

TRAVEL TALK



Rowena Somogyvary is a specialist teacher and an inveterate traveller with an abiding interest in Hungary, her late husband's homeland.

How often do you get away?

As often as possible or feasible. Usually once or twice a year nationally, and once each year or two internationally.

Where was your first trip?

I spent a year on volunteer service in Papua-New Guinea in the '60s. We flew to Port Moresby from Sydney, then switched to an ancient DC3 with wooden seats along the sides of the interior.

Why do you travel – business or pleasure?

I've always felt it was best to travel to study or work and I've done both as a teacher of children with disabilities and a school principal. There's also a case I think for thematic travel. Recently I travelled in parts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire to complete my understanding of that aspect of European history. Medical treatment has been another reason: I've been to India three times for Ayurvedic treatment.

What is your favourite destination overseas?

Undoubtedly Budapest, my husband's home town. It's one of the world's most richly cultural cities. Besides the incomparable musical feast always on offer, Budapest has flavoursome cuisine, wonderful architecture, Roman ruins, natural hot springs and spas and the romantic Danube River. When I'm in Budapest, my heart sings.

And here in New Zealand?

The deep south, where I was raised. You have the wonder of every geographic form from the coastal Catlins through the greenness of the Southland plains, the desert of Central Otago, the Southern lakes and mountains and the fiords.

Best trip ever?

They've all been wonderful.

Worst?

Never had one.

If you could be anywhere but here, where would that be?

There are only two places in the world I'd want to live: Wellington and Budapest.

What is the wildest sight you've witnessed while travelling?

It's difficult to say. Dope-smoking fellow travellers on a backpacker's safari of Kruger National Park in South Africa, or the howling hyenas that prowled the fences of our campsite at night.

The most heartbreaking?

Seeing the partially cremated bodies floating down the holy River Ganges at Varanasi in India, because the deceased's families couldn't afford enough wood for a complete cremation.

Who (or what) is your favourite travelling companion?

Since my husband died, it's me. I appreciate being able to absorb the sights, sounds and tastes of another culture without being influenced by the opinions of someone else.

Where to next?

South America is the only continent – apart from Antarctica – that I haven't set foot on. I hope to celebrate my 70th birthday by going to South America next year.

PRAGUE, CZECHOSLOVAKIA

Czech your safety catch

Should you trust a man with a ponytail wearing stonewashed jeans and brandishing an AK47? **Sharon Stephenson** finds out.

BEYOND the pretty postcard precinct of Prague, we're climbing the steps to the type of squat, ugly building Eastern Europeans seem to excel at.

Ponytail man, aka Joseph Kutilck, is a former SAS crack shot who, 30 years ago, turned the concrete monstrosity into an exclusive shooting range where Prague's policemen and women learn how to shoot, kill and maim.

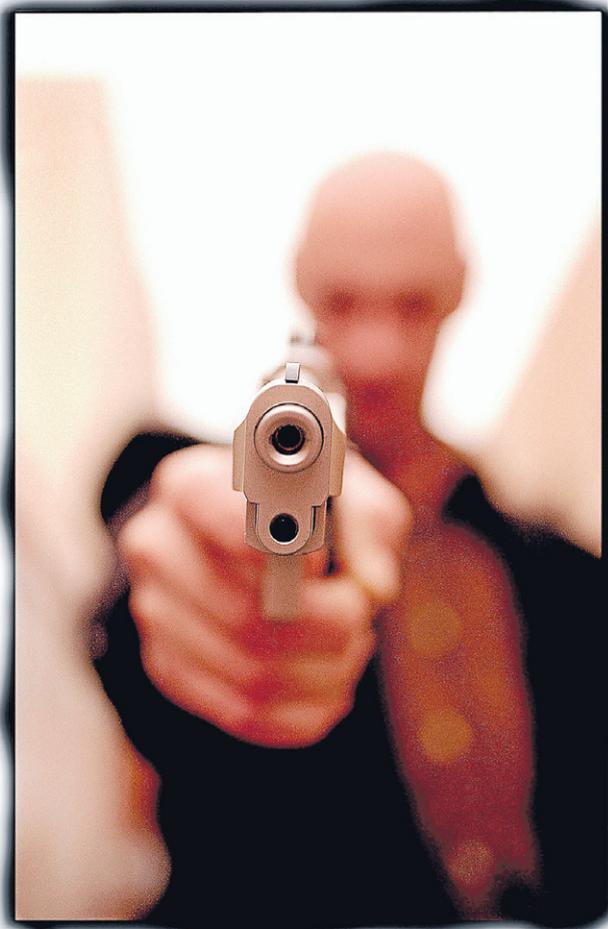
If, however, you're a tourist with an itchy trigger finger, then the Magnum Gun Club can also teach you how to handle a sniper rifle, a pump-action shotgun, a .38 calibre revolver and, the big, black beastie that could stop an elephant at 10 paces, the Russian-army-issued AK47 Kalashnikov rifle.

I should nail my colours to the mast here: I'm a pacifist who has to avert my eyes whenever anyone on screen gets shot. But, perversely, I've often wondered what it's like to be in control of an object that can remove someone from the gene pool.

The smell of gunpowder tangs our nostrils as we assemble for the safety briefing. New Zealand's occupational safety and health inspectors would have a field day here, particularly as we're using live ammunition. But we're in Prague, so we shrug, sign the waiver form and don the earmuffs that have been around as long as Joseph's jeans.

Like many who come to Magnum, I've never shot a gun before. I'm a city girl. Hunting has zero appeal. The closest I get to the great outdoors is the botanic garden and the biggest creature I've killed is a wasp.

Perhaps Joseph senses my reluctance, or maybe he guesses I've



throw off my aim. I count to three and . . . boom! My heart and throat become intimately acquainted and I squeal like a big girl's blouse. Sadly, the target flaps idly in the breeze, untouched.

"You didn't hit it, but you sure as heck frightened it," laughs Joseph in what I assume is ponytail humour.

Fortunately, things get better and by my 12th shot, I'm really feeling the Rambo vibe. Sure, the target is still flapping in the breeze, but it's got holes in it.

Sadly, my new-found confidence deserts me when I tackle the next weapon – the sniper rifle – where I'm deemed too short to properly align the target. Even propped up on two phone books, my aim doesn't improve, and with each shot, my whole body rises from the chair. I decide a

career as a sniper is not to be and give up after a few tries.

I fare little better with the AK47, but in terms of raw, energy-soaked adrenaline, it's hard to beat. Joseph spins us a tall tale about the semi-automatic weapon being used to kill certain political figures we've never heard of, but the twinkle in his eye means we understand it's more hirsute Czech humour.

I fire at the target, a plastic pig, and the kickback is so severe the weapon whacks into my shoulder, giving me a necklace of bruises that lasts a week.

The gun is incredibly heavy to hold (how do child soldiers manage?) and my hands are shaking, but the joy of blowing the pig to smithereens makes me grin like a kid seeing snow for the first time.

You know something is good when you forget to look at your watch and, all too soon, Joseph is herding us into the lunchroom where we snack on filled rolls and slurp Czech pilsner.

Not surprisingly, my dismal effort leaves me near the bottom of the points table, but for a blood-throbbing-through-the-temples experience, the bruises and aching arms are more than worth it.



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been secretly mocking his hairstyle and wardrobe. Whatever the reason, he picks me as the first to stand on the red marker that overlooks the shooting gallery. For the 10th time today, I wonder if I really want to do this.

Joseph loads the ammunition and hands me the pistol, which is surprisingly heavy. I'm told to grip the pistol firmly in my dominant hand, making sure my finger is outside the trigger guard. The other hand wraps underneath, but apparently a common mistake of first timers is to hold their thumb too close to the slide, risking a decent bruise.

I assume the shoulder-width-apart stance and stare down the barrel, ensuring the front and back sight notches are aligned. Joseph advises me to gently squeeze the trigger, so as not to



FAST FACTS

Prague is a cheap three-hour flight from London. Singapore Airlines flies from Auckland to Singapore 12 times a week and from Singapore to London three times a day.

The Magnum Gun Club is found at Ke Strelnici 10, Praha 6-Sedlec, Czech Republic. For more information, see magnumpraha.cz

BUCHAREST, ROMANIA

The Paris of the East makes a comeback

Among the legacies of communism, **Leo Kent** finds Bucharest returning to its vibrant self.

IT'S true that Romania has been plagued by corruption and things haven't changed much since it joined the European Union three years ago. It's rife in every strata of society, from minor civil servants up to ministers and even doctors. Medical care may be free, but if you want proper treatment, slipping some notes to the doctor is expected. Small wonder that in last year's EU Corruption Perception Index, Romania tied for last place with Bulgaria and Greece.

But otherwise, a lot has changed. While older Romanians avoid eye contact with strangers – a hangover from the days when the Securitate, or secret police, mingled with the crowds – the younger generation is much more carefree. And Bucharest is a city in transition: overshadowed by its communist past, but slowly returning to

what it was at the beginning of the 20th century – a vibrant, cosmopolitan centre of Eastern Europe. This gives rise to some eccentric sights, such as the shiny new glass tower that sprouts from the shell of the old Securitate building.

If you want a sense of what it would have been like in the communist era, look no further than the vast Parliament Palace. Begun in 1983 on the orders of the then leader Nicolae Ceausescu, additions are still being built. The neoclassical monolith contains three million light bulbs and 5000 staff. It's the world's second-largest administrative building after the US Pentagon.

Standing in front of the apparently endless facade gives you a feeling for the history of the city. It symbolises the inequalities between ruler and subjects, the latter shoved in hideous apartments.

Fortunately, much of the old city that won Bucharest the nickname Paris of the East in the 1920s and 1930s remains.

In Lipsani, there are wonderful Parisienne villas and ornate chapels dotted around the streets.



Vegetarians should note that Romanians love meat.

Stravropoleos St, where you will find the restaurant Caru cu Bere, is particularly charming. Inside, the restaurant is like a Catholic church, with frescoes on the vaulted ceilings and winding wooden staircases.

The food is traditional and cheap with a set meal, including drinks, costing well below US\$30 (\$45). Sarmale – mince wrapped in cabbage – with polenta is a staple Romanian dish and delicious. Vegetarians should note that Romanians love meat.

The story of Count Dracula was based on a particularly gruesome Romanian ruler known as Vlad the Impaler. Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, which made the myth so popular in Britain, was largely unknown in Romania until after the communist era. The book was censored because it was considered propaganda.

You can catch a whiff of the world's most infamous bloodsucker at the Village Museum on the shores of Bucharest's Herastrau Lake. Europe's largest outdoor museum is filled with traditional Romanian dwellings, from windmills to cottages, but it's at the Gothic wooden church from Transylvania that most visitors linger.