

This past September I tried a different style of travel. I joined an organization called Friendship Force International, (FFI) which has its headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia. It is a non-profit cultural organization focused on promoting understanding, cultural education and citizen diplomacy through homestay journeys and personal friendships. (This last statement was lifted from their web-site). It has clubs in 60 countries and there are presently 15,000 members. One of its founding members in 1977 was Jimmy Carter. The basis of the philosophy is that one stays at a host's home and shares their everyday life (meals, conversation) and their hospitality, but there is also a programme put together by the local club, so that one is taken to venues off the beaten path and is involved in cultural exploration that most tourists do not experience.

I travelled with two other women, Irene and Pat, and our trip was to be in two parts: first Belgium, then Hungary. But with this kind of travel, we could expand what we wanted to do, and many people in our group did just that. (The total number of people in our group was fourteen from the Hamilton / Burlington area and six from Winnipeg.) Many people arrived earlier than the planned visit with our FFI hosts; some went to Flanders, others to Ireland, still others to Brussels. The three of us began our journey in Bruges (Brugge), the capital of West Flanders. This city is a UNESCO heritage site because it is one of the best preserved medieval towns in Europe. It is also known as the Venice of the north (along with Amsterdam and St. Petersburg); its lovely canals flow through the city and one can take a boat as far as Zeebrugge, the international port on the North Sea. We stayed in an apartment directly overlooking one of these canals - an excellent view! Our tour guide gave us some background on the city: it was once (14th century) the richest in Europe because of the trade routes passing through it. It held a monopoly on wool, and was a member of the Hanseatic League. The Dukes of Burgundy settled here, influencing its stature during its Golden Age. As other cities gained prominence, Bruges became frozen in time for about 400 years; thus its old buildings are nicely preserved. Spinning, weaving and lace-making are its traditional occupations, but there is now a resurgence in tourism, but also new industries: ships, electronics, industrial glass, etc.

We were introduced to a unique venue common to Belgium and other parts of Europe: a Beguinage (or begijnhof). It is described as a walled oasis of religious peace, and in Bruges it was established in 1245. It is associated with the Benedictines and operates under the auspices of the Roman Catholic church. Lay-women who led a pious and celibate life would live there, probably because their men were killed in the crusades or by misadventure. They were protected in these sites from predatory men, and went out and worked with the poor and sick, but if they married, they would have to leave. These women were able to live out their lives without men directly controlling them.

We also visited the Gruuthuse museum, once the family home of Lodewick van Gruuthuse that had a monopoly to levy taxes on the sale of gruit, a type of beer of the day. The building is palatial in size and appearance, and depicts the interior of what a wealthy person's home would be like, with tapestries, stained glass windows, lace and wooden sculptures, etc. In 1875 the city of Bruges bought it and made it into a museum showcasing 500 years of its history. One interesting feature is that it has an "oratory", an area on the second floor which overlooks the prayer loft of the church that is attached to it, the Onze-Lieve-Vrouwekerk (Church of our Lady). This is the tallest structure in Bruges, and has the second tallest brickwork tower in the world (the tallest is in Germany). A beautiful building, seen from everywhere in the old town. Then we visited the Basilica of the Holy Blood: in one section there is a small room, guarded by some priests where one finds a venerated phial said to contain a cloth with the blood of Jesus Christ. It is said that Joseph of Arimathea wiped the blood from Jesus' body with this cloth, and it eventually found its way to this church. Many walks took us through the Market Square, with its huge belfry tower and many shops and restaurants.

We took a boat ride on one of the main canals in the city - a very pleasant ride, on a lovely, sunny day. Afterwards we went to the Half Moon Pub: it is famous because beer is processed here, and then transported (12,000 bottles per hour) seven kilometres by pipeline to the bottling centre - the only place in the world where there is a pipeline for beer. It was built under the main streets, so that nearby residents could not help themselves to their own supply through their basements. That evening we were lucky to be able to attend a harp concert (Pat plays the harp) where many varieties of harp were exhibited, described and played. The musician was Luc Vanlaere, who had rebuilt the Lyre of Ur (of Mesopotamia) from scratch - this is known as the oldest musical instrument in the world. Very peaceful, meditative music.

During our last morning in Bruges, we visited the four remaining windmills, found on the ramparts on the canal side of the city. There were once 23 of these, used for grinding corn, flour, etc. It is a spot that is calmer than the rest of the old town, good for strolling, bike riding, etc.

We were then on to the next leg of our journey - to meet our hosts in Bokrijk, near the area around Limburg, our main destination. They had a nice "meet and greet" planned for us, along with introductory speeches and formalities. I met my host, Willy Piette, who lived in Sluizen-Tongeren. He has a nice home, and he also had another guest from another FFI group staying with him at the same time as me: Sabrina. We each had our own bedrooms, and Willy prepared breakfast for us. After that he would take us to the different spots that we were to visit. he was a very good host, pleasant, forthcoming, and with very good English; we had some excellent conversations about life in Belgium.

A few words about the political arrangement of Belgium: it has three main areas: Flanders in the north where the dominant language is Flemish (actually Dutch), because of its being close to the border with the Netherlands; Wallonia in the south (French-speaking), because France is to the south, and Brussels (French) in the centre. In the east near the German border, the dominant language is German. Willy called it "Absurdistan" because it seemed to him to be a country amalgamated at the whim of others, without any consideration of former allegiances or tribal arrangements. It is a buffer between the other larger countries bordering on it. As a result there are many enclaves that wish to remain separate from the others, leading to a lack of loyalty towards the country as a whole. But somehow, life goes on...

Belgian chocolate is considered to be the best in the world because it contains the most cocoa. But because it contains natural products, it must be consumed within about 24 hours of production, as it soon loses its distinctive good taste, and becomes much like any other chocolate. And a word about coffee: the best coffee (and the most expensive - \$90 per cup) is the one that has been excreted by civet cats. They eat the raw coffee cherries, but cannot digest the centers, which are the coffee beans themselves. And who discovered this? Another interesting tidbit: there are 1.2 million people in Brussels, and there are 19 mayors (there are 19 "communes" in the city, and each has a mayor; one of these is the "head mayor") and six police forces, and over 50 police stations. I wonder what the taxes would be for property owners in this city, but one must feel quite safe living there. (Belgium's population is about 11 million.) A few other things Belgium is known for: waffles, of which there are two kinds: Brussels (rectangular, lighter with icing on top) and Liège (small, thick, with rounded edges and sugar inside). Belgium is actually the place where "frites" ("French fries") originated. American servicemen decided to call them French fries because they first ate them when stationed in Wallonia, the French-speaking area of the country. Just about every meal had fries as a side, or the main starchy item.

Our first stop according to the plans made by the FFI group was at the Fruit Auction BelOrta storage barns in Borgloon. This is a series of refrigerated warehouses where fruit is stored, sorted, classified, and auctioned off to various distributors. It is the largest fruit and vegetable co-operative in Belgium, and the leading market in Europe. More than 1350 growers supply more than 120 vegetable varieties and 30 types of fruit. Huge trucks and other vehicles moved the fruit around, with everyone (including us) wearing very warm clothing. At this time of year it was dealing mainly with pears and apples, but we also saw strawberries and plums, which can last for months. There were huge coolers where all the oxygen had been removed and the fruit was sprayed with an agent that would keep it fresh longer, but was not harmful to one's health. One everyday suggestion we learned: do not break off the stem of an apple unless you plan to eat it right away - damage will begin.

Afterwards we were taken to the Yves Cuvelier Winery for a walk through the vineyards, followed by a wine tasting. Most wines in Belgium are white or sparkling, with a mix of several types of grapes. At this winery there was something about the bottom of the glasses that caused the wine to continue bubbling long after it should have stopped - interesting. Then a different kind of lunch: "toast champignon" - mushrooms with bacon on toast - very tasty!

To continue the fruit theme, another stop was on our agenda: Hellingentfort. This was a fruit farm with apple, pear and cherry trees. During the tour we were told that if one makes a cut at the base of a fruit tree, it matures more quickly, and thus produces fruit earlier than if it was left to mature naturally. There was a project going on to attempt to increase the numbers of bumblebees for pollination, by having many bamboo hives located in various spots. Our last stop of the day was to attend a reception with the mayor of Borgloon. He and his staff made us feel welcome, with some sparkling wine (no doubt locally produced) and with some words of greeting.

Willy then took Sabrina and me to another FFI member's home: that of Edith and Etienne, where we had a sumptuous supper of seafood lasagne with lots of wine. They had two people from our group staying with them, so it was a lively evening, with other guests as well (Pat and her host). Willy said he doesn't cook much, but that was OK - we went out most nights.

We took the train to Antwerp (Antwerpen, Anvers) the next day. Its train station is amazing; it has been deemed the finest example of railway architecture, and is considered to be the most beautiful and the fourth greatest station in the world. The name "Antwerp" is from the Dutch "Hand Werpen" - meaning to throw a hand. Legend has it that a giant called Antigoon extracted a toll from boatmen passing on the Scheldt River; if any refused, one of their hands was cut off and thrown into the river. Or was the giant's hand cut off because he was too greedy? Who knows? ... Antwerp's claim to fame is that it was the residence from 1609-1621 of the painter Peter Paul Rubens. (He spent time in Italy, then came back to Antwerp where he died in 1640). There is a statue of him in a main square, and the Cathedral of our Lady showcases three of his paintings. Antwerp has also been known for its diamond quarter: at one point 84% of the world's diamond business was conducted in this area. Still today 16 billion dollars worth of polished diamonds pass through here, and there are 380 workshops where cutting and polishing take place. We explored the old city, then took a lunchtime cruise on the river and afterwards visited the cathedral to view its ornate decorations, two organs, stained glass windows, and Rubens works. The MAS building is near the river, and from the top there is an excellent view of the city.

The next day we went to Hasselt, the capital of the province of Limburg. There is a canal nearby that was dug out between the two World Wars that takes one from Antwerp to

Liège. Besides some good shopping, this town is known for its Jenever Museum. Jenever is the original gin made with juniper berries that is produced in Holland, Belgium and surrounding areas. Only in this area can this liquor be called "jenever"; in others it would be called "sparkling gin". Britain's gin came after this one, and was modeled on it. It has been around since the 1500's and was originally used as medicine. It is made of starch from grains of corn and barley (plus sugar and yeast), which are allowed to ferment, with the addition to the mix of herbs, mainly juniper berries. In 1970 there were 15,000 people in Hasselt, and 5,000 oxen. These animals were fed the "porridge" - mash left over from the jenever making process; they were known to stagger around from time to time...

Liège (in Wallonia) has a beautiful train station: Liège-Guillemins; it was designed by Santiago Calatrava, the same architect that designed the Atrium in Brookfield Place in Toronto. The Meuse (Maas) and Ourthe Rivers meet in the city, and a famous spot is the Palace of Prince-Bishops in the Place Saint Lambert. Politically and historically, there was an "amalgamation" of church and state, in that the rulers (royal persons) in the area were also high up in the hierarchy of the church, thus they controlled both the secular and religious lives of the people. After a stroll through the city, we were invited to climb the 407 steps to the top of the "Mountain of Bueren" to get a panoramic view of the area. I climbed about halfway, and said "enough"; others did go to the top.

We went to Maastricht the next day, just across the border in the Netherlands, and I was able to set foot on Vrijthof Square, where Andre Rieu holds his famous concerts. I believe he had much to do with putting Maastricht "on the map". We toured the old part of the city, with cobblestoned streets everywhere. On buildings at street corners one could see animal pictures - these dated back to the time when people could not read, and these pictures helped them navigate through the city. When Napoleon came into power, he decreed that houses should have numbers on them, and of course, it has been thus ever since. That night we had an excellent Taiwanese dinner - cooked by Sabrina (Willy's other houseguest, who is Taiwanese), helped by David's wife, Willy's daughter-in-law.

During our last day in Belgium we visited the Beguinage in Tongeren, a UNESCO heritage site. It is a walled "city" and is now a museum. Single women lived here, not nuns, thus they did not have to be beholden to the Pope, or any other man. In the 1700's there were about 300 beguinages; the women took vows of chastity and obedience (to their "mistress"), and wore habits similar to those of nuns. They worked in the community, helping others, and established an infirmary for the elderly and their own people. They were self-sufficient, but had to pay something to the local priest, such as grain. Cloth and grain were stored in the attic of the building, and the windows were left open so that owls could fly in and catch the mice that were always looking for food and shelter. Laundry was done twice a year, and starch was used, because it is a disinfectant. The beguines had their own garden and animals, made their own beer, and fed the

processed hops to the pigs. They also made their own cloth, and soap, among other products needed to run their household. During the French revolution most beguinages were done away with, and now there are only 29 in Belgium - still the most in Europe. Tongeren is the oldest town in Belgium, dating back to the second century. It was settled by the Romans, and thus one can still see remnants of Roman city walls and ramparts. That evening we all got together, all the hosts and guests, for a pleasant farewell dinner. The next morning we said good-bye to our Belgian hosts, and began our trip to Hungary.

On our arrival in Budapest, my two travelling companions and I spent two days exploring this city. In 896 A.D. the Magyars had emigrated here from an area in Siberia, east of the Ural mountains, because of climate change - it had become too cold there. Perhaps this is why the Hungarian language is so different from all the European languages surrounding it. And it happens to be one of the most difficult languages for foreigners to learn. It has 44 letters in its alphabet, and is similar to Finnish or Estonian. During the 16th century the Ottomans arrived and brought paprika - the main spice that Hungary has forever been associated with.

Buda and Pest are separated by the Danube River, and each section has its own character: Buda, on the western side of the river, is quite hilly and has a history of viticulture, and is also historical. Pest on the east, is quite flat and was once good farmland, and now is more political. Budapest (the two parts were joined in 1873) was once the capital of the Austro-Hungarian empire, thus it has some magnificent buildings and monuments, and the area close to the Danube is designated a UNESCO heritage site. There are 1.7 million inhabitants in the city, one quarter of the population of Hungary. We were lucky to stay two nights in a centrally located apartment in a very old building with a creaky elevator, but with ample space for the three of us. St. Stephen was the first King of Hungary (from 1000 A.D. to 1038) and St. Stephen's church has his right hand (arm?) in its reliquary. No building in Budapest can be taller than this church, even the famous Parliament Buildings. And both of these buildings were built in 1905. King St. Stephen is credited for bringing Christianity to this area, and he also established the Hungarian state. He lost his only son in a hunting accident, and both father and son were canonized in 1038. Currently 39% of the Hungarian population is Roman Catholic, 1% is Jewish and 10% Protestant. 50% have no religion, a result of Communist rule (from 1945-89).

Franz Joseph, of the Habsburg royal family, was emperor of the Austro-Hungarian empire from 1848-1916, and his wife was Princess (Empress) Elizabeth of Austria. She performed many charitable works during her reign. In 1879 Franz Joseph formed an alliance with Germany (formerly Prussia). One of his sons, Archduke Ferdinand, married a commoner, which led to difficulties, but the worst aspect of all this was that

there were tensions among the Balkan countries, which led to the duke's assassination in 1914, which led to the First World War.

In 1849 the Chain Bridge was built - the first stone bridge in Hungary across the Danube. It is very famous and has beautiful lighting at night (as do all the other bridges, but this one stands out). At the end of WWII the retreating German armies blew up all the bridges in Budapest, including this one, but it was rebuilt, as were many others. The castle district (Buda) is the oldest in the city, and was once the political centre. It has 1000 kilometres of tunnels and 200 caves under it, which were built during the Middle Ages and have been used as shelters, a prison, a harem, and more recently a hospital during WWII. It is now a tourist attraction. (There is also a tunnel under the Danube.) Another spectacular building in this area is the Fisherman's bastion, right on the edge of the hill overlooking the water. The first Jewish ghetto was established on this hill. Nowadays there are about 100,000 Roma living in Hungary, most of whom have become quite settled. The families are quite large with nine to ten children, most of whom go to school. Budapest has a population of two million people, but about one million workers arrive into the city every day from surrounding areas. (Hungary itself has about ten million people.)

We had a chance to explore the city, and to be given an excellent guided tour. That night we went to see a folk dance performance - excellent! Part of the package was to take a night boat ride on the Danube past the spectacular buildings, looking even better at night than in the day; we also got two drinks thrown in. On the way back to the hotel we took a cab (on the recommendation of one of the ship's staff), since we had been walking a lot that day. But the cab driver had other ideas, and he meandered throughout the downtown, then decided to cross the bridge into the other half of town. We knew things were not right, but he spoke only Hungarian (as he said), and we did not. Finally we yelled at him to STOP! and luckily he did. We tried to argue with him, but finally we jumped out of the cab just at the end of the bridge closer to our side of town. He did not pursue us, or demand payment, but we now had a VERY long walk back to our hotel. Not a fun adventure.

The next morning we met our Hungarian guide, Krisztina, and the other members of our travelling party. Our bus took us to the Parliament Buildings, built from 1882 -1899. It has been very much photographed, and is found on the cover of many European travel brochures. Nearly a thousand Hungarians worked on it, and this project revitalized the economy of Budapest. There are 690 rooms, 29 staircases, and 90 exterior and 152 interior statues. All is very opulent and grand, with lots of gold. The building had been bombed 500 times during the wars, but was reconstructed because there was a record of 600 photos of the original. This is the second largest Parliament building in the world (after the one in Romania). The crown (which cannot be approached or photographed) weighs two kilos, and Jimmy Carter helped to repatriate it from Austria. There are six

political parties and 199 members of parliament; right now the party in power is rightist, and as a result, a wall has been built along Hungary's southern border to keep immigrants out.

Before leaving Budapest, our guide took us on a walk to King St. Stephen's Church, then by bus along Andrassy Avenue (a World Heritage Site with the opera house, the music academy and the ballet institute, plus many other famous cafes, buildings, etc.) to Heroes Square (built in 1896 to commemorate the 1000th anniversary of Hungary), and up to Gellert Hill for a spectacular view of the city. This hill is 235 metres high and is named after St. Gerard, a bishop who was assassinated by pagans during the great pagan rebellion in 1043. There are other spots named after him as well: a hotel, a spa, a cave church, a monument.

For lunch we went to a restaurant specializing in strudel, where we got a demonstration, then some hands-on work, and finally lunch! It is said that the Turks introduced strudel to this area - it is considered to be a variation on baklava.

On the way to our Hungarian destination (Székesfehérvár) we stopped at Bory Castle. This castle was built by a university professor (a sculptor and architect) who took about forty summers to build it - for his wife. Several of his students helped him, and it is rather eccentric with several styles: Scottish, Romanesque, and Gothic. Bory was the architect, project supervisor, foreman and mason, also the sculptor and painter of many paintings of his wife. Each year he added a bit, with no real overall plan in mind. There are many and various staircases, seven turrets, sculptures, gardens, walkways, busts of Hungarian VIP's, also a chapel and a dungeon. Very unusual, but the setting was very pleasing. It is considered an open-air museum.

At the end of our tour of this castle we met our Hungarian hosts: Mishi and Mariana. His English was quite good, but she managed only a few words. I was to share their home with Willy and Joan. Again we had a welcoming dinner where we met the other members of the Hungarian hosting group. One difference here from the group in Belgium was that our Belgian hosts were retired and could accompany us where we went, but in this group most of the people were still working; as a result, our hosts would drop us off at a central location in the morning, and pick us up in the evening, and we had a bus at our disposal that took us around. But Krisztina was always with us, giving good information on what we were to see and do.

We first explored the city of Székesfehérvár. I believe most tourists have never heard of this city, but it is famous in Hungary. It was founded in 972 A.D. and became a royal and cultural centre during the reign of King St. Stephen. (In Hungary, as in Belgium, state and church were intertwined.) He had a church built here, which was at first his private domain, later it was designated the coronation church, because 36 kings were crowned here. It was well-situated as a trade route among various neighbouring countries. In

1543 the Ottomans invaded and it was made into a Muslim city, but it was the capital of Hungary until 1688. King St. Stephen's son is buried here, also 15 Hungarian kings and queens have their remains in the crypt. There is a huge orb in the centre of town, signifying the royal aspect of this place, and every August there is a Royal Festival lasting ten days. Now there are only about 100,570 inhabitants, but it still retains its royal aspect and there are many interesting spots to explore. There is a musical clock (similar to the one in Vienna, Austria) where four times a day it chimes and small figures from the royal family revolve in front of the clock on a small platform. The Bishop's Palace / (including City Hall) is very opulent and grand, with heating units like one sees in other countries: a huge floor-to-ceiling "furnace" made of faience that heats the whole room, with pipes within the walls heating adjoining rooms as well. This building contains a replica of the royal crown (the original was in Budapest), but here one could examine it more closely and photograph it. Franz Liszt played the piano in the dining room here, which has walls covered with painted leather. After King St. Stephen's son was killed, he offered his kingdom to the Virgin Mary. A piece of King St. Stephen's skull was brought back from Dubrovnik to this palace.

We visited the Hetedhét toy/doll museum where we saw many doll houses filled with miniature dolls and furnishings, dishes, etc. They were all very varied and interesting. One was able to gain an insight into the toy-making art of 100 years ago, but also middle-class lifestyle trends in interior decorating, furniture and fashion, etc. And in one room there was an extensive train set.

Pannonhalma Archabbey (the main abbey) is located on a high hill about one hour out of Székesfehérvár. Benedictine monks introduced Christianity and European culture to Hungary about 1000 years ago. This abbey housed the first school in Hungary, and still today there is a dormitory, a high school, a college and a nursing home for the elderly, even a pet nursery. It was designated a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1996. The monks here still live and work according to St. Benedict's rules (pray, work and read) in that they are self-sufficient and produce herbal tea and lavender soaps that they grow themselves on the abbey grounds, also herb-flavoured chocolate. The grammar school was one of eight such schools that survived during the years of Communism, and many graduates have become university educators. In the archives of its vast library are preserved King St. Stephen's letter of decree, dated 1001, and the oldest written example of the Hungarian language. It also boasts of having the oldest Bible (800 years old) and there are now 400,000 books, all originals, on its shelves. In all it is a magnificent set of buildings, including a basilica, a crypt, a cloister, the library, a refectory, a cafe, a restaurant and a winery, also a biomass heating plant, and botanical and herbal gardens. Boys from grades 7-12 live here and go home once a month; parents can also visit once a month. At the time of our visit there were 340 students and 35 monks. Ten percent of the monks are teachers and 80% of the teachers come from outside the abbey, some of which are women. The government pays the students' tuition, except for Saturdays.

Students pray three times a day; they are not all catholic students, but whatever their religion, they must go to mass. Pope John Paul II visited here in 1996. There is a sculpture of a peacock in a courtyard with twelve tail feathers: it symbolizes eternal life, and its tail feathers represent the twelve disciples. Inside there was a picture on a wall that weighs 70 kilos - it is made of tiny mosaics that are so well done that one can see them only at a certain angle. The two rose windows and the font in the chapel are made of white onyx brought from Pakistan. All in all, a fascinating and interesting spot! We were treated to a wine tasting of five kinds of wine with delicious buns, and then visited the huge herb garden (17 different herbs, many medicinal).

The town of Herend is known for its Porcelain Manufactory and shop, selling beautiful but very expensive items in porcelain. It was founded in 1826 and today there are 700 employees in this plant. Porcelain was once considered to be "white gold" because of its beauty and cost. Queen Victoria had a dinner set made for the 1851 World Fair. The many steps in the process were explained via video and then certain workers allowed us to watch while they mixed clay or painted. Some pieces take all day to paint, and depending on the desired result, as many as five firings might be needed. A key element in all this work: a steady hand. Herend porcelain has won many prizes, and it is exported to 50 countries, including Canada. We were able to visit the museum, and the shop, but all we did was stare in awe and amazement.

Lake Balaton is the longest lake in central Europe, sometimes called "The Hungarian Sea". It is 78 kilometres long and 14 kilometres wide, and is known for its numerous recreational offerings: spas and thermal springs, swimming, kayaking, sailing, etc. Nearby are also some vineyards, because of its micro-climate, greatly influenced by the waters. During the Communist era relatives from East and West Germany were able to meet here because East Germans could travel only to Communist countries. The spa town of Balatonfüred has a very famous hospital for patients recovering from heart surgery. The famous Indian poet, Rabindranath Tagore was treated here in the 1920's, and made this hospital famous. As a gesture of thanks for his healing he planted a tree, and others have continued this tradition. The walkway by the water is called Tagore Promenade. Here again, the micro-climate is very suitable and ideal for such treatments. We were able to visit Tihany peninsula, on the north shore of the lake, where many rich people live, and where another famous Benedictine Abbey stands. It is in Rococo style, and about five or six monks still live in it. One could still see some thatched roofs on homes in this area, made with reeds from the lake, but they are now tourist attractions and are not a good idea, since they are quite the fire hazard.

The next day our hosts took us to explore a monastery that they knew about, but on the way we happened to see a festival going on in an open area: it was St. Michael's fair/festival, usually celebrated on September 29, but this was Saturday, September 28. Close enough - it's also Saturday. This festival is also called Michaelmas, and is

celebrated in many countries; he was the archangel who fought against Satan. There were a lot of booths selling crafts and food; some people were in national costumes, and there were many people on horseback or with wagons, driving in processions around one area of the field, to the music of the Radetzky March. There was also an ox roasting on a spit, covered with tin foil, and a goulash making competition.

The monastery we visited was Kamalduli in Oroszlany, which is now a museum. It was founded by a 90 year-old Benedictine monk who came from Italy in 1029, and who strove for spiritual perfection. Each monk who joined this order swore an oath of silence and lived in a separate "hermitage" (there were 17) and worked alone in his herb garden near his house. Each house had a bed, a table and a chair. Speech was allowed only at Christmas and Easter, and there was never any communication with the outside world. The monks wore white robes tied at the waist, and shaved the tops of their heads, but had long beards. They were allowed to leave their house only once a day, and the walls and windows of the houses were constructed in such a way that the monks could not see each other. A servant would bring them meals twice a day, and they prayed eight times between the hours of 4 a.m. and 8 p.m. There was an infirmary on the grounds, where the monks could talk. The Esterházy family donated funds for this monastery, but the lands were confiscated in 1951. During the Hungarian Revolution in 1956 this rich family was in danger and most members fled to Austria, but the wife and daughter remained, put aside their "royal" perks and privileges and worked with the townspeople. The wife lived like a peasant and did many good works; she died in 1974. Afterwards the monastery was made into a hunting lodge, but in 2015 it became a museum. There was a motto on the wall: "Before you speak, think it over: is what you want to say nicer than the silence you will break?"

This was our last outing with our hosts, and we all had a farewell dinner before going our separate ways. At the dinner two folk dancers came to perform for us, and we also got up and danced with them - a nice ending to a busy and interesting week. I was happy to have been able to have some real Hungarian Goulash; some langos, a deep fried flat bread with various toppings, usually cheese, yogurt, sour cream with garlic; some letcho, a vegetarian ragout made with peppers, tomatoes, onions, garlic and paprika as the main ingredients, also some Hungarian Strudel. Our hosts had looked after us very well, and were always very attentive and caring.

All in all, my first trip with Friendship Force International was different from the usual tourist outings; I saw places that I'm sure most tourists do not get to, and I learned about the lives of the hosts I stayed with. I hope to travel in this way again soon!

(Then at the end of October I hosted a lady from Taiwan, whose group was visiting Canada - this time we were able to show these visitors parts of our country that they might not otherwise have seen.)

