovina thus owns 21 kilometers (13 mi) of the Mediterranean coast, a fact that split Croatian Dalmatia into two parts.

Founded during the domination of the Ottoman Empire (1522), the city of Mostar is situated on the Neretva River. The name derives from a famous bridge built here in 1566. During the war the Stari Bridge was destroyed by Bosnian Croats. In 2004, its exact replica was completed. The photo of the original bridge is from 1988.

Medjugorje, a town of four thousand, sits 25 kilometers (16 mi) southwest of Mostar. It is said that from June 1981, the Virgin Mary appeared around here to six young people, stressing in her message the need for peace (which is interesting as back then no one could imagine that in a few years' time a war would break out here).



Medjugorje has gradually become one of the most visited Catholic pilgrimage sites in Europe. This entails an opportunity for believers to gather and undergo a spiritual renewal, but also a chance to do "business". Very quickly sellers began to offer kitschy plastic statues of the Virgin Mary and thousands of other souvenirs of questionable quality.

Serbia used to be a sort of "heart" of Yugoslavia, which started to gradually fall apart in the early 1990s until even the last remnant of the former Yugoslavia, the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro, disintegrated in June 2006. Today, Serbia has only 88,000 square kilometers (30,000 sq mi) and not more than 8 million inhabitants.

The Serbs have a rich and complex history. During the 6th century when the Slavs were settling, the Eastern Roman Empire enjoyed a strong influence, and the Orthodox Church put down roots here. Serbs fought against the expanding Ottoman Empire even though after the battle of Kosovo (1389) they had fallen under its rule. (It may very well be thanks to the Serbs that Europe was not Islamicized in the past.) They restored their independence only in 1878. In 1914, Serbian nationalists assassinated Francis Ferdinand, Archduke of Austria-Este, successor to the Austro-Hungarian throne. As a result, on 28 July Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia, triggering off World War I, which claimed 15 million lives.



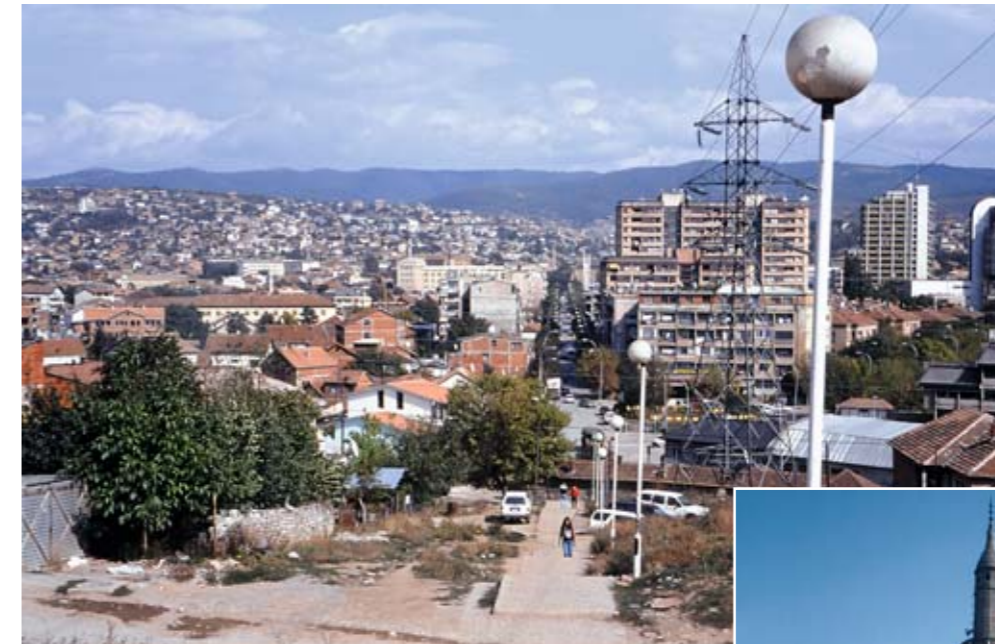




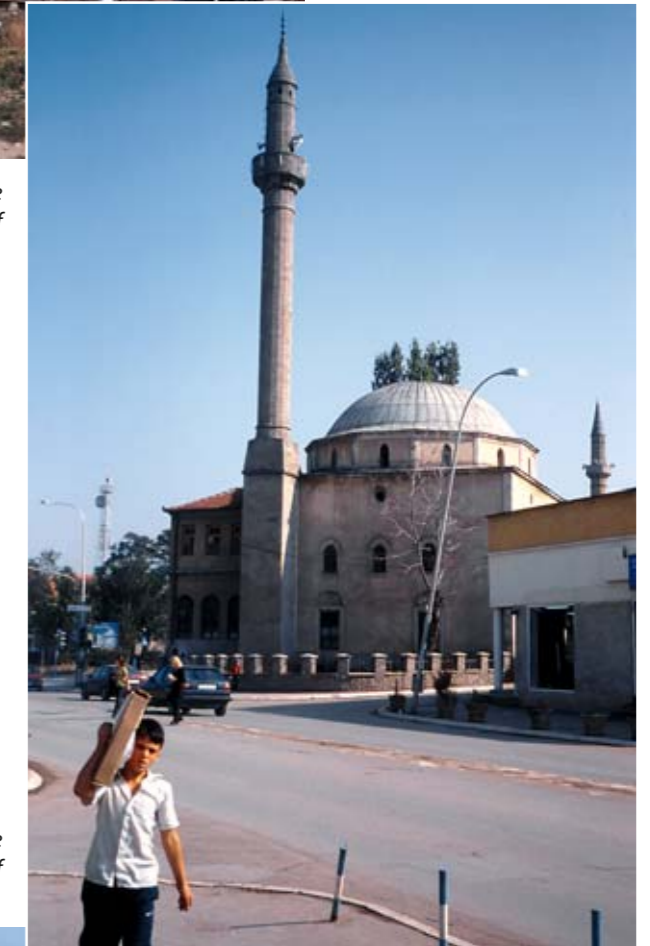
Today Serbia is striving to become a modern and prosperous country in Europe and, in the future, perhaps even part of the European Union. Modernization of the country would require a lot of energy and Serbia is not very rich in fossil fuels. The black and brown coal that Serbia mines is burnt in power plants, which brings along the problem of environmental pollution and the generation of carbon dioxide, the principal greenhouse gas.

Kosovo was once part of Serbia and Serbs still consider it their territory. Nowadays Albanians make up 88% of the Kosovo population, while Serbs only 7% (this ratio has been caused by rapid demographic growth of the Kosovo Albanians in the past, and by many Serbs leaving the area in recent years). In February 2008 the Kosovo parliament declared independence from Serbia. To date the independent Kosovo has been recognized by 75 countries.

The fighting between Serbs and Kosovo Albanians went on from 1996 to 1999. During this time, hundreds of thousands of Albanians and Serbs had to leave their homes. Between 2000 and 2008, the territory was administered by the UN and NATO.



A view of the Kosovo capital, Pristina. Most of the 600,000 inhabitants are Albanians, but there are also Serbs, Bosnians, Roma and others, even if only in small numbers since the war.



The predominant religion in Kosovo is Islam as the influence of the Orthodox Church is waning together with the diminishing number of Serbs in Kosovo.







A view of the architecturally interesting National Library, built in the times of Yugoslavia.



The Kosovo path to prosperity will be a long one, if ever in the foreseeable future this little piece of land (10,912 square kilometers [4,212 sq mi]) with more than two million people will manage to become a pleasant and peaceful place to live. Too many wrongdoings have taken place here, and the distrust or even hatred between the Kosovo Albanians and Serbs will not fade any time soon. It is questionable whether this small, poor state with a lack of natural resources and no access to the sea can survive with no aid from the outside.

From time to time the representatives of Albania and Kosovo suggest all Albanians unite in one state called "Greater Albania". This is nevertheless another "powder keg", and should it explode, it would not only hit Serbia and Albania but also the southern part of Montenegro, half of Macedonia and the northwest of Greece.

There is always hope for a peaceful solution and a good future, and people need to strive for it even if, rationally speaking, the chances of success should seem very little.



In the southwest of Europe lies the Iberian Peninsula, separated from the rest of the continent by the Pyrenees, a Tertiary mountain range formed by the Alpine-Himalayan orogeny. The main ridge is 435 kilometers (270 mi) long and the highest mountain, Aneto Peak, is 3,404 meters (11,169 ft) high. One of the mountain valleys cradles the tiny country of Andorra (468 square kilometers [179 sq mi] and 84,000 inhabitants).



Llamas were brought to the Pyrenees from the South American Andes, and they seem to be thriving here. They also make a welcome attraction for tourists.







Spain occupies the majority of the Iberian Peninsula (504,782 square kilometers [195,364 sq mi]). The southwest part of the peninsula belongs to the smaller Portugal (92,321 square kilometers [35,558 sq mi]). The south is home to Gibraltar, a tiny overseas territory of the United Kingdom. This limestone "rock" of 6.5 square kilometers has a population of less than 28 thousand people.



The problem is that today already large parts of the peninsula are arid areas resembling the steppe or even semi-desert. In connection with global climate change, it is expected that the Sahara will begin spreading from nearby Africa to Europe, gradually transforming the southern parts of Spain, Portugal, but also of France and Italy into desert.

The Iberian Peninsula has always suffered from a lack of water and people dealt with it, for example, by building highly sophisticated if expensive aqueducts, such as this one in Segovia.



In the north of Spain on the Bay of Biscay it is certainly worth visiting the Picos de Europa National Park with its highest peak Torre de Cerredo (2,648 meters [8,688 ft]). You need to be lucky with the weather though, which was not our case.



Those who prefer art to nature and mountains should head for Madrid. Apart from many other cultural and historical sights, you can visit the world-renowned Museo del Prado with one of the best collections of European art (from the 12th century to the 19th century) in the world. The museum houses 5,000 paintings (including Goya, El Greco, Titian, Hieronymus Bosch, Rubens, Raphael, Picasso, and others), 700 sculptures, 2,000 various decorative items, 2,000 photographs, and 1,000 coins and medals.



The former royal residence and monastery, El Escorial, lies 45 kilometers (26 mi) northwest of Madrid. It is one of the most important and largest royal palaces in Europe.





In the Middle Ages Spain, together with Portugal, was a true superpower in which power and wealth were concentrated. This was reflected in, among others, religious and secular buildings of spectacular design. The photo shows the Late Gothic cathedral in Segovia, erected between 1525 and 1577. The builders made extensive use of mahogany imported from America.



Ávila has impressive and outstandingly preserved medieval stone walls. Built from the beginning of the 11th century, they were to protect the city from raids by the Moors (Muslim Arabs and Berbers from North Africa). A native of Ávila, the Christian mystic St. Teresa of Jesus (also called Teresa of Ávila, 1515–1582) was a reformer of the Carmelite Order. She was the first woman ever named a Doctor of the Church by Pope Paul VI in 1970.



Forty kilometers (25 mi) northwest of Barcelona is the limestone mountain massif of Montserrat. Since the 11th century, the slope of the massif has held a Benedictine monastery dedicated to the Virgin of Montserrat. It is a pilgrimage site and one of the holiest places in Catalonia. Here the founder of the Society of Jesus, Ignatius of Loyola, made a general confession, took off his civilian clothesword, handed over his sword, and put on a pilgrim's robe. The local museum boasts paintings by El Greco, Caravaggio, and Picasso.



For a long time, the Atlantic coast in northwest Spain (Galicia) was considered the "end of the world". That is why the westernmost point of the coast is called Cape Finisterre. As long as people believed that the earth was flat, quite logically they assumed that the ocean ended somewhere far beyond the horizon with a terrible abyss. The sailors must have been very brave to go on their voyages of discovery.







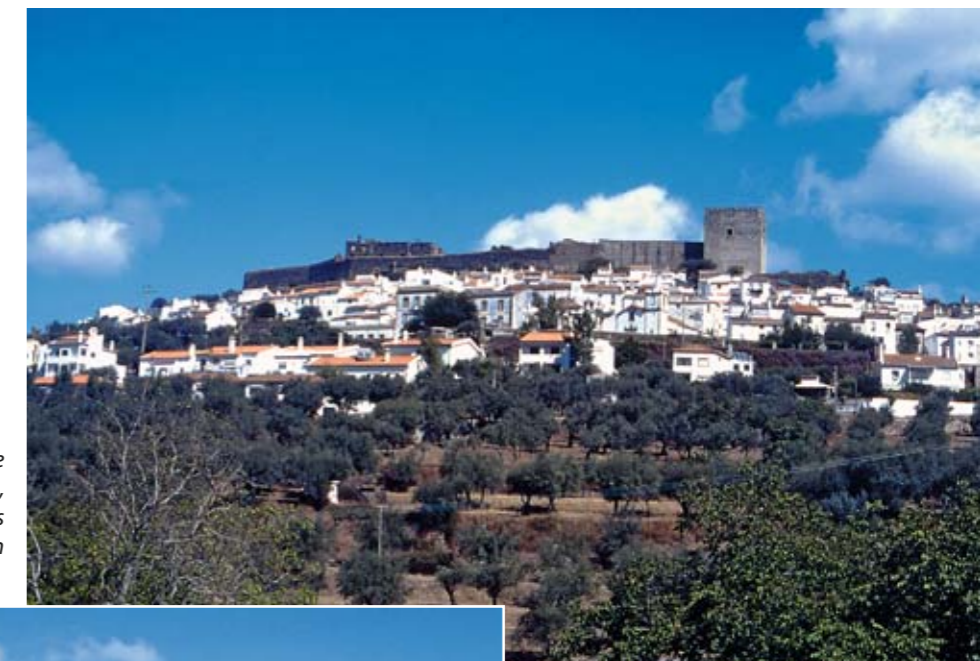




Even "at the end of the world" you may step where you should not. Instead of feasting your eyes on the beautiful landscape and the sea, you then have to focus on a much more mundane task.



Our visit to Spain will conclude in Santiago de Compostela, one of the main pilgrimage sites of Europe since the Middle Ages. The city was founded in the late 4th century and early 5th century. In the 9th century the probable remains of St. James, one of the twelve apostles, were discovered here. Legend has it that James was sent to the Iberian Peninsula as a missionary – to spread the faith in Jesus Christ. After returning to Jerusalem he was executed, but his remains were brought back to the place of his missionary work. This shows that, as Christ wished, the first apostles were already trying to proclaim the Gospel (the Good News) into all countries, to the ends of the (then) earth.



Just beyond the Spanish border lies the Portuguese medieval fortified village of Marvão, which is applying for World Heritage status. It is dominated by a magnificent castle from the 13th century.



Together with Lourdes, France, and Santiago de Compostela, Spain, Fatima in Portugal ranks among the best known Catholic pilgrimage sites. In 1917 three small children had an apparition of the Virgin Mary here. The apparition lasted from May to October, always on the 13th day of the month at the same hour. The Catholic Church recognized the authenticity of the apparitions in 1930. The basilica, the construction of which began in 1928, contains the bodies of two of the three children (Francisco and Jacinta), who, shortly after the apparitions, died in the 1919 Spanish flu epidemic. The third, Lucia dos Santos, became a nun and died in 2005 aged 97.







## 7.5 Eastern Europe

*The misfortune of Eastern Europe is that for a substantial part of the 20th century it was a part of the Soviet communist empire and the consequences of this bondage are still present.*

*Russia is a large country, in fact the world's largest in area (17,075,000 square kilometers, or 6,592,700 sq mi). It has a remarkable history going back to as early as 862 AD. It has always been the crossroads of Eurasia. The center of political and social life is the capital Moscow (11.5 million inhabitants) with Red Square and Saint Basil's Cathedral, a symbol of the Orthodox Church.*

*On Red Square near the Kremlin wall, you can see another symbol of Russia – the Mausoleum of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, the founder of the communist Soviet Union. At that time, Russia attempted a big leap from feudalism to socialism using the ideology of class struggle, or rather class hatred. The results were quite woeful. Even today many Russians see no future for themselves and drown their souls in alcohol. They also face a serious demographic problem – the population is aging and dying out. Previously, they formed a nation with 150 million inhabitants, now the number has decreased to 142 million and there is no indication that the trend will change in the foreseeable future.*



*The second largest city is St. Petersburg (5 million inhabitants). It was founded in 1703 by Peter the Great as a “window on Europe” and between 1712 and 1917 it served as the capital. Peter the Great wanted the European influence to prevail in Russia as much as possible over the Asian, therefore he built the capital city on the northwest edge of the empire even if the place was wetland and many of his subjects lost their lives there.*

*The dark side of St. Petersburg, but also of many other cities. Using outdated technologies has always been typical for the industrialization of this country which in turn has destroyed the environment and human health.*





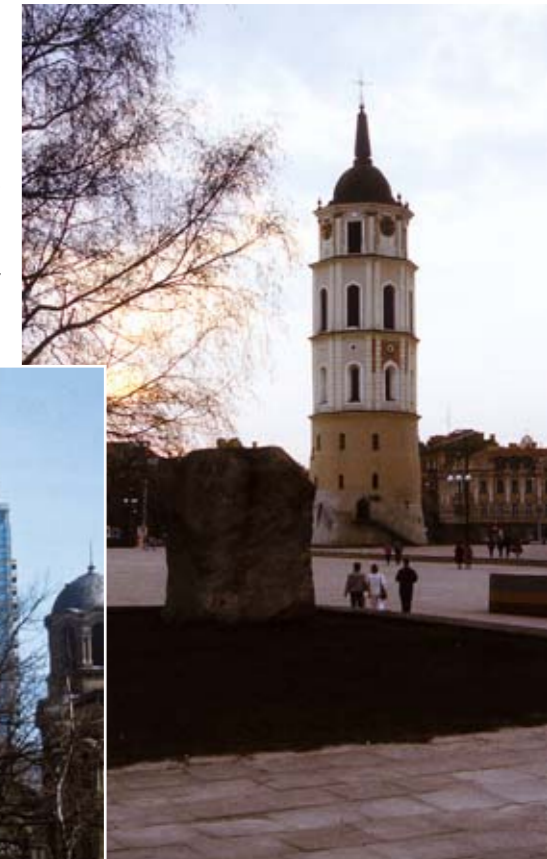


Latvia is one of the three Baltic countries, together with Estonia and Lithuania, which were occupied by the Soviet Union from 1940. Tens of thousands of Latvians were murdered or carted off to the Siberian gulags. In 1990, Latvia declared independence, and one year later, the Soviet Union disintegrated. In May 2004, Latvia, as well as nine other candidate countries, joined the European Union.



Riga, the capital city, is home to 730,000 out of the total 2.25 million Latvians. From the religious perspective, it is a mix of the Orthodox, Lutheran and Roman Catholic faiths.

I visited Riga for the first and so far the last time in spring 1988 and I have great memories of that visit; I was an eye-witness of a massive demonstration for more freedom. In the former Czechoslovakia, my home country, it was something unthinkable at that time, but in Latvia Gorbachev's perestroika was well underway and people were not afraid to make use of it.



Another country that was part of the Soviet empire for half a century is Moldova. The Soviets, under an agreement with Germany from 1939, occupied the territory of Moldova in 1940. In 1941, when the two countries started a war against each other, the Soviets were pushed out of Moldova by Germany and Romania, but in 1944 the Red Army won this territory back and stayed until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The consequences are sad. Today, Moldova is the poorest and most backward European country, which depends on considerable development assistance from the developed nations. The big problem is the emigration of mainly young, economically active people. Basically, everyone who can tries to get away from Moldova and seek a place where the living conditions are better.

Another problem is Transnistria – an internationally unrecognized state east of the Dniester River, which broke away from Moldova and which remains under strong Russian influence.

The picture shows the center of Chisinau, the capital of Moldova. Out of the total 4 million Moldovans, 600,000 people live there.







The Dniester River forms the border between Moldova and Transnistria.

Remembrance of times past. Although Moldova as a part of the former Soviet Union and Romania were "brotherly countries united in the camp of peace and Socialism", the borders were closely guarded and the countries were separated by a massive fence.

A typical Moldovan landscape with good agricultural land, but without significant mineral wealth. It is, however, not particularly attractive for tourists.



An image still typical of the countryside. A tractor is expensive, so horses are used for pulling loads instead.

Moldova – it is mainly vineyards and the production of wine. The problem lies in the fact that small growers process wine in primitive conditions using technologies that are unacceptable if judged according to the European hygiene standards. The resulting wine is of good quality, but unfortunately the typical Moldovan product is not price-competitive on international markets. Most of the production goes to Russia, which occasionally "harasses" Moldova by ceasing the import of the goods. In this way, Russia forces the Moldovan government not to apply a policy that would be too independent of the Russians.







In addition to thousands of family-owned wine cellars, the Moldovans also have several in state and cooperative ownership, which are really large, up to several dozen kilometers in length! Inside, people do not walk but drive. The Moldovans themselves joke that if they were able to sell all the wine that is stored inside, they would not be the poorest, but the richest country in Europe. Because life is difficult in Moldova, it is necessary to have some fun and celebrate once in a while. Such an occasion is the autumn wine festival in Chisinau. First, the (mostly corrupt) politicians make speeches in which they claim all the successes, from the rich wine harvest to favorable weather. Then the cultural program finally begins. Performances of folklore groups in costumes accompanied by music gradually turn into unrestricted wine tasting.







Moldova borders with Romania which is considerably larger (283,000 square kilometers, or 92,000 sq mi, 22.2 million inhabitants) and which in the past controlled a large part of Moldova. Romania managed to keep their distance from the Soviet Union and employ a relatively independent foreign policy, but the dictator Nicolae Ceausescu threw the country into great poverty. He was the only representative of the communist regime who was, immediately after his overthrow, sentenced to death by a military court and shot together with his wife.

Today, Romania is trying to catch up as much as it can, and is quite successful. In 2007, the country joined the European Union together with Bulgaria. Bucharest, the capital with 2 million inhabitants, has some nice quarters which are properly taken care of, streets full of bombastic advertisements, but also less pleasant quarters with a touch of Socialist gray and dilapidation.



I visited Romania several times before 1989, because at that time it was an easily accessible and inexpensive country with beautiful mountains. Făgăraș, Retezat, Piatra Craiului, or Bucegi; these are the names of mountain ranges remembered by almost everyone of my generation, who in their youth enjoyed hiking in the mountains.







*The saying that every cloud has a silver lining is quite true. If I could have traveled freely as a student to the West, I would have probably never visited the Romanian and Bulgarian mountains. I can definitely recommend these places to the young generation of today. So if you do not mind sleeping in a tent and carrying a 20 kilogram (45 pound) backpack, go there at least once.*



*The local herdsmen are simple, perhaps uneducated, but friendly and warm. They have a pride and dignity which they have acquired throughout the years spent in the mountains, but their dogs are often semi-wild and they roam far away from their masters. Many a lonely tourist has already been badly bitten by them. The dogs respect only strength, so forget about what you do with the pets that you may have at home. You must grab a stone and do not be afraid to use it. You do not necessarily need to hit them; they will understand the message even if a few stones only fly close enough to them.*



*The last time I went to the Romanian mountains was in 1991 with a group of Scouts. Our twenty-year-old car of Soviet make fitted into the local environment well. It worked well on the poor roads full of holes; only the exhaust pipe fell off.*



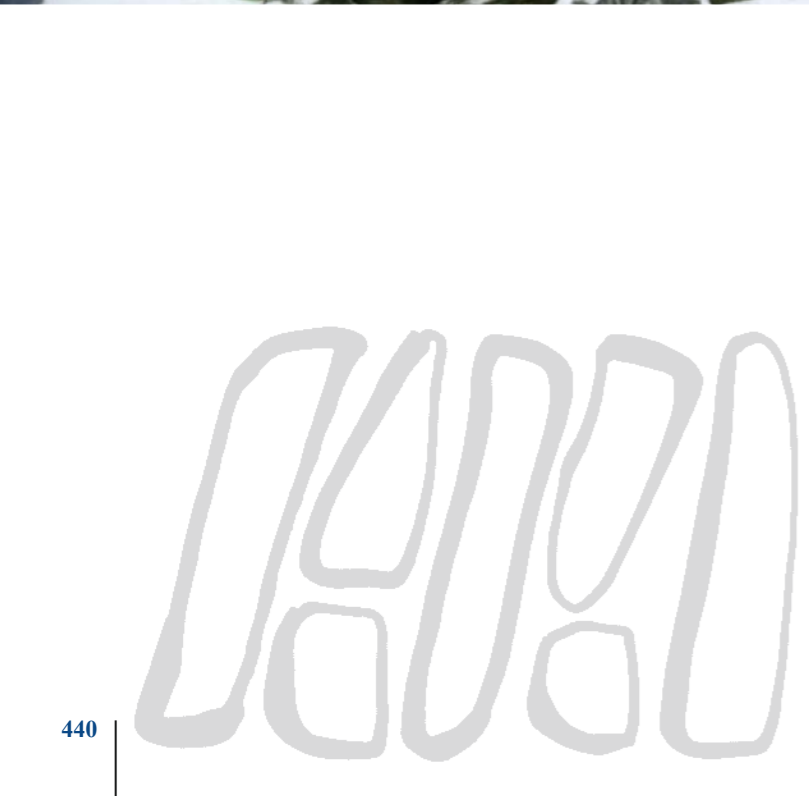




*Our trek in the mountains was not successful this time. We climbed to 2,000 meters (6,500 ft) in the Făgăraș mountains on a sunny day and then it started to snow. We did not mind for a while, but it snowed and there was fog and overall bad weather from Monday to Thursday. In July! So we gave up and went down again.*



*Instead of mountains, we focused on learning about the Orthodox churches and monasteries.*







*It was the first time we could leisurely explore the rolling Romanian countryside with the poor, but pleasant villages, churches, forts, and castles. There were definitely always many things to look at.*

*Nevertheless, the sight was not pleasant sometimes. When we came to a factory that reminded us of the 19th century, we had a sad spectacle. Judging from the fly ash deposits in the surroundings, it still employed people.*



*We headed to the second destination of our summer trip, to the Romanian Banat. The Danube creates here a natural border between Romania and Serbia.*





The large water project Iron Gate, which was built between 1946 and 1972, is quite close. The dam is 1,200 meters (3,940 ft) long and 63 meters (207 ft) high. After completion the dam raised the water level of the Danube by 33 meters (108 ft). The hydroelectric power plant has an output of 2,100 MW (equivalent to two large nuclear reactors). The electricity generated goes into the two countries.



The Banat is divided into three parts: the eastern part in Romania, the western part in Serbia, and the smaller northern part in Hungary. In the first half of the 19th century, Czech and German settlers came here (especially to today's Romanian and Serbian parts). The Czechs founded seven villages. One of them, Saint Elizabeth, was abandoned as early as in 1847; the others have survived to this day. In the last twenty years, however, the villages have been depopulating. Young people are leaving to work in Bohemia and Moravia.



In the Banat, you can listen to Czech as it was spoken in the Czech lands 150 years ago. The Czech language has been conserved in this secluded region; it has not absorbed new Czech expressions, but rather borrowed Romanian ones. Similarly in agriculture where it looks as if you have gone one hundred years back in time. People live modestly, perhaps even in poor conditions, but they have lost none of the goodness of their hearts. The Czech Republic has developed into a richer society, but the question is whether we have not lost something important in terms of interpersonal relationships in this pursuit of prosperity.











The locals cannot live on agriculture alone, so the men are employed in the nearby coal mines. The work is hard and dangerous, all the more so since the mining technology is considerably outdated.

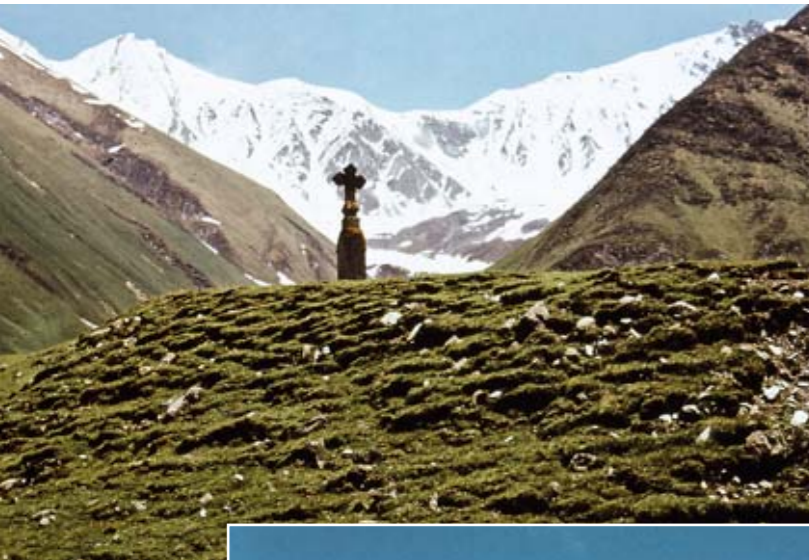
Finally, this is my favorite picture taken in 2009. Romania is a member of the European Union and every road user must have a license plate. Therefore, this horse-drawn wagon is marked with a plate and the emblem of the European Union on it. Let us hope it is not a model for the common future of the whole of Europe when the world's oil reserves shrink radically.



In 1984, when I my request for permission to exchange foreign currency was refused for the third time, I went with five friends to Georgia in the Caucasus. It was not easy. We had to forge a letter of invitation to obtain a recommendation from the faculty committee of the Socialist Youth Union. We left our own country successfully, but we lacked the "marshrutnaya karta" – the approved travel plan. We had good luck for three weeks and nobody checked us in the mountains. For the last two days, however, we imprudently went down to the sea and were quickly arrested. After five hours spent at the police station, the police officers realized that we were indeed no imperialist spies. They gradually became friendlier and one of them went to buy some food for us. In short, Georgian hospitality was not suppressed even under socialism. We parted as friends, even though we had to leave the country. It did not matter; our stay was already over anyway.







The ancient Georgian state, called Kartli, was formed as early as the 4th century BC. In the 1st century AD, the area was occupied by the Romans. Christianity was adopted here around 340 AD. From the 7th to the 9th century, the area was under Arab influence. In the 13th century, the country was threatened from the west by the Turks and from the east by the Persians. Part of the population was Islamicized at that time. In 1783, the Russians gained power over the territory. Georgia won complete independence from Russia (or the Soviet Union) as late as 1990. Nevertheless, it faces big problems with the two rebel regions – South Ossetia and Abkhazia. They declared independence from Georgia (South Ossetia in 1991, Abkhazia in 1992), although in addition to Russia, they were recognized only by Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Nauru (in 2008 and 2009).



Mount Kazbek (5,047 meters, or 16,558 ft) rises above the town of Kazbegi near the border with Russian North Ossetia. It is an extinct volcano which erupted for the last time 2,750 years ago.



Pure virgin nature and blooming mountain meadows contrast sharply with the mess surrounding villages. Local people still do not understand that nice surroundings and clean water in the creeks contribute to the quality of their lives.







We are moving to the west to the town of Zugdidi on the border with Abkhazia, and from here further to the mountains, to the province of Svaneti in the northwestern part of Georgia. At some points it was not an easy trip. There was a landslide which blocked the road just in front of our bus and we had to wait for heavy machines to clear it. Svaneti is known for its typical remains of medieval fortifications and villages. Virtually every building in a village was fortified. When an enemy attacked the village, people retreated to the towers, where they had prepared food, water, and weapons. Nowadays people do not build fortifications against enemies, but life is not easy here anyway. The main economic activity is agriculture, but very hard work is necessary to make a living from the fields of the foothills.







One of the mountain passes, which gets you to Elbrus, the highest mountain of the Caucasus in Russia. In wartime, a whole company of soldiers passed through it with full gear. Today, we would consider such undertaking without good climbing equipment a hazard to our lives.

An unexpected but welcome refreshment on the trek – a mineral lake with hot water. Beautiful landscape all around and perfect privacy – no one else but our six-member group.



The Ushba, the most beautiful mountain I have seen in the Caucasus, which is one of the peaks higher than four thousand meters (fifteen thousand feet). It looks like the Matterhorn in Switzerland, but without tourists. The mountain also enchanted one of my colleagues who created a short rhyme expressing his deep attraction towards it.







## 7.6 Central Europe

Our travels around the world now bring us to Central Europe. Poles, Slovaks, and Czechs are very close linguistically, culturally, and historically. During the first three years of World War II, Great Britain, the Polish government in exile, and the former Czechoslovak president Edvard Beneš discussed the post-war federal arrangement of Czechoslovakia and Poland. Now it is only "what if" but a strong and powerful country with sixty million inhabitants could have emerged in Central Europe.

Eighty five percent of Warsaw, the capital of Poland, was destroyed at the end of World War II because on 1 August 1944 the Poles began the Warsaw Uprising. It was scheduled to last 48 hours, until the Red Army would enter the city. Stalin, however, stopped the Warsaw advance short directly before Warsaw. The defenders of Warsaw held out for 63 days before they surrendered. Hitler ignored the terms of surrender and razed the city to the ground. The death toll of this uprising is estimated at 800,000. There was hardly anything left of the historical center and Warsaw had to be completely rebuilt.

After the war the dominant feature of the city was assumed by the Palace of Culture and Science built in the style of Socialist Realism. This "gift from the peoples of the Soviet Union to the people of Poland" was completed in 1955. The building is 237 meters (757 ft) high and has 42 floors.



In the north of Poland there lies the Masurian Lakeland, a remnant of the Pleistocene glaciations. It is a popular summer destination offering a great variety of sports, especially sailing.

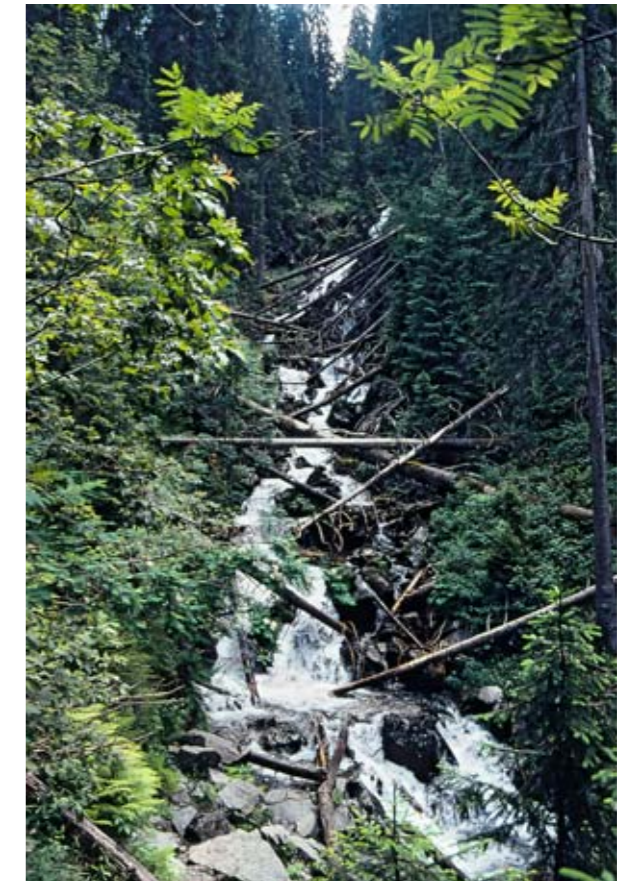






*In the south of the country, in contrast, the Poles share the High Tatras with the Slovaks. The starting point for the mountains is the town of Zakopane. The Polish part of the Tatras is mainly limestone, unlike the Slovak part, which consists mainly of granite and slate.*

*The Slovak Republic, its people and beautiful landscape will always have a special place in my heart, and not just because we, the Czechs, shared one state with them for more than 70 years. My first daughter was born there; I did a year of military service there and worked for another four years at the Institute of Landscape Ecology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences. I look forward to having many years ahead of me when I am still strong enough and curious enough to get to know especially the Slovak mountains.*



*Having visited the Slovak Paradise National Park eight or ten times now, I can recommend this corner of Slovakia to everyone. Covering nearly 200 square kilometers (76 sq mi) it features gorges, canyons, and dozens of waterfalls accessible by ladders and steps. The south part of the national park holds the largest ice cave in Slovakia, the Dobšinská Ice Cave.*

*At first sight the Slovak Ore Mountains are not as glamorous as the Slovak Paradise or the High Tatras. However, they are the largest Slovak mountains and have one great advantage – you will find very few tourists here.*











Slovakia does not have many cities with significant and well-preserved historical centers. One exception is Levoca in eastern Slovakia. The first mention dates from 1249; in 1317 it became a royal city. Since 2009, the city has been inscribed in the UNESCO World Heritage List.

Spiš Castle is a large castle ruin near Levoca. The site was inhabited by people already in the Old Stone Age (Paleolithic). A fortified settlement was founded here at the beginning of the Christian era, and the fortification was further developed in the 12th and 13th centuries. In 1241 Spiš Castle was one of the few which resisted the Tartar invasion.



The stunning landscape of Slovakia, too, may succumb either to natural factors or human activities (or both). In 2005 a storm brought about extensive wind breakage in the High Tatras. The scars on the face of the Tatra National Park will take a long time to heal.



Still, humans can inflict an even more permanent damage. This moonscape is the aftereffect of the magnesite plants in Jelšava-Lubeník. Industrial activities have, however, devastated Slovakia only locally (for example, the surroundings of the aluminum smelter in Žiar nad Hronom), unlike the large-scale devastation in the Czech Republic (for example the North Bohemian Coal Basin, the Ore Mountains, or the Jizera Mountains).

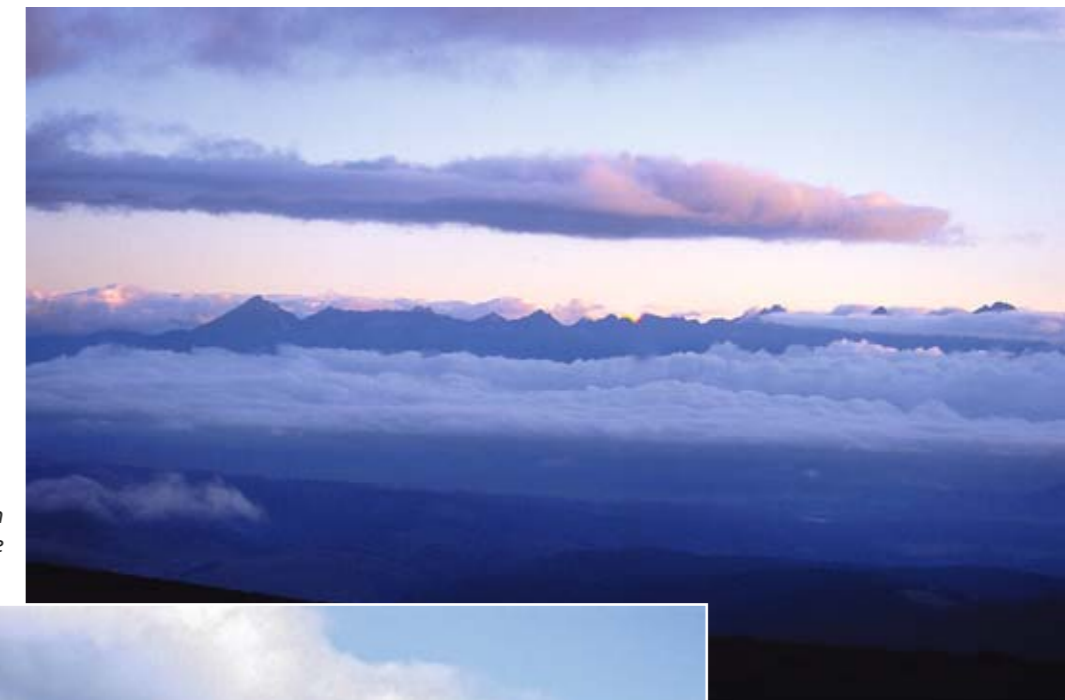




Roháče is a part of the Western Tatra Mountains, covering 260 square kilometers (100 sq mi). The mountain range consists of granite and schist that formed in the Paleozoic era. It is the best hiking location in the whole of the former Czechoslovakia.



Malá Fatra is another gorgeous natural area in Slovakia. The mountains emerged during the Tertiary and Quaternary periods. They are characterized by limestone and dolomite cliffs, grasslands (an ecosystem above the tree line, in the subalpine zone) and gorges.



A view of the main ridge of the High Tatras taken from the Low Tatras ridge at dawn.







*We can learn about the world but we will never know everything. It is not humanly possible to see everything within a single lifetime, regardless of the fact that nature and society change over time. I feel grateful for having been blessed to see a great part of the world, and hopefully I have managed to share a few interesting insights with the reader, who has been generous and patient enough to reach the end of this book. Our journey will end in my native land, the Czech Republic. Thousands of Czech tourists know the country much better than me. It is not my ambition to come up with something completely new and sensational but there may be a few observations worth making.*

*Foreign tourists are mostly familiar with Prague, which they tend to come to see for two or three days and then travel on to other European destinations. Packed with history, Prague is certainly beautiful, but there is more to the Czech lands than just Prague.*



*The Czech Republic does not have the sea or eight-thousand-meter peaks, and yet the Czech landscape is "paradise on earth to see", to quote the national anthem. It was not only nature but also the work of past generations that created for example the beauty of the Bohemian Paradise.*





*In the spring, you can wander around the alluvial forests of Podyjí National Park in the south of Moravia. In the fall, strolls around the Jeseníky Mountains in the north of Moravia feel simply magical.*



*In the Beskydy Mountains it is worth visiting the Rožnov Open Air Folk Museum demonstrating how the Czechs once lived and cultivated the landscape.*



*Nothing comes completely free. A convenient and comfortable lifestyle requires energy, a lot of energy. For Czechs the principal means of acquiring it has been coal mining. The landscape has been devastated chiefly by the surface mining of brown coal in the north of Bohemia.*







*In pursuit of wealth the Czechs are capable of plundering anything, including the slopes of the Ore Mountains. It is possible to tell how advanced a society is, not so much by what it can and may do, but rather by what it willingly restricts itself from doing.*



*Brown coal combustion resulted in acid rain, which in the second half of the 20th century destroyed mainly the Jizera and Ore Mountains. The 1990s saw a drop in coal mining and a substantial improvement in combustion technologies; as a result the sulfur dioxide emissions fell by more than 90%. The situation is nevertheless still not ideal. The summit areas of the Jizera Mountains are deforested or have dead trees rising up to the sky in reproach – the palpable aftereffects of acid rain.*







The Czechs also generate energy at the Dukovany and Temelin nuclear power plants. The Temelin plant was hotly discussed in the 1990s, while it was being built. Today there are two blocks standing. I do not, however, understand why the Czechs want to build another two blocks, as roughly a quarter of the national electricity production is exported abroad.



The construction of the Nové mlýny Reservoirs on the Thaya River below the Pálava region represented another controversial large-scale intervention in the landscape. This system of three reservoirs with a total area of 3,393 hectares (8,384 acres) was to store water for irrigation and prevent floods. The reservoirs are currently used mainly for recreation and fishing. Experts and lay people have been unable to come to agreement concerning the purpose of the structure. In order for the system to be built, the largest complex of alluvial forests in the Czech Republic had to be sacrificed and cut down.



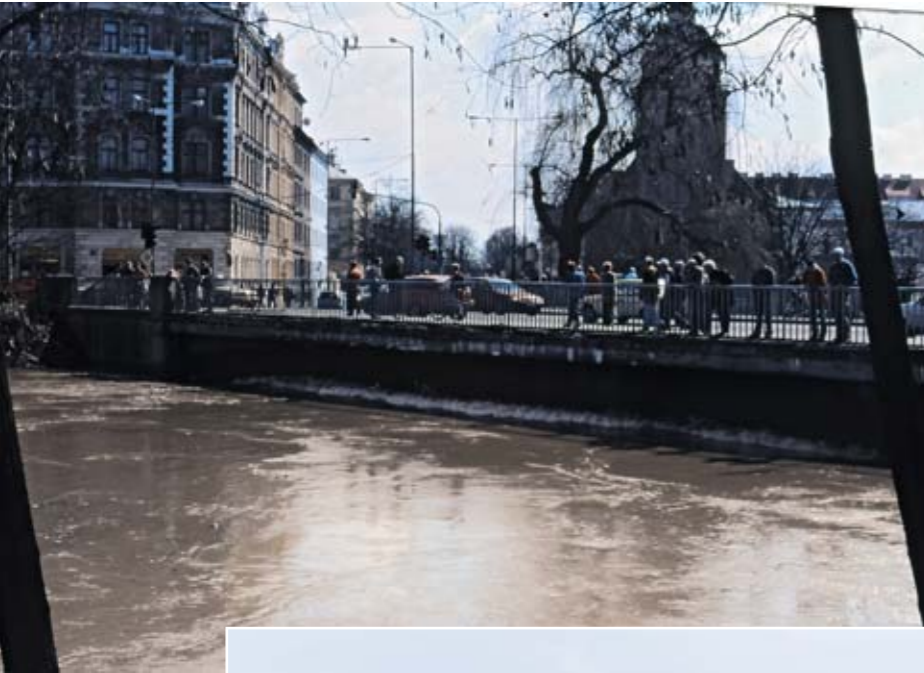
As a result of climate change the Czech Republic is likely to be exposed to flooding more frequently than in the past. Like a sponge, alluvial forests can absorb and soak up huge amounts of water from spring snow-melt as well as from torrential rains. The pictures show an alluvial forest in the Litovel Morava River Basin Protected Nature Area above Olomouc.











Were it not for the Morava River alluvial forests, Olomouc with its hundred thousand inhabitants, as well as towns further down the river, would suffer from flooding much more and more often.

Flooded land around the Sluňákov Centre for Ecological Activities in Horka nad Moravou. As the construction site is artificially elevated above the surrounding terrain, there is no risk of flooding.



Agriculture has also contributed to damaging and destroying the Czech landscape. The Czechs are fascinated by agricultural intensification and industrialization; instead of growing crops and keeping livestock they have begun talking about "producing" food. Sloping plots were converted into large terraces, which changed the groundwater system. Financially, this step made no sense. These terraces, built in the 1980s below the Buchlov Castle, cost 250,000 Czech crowns per hectare back then and the expected return was more than 200 years.

The intensification of agriculture based on the Soviet model transformed the Czech fields into plains with no greenery. Environmentally the term "cultural semi-desert" might fit here.



Even in the difficult conditions of the authoritarian communist regime there were people who opposed this situation, trying to formulate and promote alternatives to the above lifestyle.

In 1988, for example, a large international event called "Ecotopia" took place in western Bohemia, which the state authorities tolerated, albeit reluctantly.







One of the many other major activities was the Brontosaurus Movement. Young people, mostly college and high school students, volunteered to help with mowing and maintaining orchid meadows, forest planting, cleaning streams, and so on. The photo is from a summer camp of Palacký University students in the White Carpathians. Back then I was, like most other people, a member of SSM (the Czechoslovak Socialist Union of Youth) because I had been too weak to turn down this "offer that cannot be refused". Refusing the membership would have most likely meant renouncing higher education and doing two instead of one year of military service, among other things. I swore to myself I would only get involved as a sports coach or part of the Brontosaurus Movement (officially administered by the SSM). Luckily it worked out for me.

Young Czech people of today do not have to face the above moral dilemmas and compromises, but I am sorry to see that "care for the common good" has been pushed far away in our pursuit of success, career, and money-making. Perhaps it is only my

wrong impression. If not, let us hope this is a temporary phenomenon as the Czechs have not yet tired of all the opportunities that life in freedom has to offer.

Despite all the mistakes and blunders the Czech Republic is lovely. Dozens of generations have shaped it since the Slavs arrived in the 5th and 6th centuries; a good example is the landscape around Stupava and Staré Hutě in the central part of the Chřiby Hills in South Moravia.



Cyril and Methodius, Christianizers of the Slavs, probably travelled through and left a trace in this region. Nearby is one of the most important pilgrimage sites in the Czech Republic, Velehrad. A popular tradition says this perhaps was the main center of Great Moravia, Veligrad.

South Bohemia around the city of Třeboň used to be bogs and swamps in the Middle Ages, unsuitable for soil cultivation and permanent settlements. When ponds (connected by a sophisticated system of water channels) were laid out here by Štěpánek Netolický and Jakub Krčín, this landscape was changed into a balanced, human-friendly ecosystem, which has been effective from its beginnings in the 15th century until the present. Of the total of 460 ponds, Rožmberk is the largest, spreading over 489 hectares (1,208 acres), which makes it the largest pond in the Czech Republic.



Among the most beautiful views that I have ever seen is the sunset in the Bohemian-Moravian Highlands. This is where I was born and spent the first twenty years of my life.



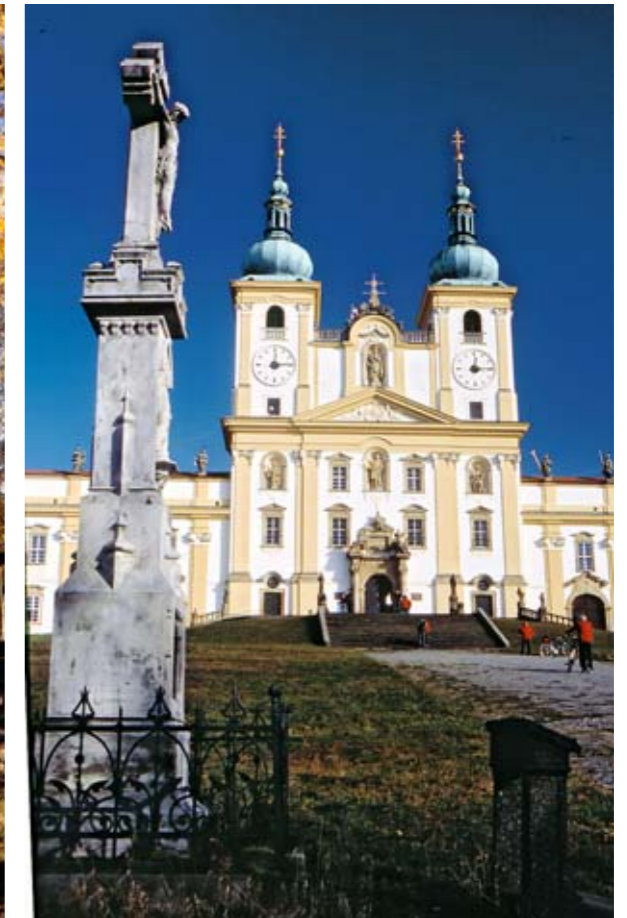




After five years in Slovakia, my family and I moved to Olomouc, a city with 100,000 inhabitants, the second largest urban preservation area (after Prague), and 24,000 students studying at Palacký University. Unless something unexpected happens, I will spend the rest of my life in Olomouc.



One day, when my strength is gone and I can no longer travel the world or even Europe, when I cannot even go to Slovakia or roam the Czech lands, I will make do with Svatý Kopeček Hill and the surrounding woods. It is only a ten minute walk from my house, a distance one can cover even when quite old.



If that is no longer possible either and I am still alive, I will sit down on the terrace of our house in the village of Samotišky and watch the sun set over the open and fertile Haná region. I have a photo of my grandfather, who I never met in person, as he sits, aged, with a pipe on the porch and watches the world go around. Like him I will no longer have any ambitions to change the world, but I will feel thankful that my parents brought me here and that I have had my family, friends, an interesting job, and that I have spent a beautiful and, I hope, useful life, no matter how long it will be.





doc. RNDr. Pavel Nováček, CSc.

*WHAT*  
*A COLORFUL*  
*WORLD*

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