

# *the Gifted Husband* *MAGAZINE*

*Wanderlust with Mr. Misu*

**Reflections**

English Edition  
Number One



*To Cosmin*



# Two Men In A Boat (The Sponge and The Mechanic)

## Preliminaries

Short time after I finished with my Father's memorial services, and I was settling into my new life as an orphan, Mr. Mişu (a Danube Delta aficionado) called me and threw me a curve, inviting me in a Once In A Lifetime Trip, and offered to pick me up (metaphorically speaking because I was in my period of maximum plumpness, and I could barely carry myself, let alone someone else to carry me) in his car, and in his boat.



I politely said, as my parents taught me, "Thank you very much, I'm coming", I packed a small backpack, I raided my father's wine collection, I stocked up thoroughly (I rushed though, and even took some sweet wines to make spritzers with them, shame on me, beginner's mistake), I called a taxi and, with my eyes blurred from the sweat dripping all over me (no, I wasn't crying, it was so hot, I was sweating in places I didn't even know I had), and staring at the thermometer in the little park across the street from the apartment building (showing a 46°C temperature, under the trees), I set out for what indeed turned out to be a unique experience.

## **#OnceInALifetimeExperience**

Six days from south to north, and back, zigzagging and zagzigging, covering about 200 kilometers (less than 150 miles) at a maximum speed of 10 kilometers per hour (that's as fast as the boat could go). During these days, at least three times Old Man Popescu (from up there, from above) helped us get out of trouble, in a world that can be summed up by boats, reeds, water lilies, water, birds, and many desperate people expertly trying to fish.

There couldn't be a dumber description because the Danube Delta is a state of mind; those so-called desperate people are true men's men returning to their primal state, of hunters and fishermen and food providers for their tribe. It's a place where you can talk to yourself and not lie (to the same self), a place to seek the end of the world and find it, a place to laugh and cry, with friends or alone, where beer belly contests are held (without anyone judging you), where if you drink three beers in five minutes and belch so badly that you're making mini tsunamis it seems normal to everyone, where you're treated with ancient herbs (when your sensitive American stomach rebels), and where food is cooked on a wood stove. Because, to visit the Danube Delta for the first time is, as my friend Mișu says, #OnceInALifetimeExperience.

## Day 1: Bucharest – Tamarin Guesthouse

Bucharest, Snagov, Dunavățu de Jos, Lipovenilor Canal, Dranov Canal, old Saint George Branch, main Saint George Branch, upstream, Old Danube up to Uzlina, stayed at Mr. Zorică's, at Tamarin Guesthouse, which Mișu briefly left in the dark by turning on the air conditioning because he was feeling hot and he thought that the little sign that said "Do Not Turn On the Air Conditioning" placed visibly on the air conditioning unit was just for show. It wasn't.

Ah, the memories of Mișu: "we were drenched in sweat, struggling to launch the boat and cramming it with all our cargo from the car. The sight of our distress still makes me chuckle! Hahaha! Poor, poor us, caught in the throes of desperation. And your face, priceless, hahaha."

Now, I must say, Mișu wasn't exactly jumping with excitement, either (I found this expression, I have to leave it here – 'as thrilled as a sloth on caffeine'). Due to severe drought and the very low water levels of the Danube, we couldn't launch the boat where he initially planned to. So, we had to go several extra tens of kilometers to a deeper spot, which added a few more hours to our already long and exhausting journey from the first day.

Tamarin Guesthouse, at Mr. Zorică's, on Uzlina Canal, with his raw pike salad, fish pastrami, polenta with garlic sauce, and the ice cold beer, all on credit, each guest with his own open tab, on a crumpled piece of paper that we were passing from one table to the other.

The green pool at Tamarin (off-season, he claimed, like we believed him, it was August, after all), the local who brought a sunken boat back to the surface while giving me a nasty look, as if to say, "Why are you taking pictures while I'm working?" I just didn't have it in my heart to explain to him that this is the ultimate pleasure: to watch someone work while you do nothing.





Due to drought, water levels were unusually low; normally, the water reached up to the pontoon. Captain Mișu had his ear constantly tuned to the Danube's water levels (on the radio), and Passenger Popescu was like a little (hmm, wishful thinking) ball, swaying and counterbalancing, left-right, front-back, left-right, front-back.

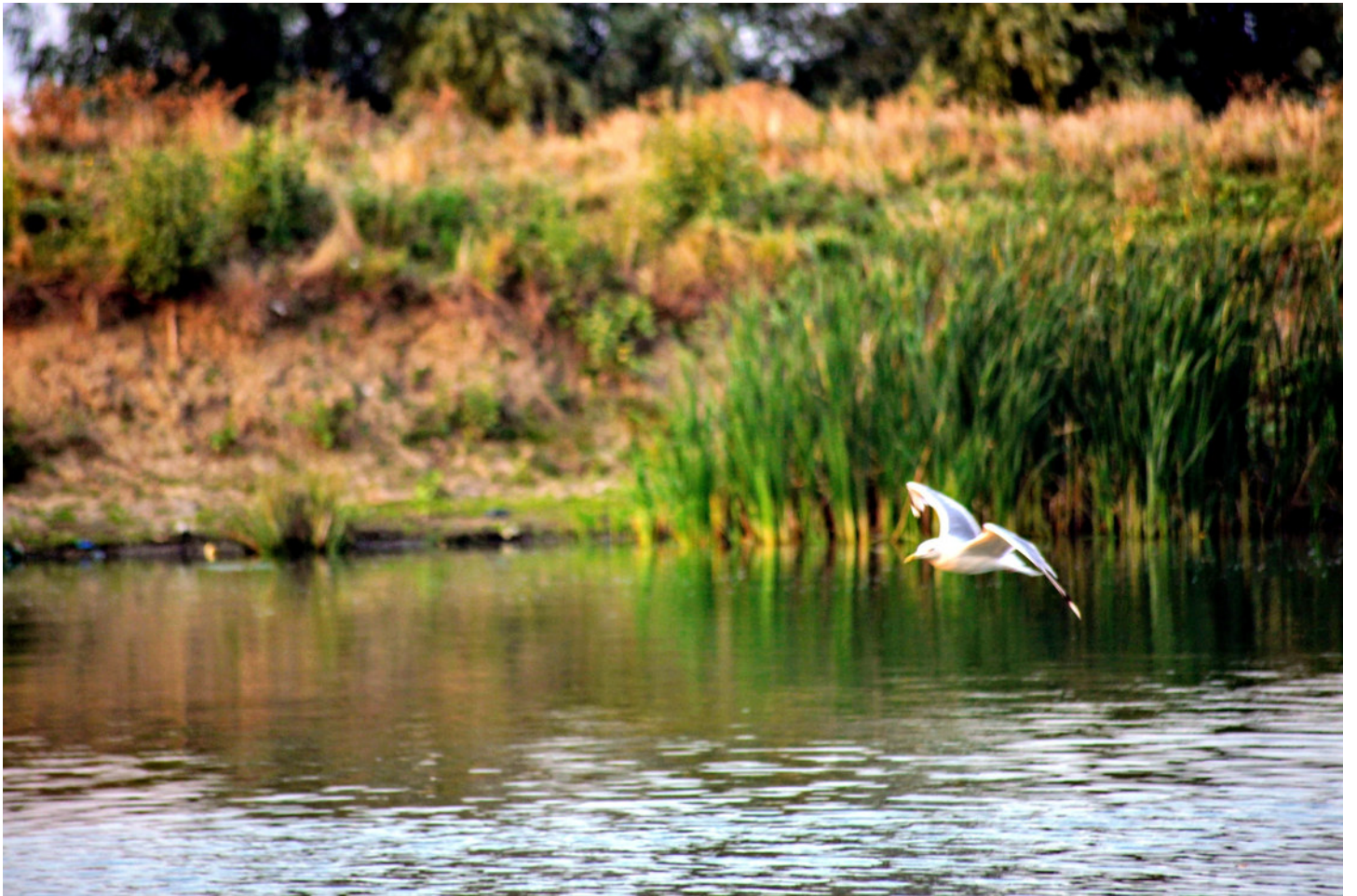
Speaking about watching someone work while you do nothing, Americans have discovered an even greater pleasure: watching beginners launch their boats into the lake. They make movies and place bets, and it's a real free comedy show. When someone gets into the lake pick-up truck first with the boat still attached, it's absolute mayhem.

## Day 2: Tamarin Guesthouse – Mila 23

We went North onto Lake Isacu Mic (also called Isăcel), and we got stuck for a bit. The propeller made a harsh noise, and we froze. I had to quickly move to the bow (like that dude from Titanic, sharing his happiness with the world “I’m the king of the world”, I was also in front of the boat, yelling at Captain Misu “Am I far enough, or do I also bend, like I’m barfing?”) We safely crossed Lake Isacu Mare, the Isacu Canal, turned right onto the Litcov Canal, left onto the Caraorman Canal, exited into the Sulina branch, then onto the Old Sulina towards Mila 23. We passed by Mila 23 with contempt because it was too crowded with tourists, and we knew that Mr. Mateescu was waiting for us at his guesthouse with fresh fish and cold beer. We continued on the Vișina Canal, entered the Știpoc Canal, where we got seriously stuck under the astonished, but highly amused gaze of the locals who hadn’t seen a boat there since the canal was first opened for navigation, and then immediately abandoned because they said nobody could navigate it.

We managed to turn around (with a lot of difficulty and a lot of Mișu’s skill, he was able to turn the boat “in place”, after he jumped in the water, pushing and pulling) back onto the Vișina Canal towards Mila 23, along with its tourists and everything. Suddenly, that touristy place wasn’t so bad anymore. We found accommodation (thanks to Petrică’s brother-in-law, a local who loved Misu’s boat and struck up a conversation, captain to captain) at the last minute (literally just before the night fell). We stayed at Petrică’s Bed and Breakfast, where Mrs. Clava, his wife (Delta’s champion and expert in fish borscht—with a diploma to prove it, not only word of mouth), kindly served us some fresh fried fish with garlic sauce (mujdei) and polenta, as we were quite starved. Just starved, because when it came to thirst, Old Man Popescu took care of us with his vast collection of wines. We, the juniors, tried to make him proud of us and, to keep up with the tradition, we had brought a dozen bottles of seltzer, and I just don’t want to remember how many beers.









*Some pictures from Mila 23,  
with narrow alleys serving as  
streets, with many cats,  
chickens, the most beautiful  
dog I ever saw, and many,  
many flowers.  
And hopeful fishermen.*









### *Stupid Passenger's Note:*

*Although Mișu had a very good and insanely smart professional camera, with an Auto button that could capture the most beautiful photos, absolutely idiot-proof, well, Passenger Popescu managed to ruin about 95% of the photos because he didn't focus. Why? He, himself can't answer that question. Maybe it was because he was stressed. Or depressed. An "...essed" something like that.*

*So, the photos from this trip were taken in the same proportion, 95%, with an old but decent iPhone 5S, for beginners. It belonged to my dad, and I used it in his memory. I think he was laughing up there, and I could almost hear him saying, "Keep learning, kid, and keep your both eyes open!"*

### **Day 3: Mila 23 – At Mateescu's Guesthouse**

We cruised up the Eracle Canal, on Eracle's Stream, and on Iacob's Canal, all the way to Știpoc (well, the navigable canal this time, haha). We finally arrived and crashed at Mateescu's place (he had been waiting for us since last night, but luckily he still had some fresh fish on ice and some ice-cold beer ready, and man, he was so surprised when he found out we took the old route to Știpoc – city slickers, huh? But he was even more shocked when he heard that we managed to find our way out on our own!

The Mateescus were just leaving for a vacation and left us almost alone, only with Mr. Edy and his girlfriend, who were the resort caretakers and managers while they were away. There were some noisy folks from Bucharest, who were drinking non-stop and playing the national sport of backgammon, but the courtyard was big, and their noise got lost – nature won, again. Mrs. Mateescu, God keep her in good health, had a good laugh when she found out that we didn't have any food (canned goods don't count), and she collected some leftovers from the other tourists who were heading home, and filled our fridge. Good to know: each trailer had a fridge, a large freezer, and several other refrigerated boxes in the yard, just in case you caught some really big fish.



Accommodation – air-conditioned trailers, separate beds, a shared big bathroom (for the whole guesthouse) with hot water, a kitchen with a propane stove, and a wood stove, and all the necessary utensils.

Within walking distance, we found the Saint Athanasius Hermitage. A very peaceful place where we could meditate in some quietude. The Holy Fathers had a fountain with fresh, cold, and really, really good water: you would draw it yourself with a bucket and drink from the only metal cup attached with a chain. Being Americanized, I hesitated a bit, and looked for disposable cups. I can't describe the laughter that ensued. Of course, nothing happened to me, not even after the third cup of water, drunk in one breath. I, too, hung the cup on the hook without washing it, not to ruin the good tradition.

From time to time, we would see a hurried and stealthy monk in Mateescu's yard, heading for the huge beer fridge because monks are people too, and thirsty they get.

The two friends slept like rocks, exhausted from the journey, wine, beer, fried fish, polenta, and garlic sauce. Just thinking about it, and looking at the photos, makes my mouth water. I don't know how they made that sauce—it's the Delta's secret—but it was *so* good. And if it seems like we ate fried fish at every meal, well, yes, we did. Nothing—repeat, *nothing*—compares to freshly fried fish. Give me this at every meal, and I'm happy. But don't forget the garlic sauce, the *mujdei*.

The summer kitchen—actually, the only kitchen, since the resort is closed in the winter—was where Mr. Edy, the resort chef, made an amazing *zacusca* (ajvar) over a wood fire. It was also where Lady Bee, a guest from Bucharest who came with her husband and those two noisy friends, cooked and washed dishes non-stop while the gentlemen played backgammon and consumed numerous bottles of wine, all while trying to catch fish. Mișu and I couldn't help but wonder how Lady Bee managed to work so tirelessly, and whether she ever stopped. On the second evening, she finally went on strike, and



*Fried fish, polenta, mujdei, fresh made zacusca. (see next page)*

*The wooden stove, the trailer, the small church, and the little house in the garden.*











by the next morning, she whisked her team of macho men back to Bucharest in a whirlwind. Safe to say, she did *not* have a wonderful vacation. (We never actually learned her real name, but she was like a diligent little bee—the highest compliment you can give a hardworking woman in Romania.)

#### **Day 4: La Mateescu – Chilia Veche – La Mateescu**

We took the Știpoc Canal, the Pardina Canal, the Tătatu Canal all the way to



the town of Chilia Veche, where we hoped we were still in Romania, as our passports were back at home.

Vodafone, our cell phone provider, cheerfully sent a message, welcoming us to Ukraine.

As we strolled through the town, we observed from a distance how Ukraine's factories were polluting the environment, with no regard for European standards (not that it mattered to them—they weren't part

of the EU, so they couldn't care less about those norms). We enjoyed a very cold beer at the local tavern, startled the cockroaches lurking under the ice cream freezer, and paid a memorable visit to the fragile, eerie latrine behind the establishment. We laughed like fools, choking on beer.

It was a warm, sunny day, and we decided to wander down the main street. Unpaved and dusty, the street had a unique charm, as if it had stories to tell (which it probably did). As we walked, we noticed a cloud of dust rapidly approaching in the distance. It turned out to be an old, but resilient Dacia 1300, its engine roaring and its body rattling.

Without skipping a beat, the Dacia sped past, leaving a swirling trail of dust in its wake. We watched it disappear into the distance and, after so many beers, we found ourselves getting philosophical, marveling at the solitary journey of that car on the empty road.

We continued exploring and soon found ourselves at the Church, that beautiful architectural gem still standing proudly after surviving two world wars and fifty years of communism.

The Church of Saints Archangels Michael and Gabriel, the second tallest in Romania, with bullet traces from both World Wars, has the foundation laid in 1857.

As we bid farewell to the priest and left the church, we couldn't help but reflect on the day's events. The passing car, the conversations, and the collective effort to restore the church painted a vivid picture of a town full of stories, just waiting to be discovered. It reminded us that even in the smallest of places, hidden tales lie in wait, ready to be unearthed by those willing to listen. Mișu remarked that it felt like an almost Tarantinesque place.





We then stumbled upon a General Store, almost surreal in both appearance and the variety of its stock. It had everything from rubber boots to frozen beef steaks that seemed to have been trapped in ice since the beginning of time, buried at the bottom of a freezer. Yet, it had fantastic freshly baked bread. One of the saleswomen was Mary, Mr. Edy's girlfriend from Mateescu—a pretty blonde with a spectacular bosom, which she revealed casually, though not ostentatiously. She didn't need to. When we told her where we were staying, she made a quick phone call, then cheerfully offered to accompany us, happy to save Mr. Edy the trip. We were glad to help.

Mary was young, just under twenty, working at the store, at Mateescu, and somewhere else that I can't quite recall. She had just told us she was pregnant. We became emotional, wondering when she ever found time for herself. She worked so hard. Her dream, and Edy's, was to leave the area and open their own guesthouse. I hope that God helped them, and that they succeeded, because they truly deserved it.



In Mateescu's courtyard, the famous *zacusca* ingredients were being cooked over a wood fire. I got a little wasted and, in my attempt to help, mostly just got in the way as they peeled hot eggplants and roasted peppers. I think there were tomatoes too, but my memory is a bit hazy. The final result, however, was heavenly. All the vegetables were from their own garden, the bread was fresh—it simply couldn't get better than that.

As I've mentioned before, I was very sad and quite drunk. My father had passed away, and I felt that there was no greater sadness than becoming an orphan at the age of 54. Life, however, has since shown me that things can get even worse, but let's not dwell on that just yet.



## **Ziua 5: Mateescu's Guesthouses – Tamarin Guesthouse**

If I hadn't missed so many pictures, I could show you a heron, the dumbest bird, as Mișu loves to say. As we approached it, it would fly, always ahead. Straight ahead. Seems that it was something very common because even though Mișu knew its habit, he couldn't stop laughing and marveling at such a small brain.

Chilia's Belt, the Știpoc Canal, Iacob's Stream, the Eracle Canal, Sulina Veche all the way to Sulina Great Canal, Caraorman Canal, Litcov Canal, Isaac Canal, Isacu Mare, Isacu Mic (also known as Isăcel), the Uzlina Canal, slept again at Zorică's, fresh and raw pike salad, fish zacusca, quite the adventure.

## **Day 6: Tamarin Guesthouse – Bucharest**

Old Saint George Branch, the main Saint George Branch, Dranov Canal, the Lipovans' Canal, Lower Dunavățu, Snagov, Bucharest.

I haven't mentioned or taken any pictures of our fishing rods. That's because we didn't have any. We came to the Delta without any thoughts or desire of fishing. We surprised everyone, and by the third time we heard the question, "What do you mean you came to the Delta and you're not fishing?!?" we didn't even bother to respond anymore.

At the end of this trip, Passenger Popescu gained great respect for: the hard-working people of the Danube Delta, the towing power of the Volvo, the 3-ton German boat (handmade by a German, of course), and Captain Mișu with his impressive navigation skills. All the canals looked the same to me, but Mișu knew every water lily, shortcut, and turn—except for the old Știpoc Canal, haha! I also admired his engine repair abilities. Why engine repair? Well, do you think that boat was meant to run at just 10 kilometers per hour? There was something wrong with the engine—something about a



pump and cooling—but all I remember hearing was, "It's overheated again, the pump's clogged, wait a bit." Then, Mechanic Mişu would vanish into the belly of the boat, tinker away, and reappear, covered in grease, looking like that English guy from *The Guns of Navarone* who spent half the movie fixing the boat. He'd say to me, "Fane, keep an eye on the stern and let me know when clean water starts coming out. But don't fall in while staring, or you'll drop the good beer—and that would be a tragedy."

I was happy to be of use, as I spent most of the trip sitting on my butt and downing beers. By the third breakdown, I finally learned what "stern" meant, after Mişu took pity on me and clarified, "It's the boat's rear end."

A few months later, Mişu sent me a picture of something the size of an olive and said, "Mr. Fane, this little thing caused all the trouble. I dismantled the entire Italian engine, which is *supposed* to last a lifetime" (he quickly tossed in some technical terms). "I placed a special order. Without this, the pump wouldn't work" (more technical terms followed). "I ordered one, they sent me two, and an apology letter. Now, it's running like a charm. I also improved the *peridoc*." At that point, I was completely lost. All I could do was put on my best "interested" face, like in a corporate meeting, and say, "Ahaaa! Mişu, great job! Well done, buddy!" Later, I learned that a *peridoc* is the special boat trailer that goes into the water. It's better when it's sturdy, and the boat needs to be perfectly seated and centered, especially for long trips.

And, because all beautiful things must have a continuation, here comes an invitation for #OnceInALifetimeExperience 2.0, an invitation made from the height of those 60 years that we will have pretty soon, once again in the Danube Delta, a different, more wonderful route, if this is even possible.

## Conclusion, that can as well be an Introduction

What and where is Danube Delta?

The waters of the Danube, which flow into the Black Sea, form the largest and best preserved of Europe's deltas. The Danube delta hosts over 300 species of birds as well as 45 freshwater fish species in its numerous lakes and marshes. It is part of the UNESCO World Heritage.

## Glossary of Terms

**Mămăligă** [mah-mah-li-gah] – polenta – it is a simple and hearty food made from cornmeal, water, and salt. Mămăliga has a long history in Romanian cuisine and is a staple food in many regions of Romania. In some regions, even in the same family, mămăliga is cooked until it becomes firm and sliceable. However, other people, like my wife, prefer it softer, like a porridge. We stopped arguing about the mămăliga's consistency a long time ago. Overall, mămăliga is a versatile and comforting dish that plays a significant role in Romanian culinary culture.

In US superstores one can buy polenta in plastic tubes. This is as close to real polenta as Olive Garden is to Italian food.

**Mujdei** [moo-j-dey] – garlic sauce – is a traditional Romanian garlic sauce or condiment that is known for its strong, pungent flavor. It is a simple sauce made primarily from crushed or minced garlic, salt, and water, and it can also include ingredients such as vinegar, oil, or lemon juice. The exact recipe for mujdei can vary from one household to another, like many dishes of Romanian cuisine.

**Zacusca** is a traditional Romanian vegetable spread or relish known for its rich, savory flavor. It is often enjoyed as a delicious appetizer or condiment. Zacusca is made by roasting and then stewing together a combination of vegetables, typically including



bell peppers, eggplants, onions, tomatoes, and sometimes carrots. Many families have their own unique recipes and variations, which have been passed down through generations. Being very versatile, you can add mushrooms, red pepper flakes, various spices, garlic and, to my surprise, fish.

**Borscht – borș** – is a traditional soup, particularly from Romania and Moldova. Variations exist across Eastern Europe, and each region may have its unique twist on the recipe. Some variations include the addition of meat, while others are entirely vegetarian or vegan. Borscht is a hearty and nutritious dish, and it has become a symbol of Eastern European cuisine, enjoyed by people around the world.



# The Great Trip of 2023 – Danube Delta

## Sheep's Ass Cheese

We were gearing up for our second Danube Delta adventure together, and I volunteered to do some shopping at the Obor Farmers' Market. I was feeling super guilty—it had been two whole days since I landed in Romania, and I still hadn't set foot in the Market.

"Yo, Fane," Mișu called out, "buy some vegetables, and don't forget the sheep's ass cheese."

"What should I buy, dude??"

"Brânză de burduf, but the manly one, you hear me? Not the kind for the weak-hearted."

At the Obor Farmers' Market, it was Ibănești booth after Ibănești booth. (The craze for Sibiu feta had passed; now Ibănești was the 'it' cheese, especially since it was now an EU-registered brand.) Of course, many of these were knockoffs—there's no way that tiny village could pump out so much cheese. I finally found a non-Ibănești booth and started tasting: old feta, new feta, salty feta, sheep cheese, goat cheese, cow cheese... then *burduf* balls—kneaded sheep cheese, yay!

The saleslady handed me a sample. It had a texture like hand cream—rich, creamy, and totally odorless.

"Ma'am," I said, "this is a bit mild. Don't you have the more... *manly*, stinky cheese?"

"Oh, we do, but not many people ask for it." She gave me a taste. All right! *That* was what I was looking for.

I bought an entire cheese, about the size of a handball. By the time I got home, the bag



had already started to smell. I tossed it in the fridge and left with Mișu to prepare the boat. We were gone about four hours.

When I got back and walked into the kitchen, it was like the refrigerator was crying, "What did you do to me, Don Steffanooo?!"

I started writing this post in the car, riding shotgun while Mișu drove. Every so often, he rubbed his eyes and cracked the windows in a specific sequence (we're both engineers—we know all about airflow and whatnot). Then, with a bit of a lump in his throat, he said, "Fane, you really didn't have to take that 'sheep's ass' comment so literally."

## **Two Men in a Boat During the War**

Back in 2017, I was basically dragged to Misu's place, but in 2023, it was totally different. It was like a partnership. We planned everything together in advance, we bought things together, and we prepared the boat together (actually, Misu did the prep while I mostly admired his expertise). It took me a while to figure it out, but it was actually the best strategy. Instead of waiting to be told, "Hey, you can come now." I occasionally took the initiative and helped him (as much as I was able).

The same boat, the same car, the same two boys, just a little older and more experienced, but I don't think much more mature. This time, I paid more attention to the boat: I looked closely at the famous propeller and at the trailer, with all the moving and non-moving parts, the connections of the electric cables (they didn't make good contact after two years on land, but after the first speed bump they started to work, first timidly, then, after the next bump, we also had lights, brakes, and turn signals).

Due to the war taking place north of the border, we decided to be cautious, to stay in the southern part of the Danube Delta and not take the boat into the Black Sea (although it was very tempting), and to navigate the largest lakes, Golgovița and Razelm and the canals, and try to reach Perișor Beach and, maybe, the town of Sfintu Gheorghe.

For good luck, I brought along Cosmin's Romanian flag. It was a gift from his grandfather, and I decided to keep it close to my heart. Not only did it make us feel patriotic, but also helped us stand out to those spying on us from above. In modern warfare, the strategy is shoot first and figure out what you hit, later. So we thought

we'd give them a surprise with our flag-waving skills. And give ourselves a better chance at survival!

## Day 1 – Bucharest – At Parmac's House Resort

We had an uneventful five hour drive, cruising under the speed limit with a 3-ton boat in tow. The air conditioning wasn't working. It didn't bother us (too much), but the cheese I had bought at the Obor Farmers' Market (by special request from Misu) was sending oceanic waves



of oppressive odor when the right front window was open, and Misu was getting dizzy, so I had to close it. By the time we arrived at our destination, we had finally mastered the strategy of which windows to open for how long in order to maximize the air flow while minimizing the pungent fumes of our cargo.

I regret not being an influencer or having more followers on social media. There are some places really worth writing about. For example, the good people at Parmac Resort: a very intimate, homey feeling, from the concierge in deep slumber when we opened the door without waiting to be invited (she was as unfazed as we were, as though it were perfectly normal), to the server who told us to get wine and beer directly from the beverage fridge, to the restroom whose window opened directly onto the patio where people were eating and you could actually place an order while taking care of business. A very friendly (to say nothing of intimate) atmosphere. My friend asked me to read him the menu (while he was inside, in THAT room), and the other patrons started offering suggestions, although no one had asked them. A friendly discussion and lively conversation followed. In addition to a very good local wine (from the Liuta Winery), we also had some very tasty papanashi (pronounced *papanashi*, a traditional Romanian dessert. They are similar to fried donuts topped with donut balls, and served with lots of sour cream and jam, around 3000 calories each, but who's counting).

We were offered the Honeymoon suite, as it was the only one left (or so they said). We took it, laughing so hard that we scared the fish and got some high-browed, side-eyed views from the fishermen.



## Day 2 – Parmac's House – Guta Portiței

Every day of this trip, I tried to wake up before dawn to see the sun rising, to relish the beginning of the new day, and to take some photos. I succeeded, and some of the photos are really good (as you can see, I am also very modest, not only beautiful, smart, strong, and well educated).

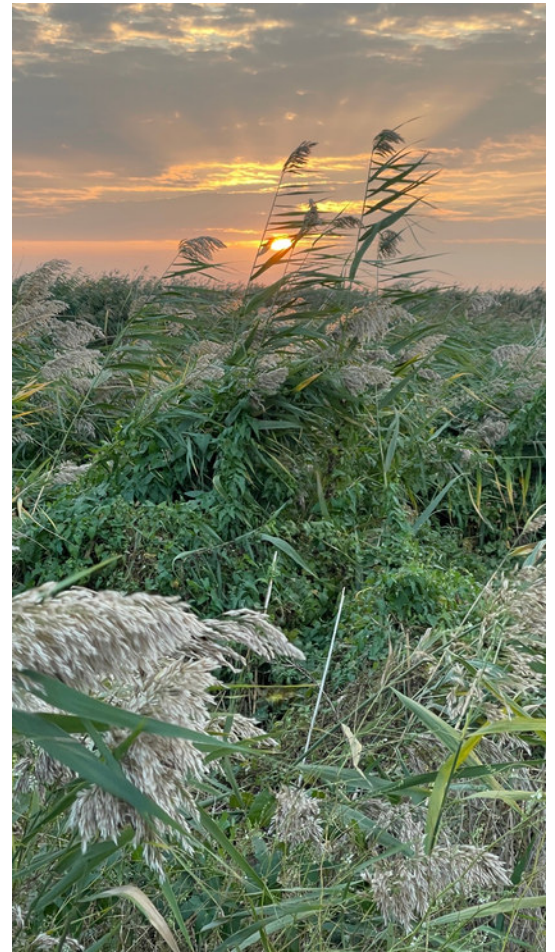
It was quite windy, but I didn't pay much attention; I thought this was how it should be in the morning. When Mișu finally woke up, looked out the window, and saw how windy it was, he had only one word to say: "Trouble!" Actually, he said something else, but it's harder to translate and not exactly suitable for minors. The 'trouble' wasn't long in revealing itself. When we left the smaller lake, Golgovita, (where we were protected, to a certain extent, by the shoreline and reeds) and got into the larger lake, Razelm, we quickly took three waves of three feet each to the bow of the boat. Mișu, after making a rather smart yet hasty calculation, said that each wave carried about a ton of water. We didn't like it, and it shook us badly. The captain made a graceful 180 degree turn, known nautically as "a strategic retreat," and we arrived at Gura Portiței, which was Plan B, in case of strong winds. Mișu knew the boat could handle it, and he could reach the other side of the lake, but it would be a lot of work and stress. However, being on what was supposed to be a relaxing vacation, we figured "why even bother?" Instead, we prudently crossed the town of Sfintu Gheorghe off our list and added Gura Portiței.

When I was 8 years old, I visited Gura Portitei for the first time with my Grandfather and Uncle Pupi. At that time, it featured only a couple of bungalows by the lake, and the whole area was wild and beautiful. The only way to get there was by boat from Jurilovca (the small village on the other side of the lake). The best place to eat was a fishermen's house, and you had to charm the fishermen to get in. Not just anyone was welcome at their table.

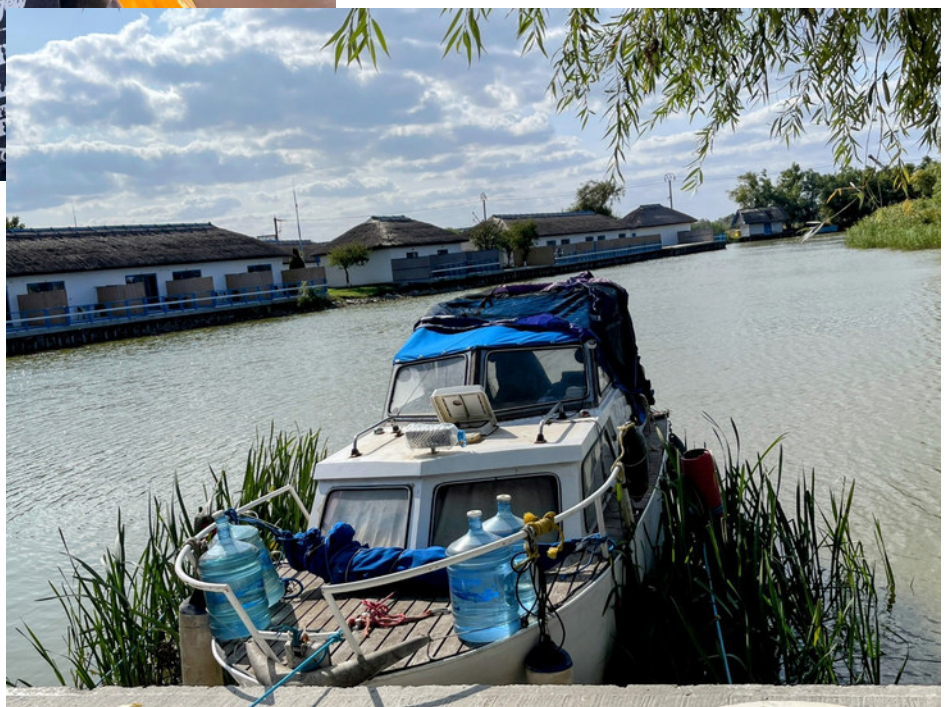
Being a dumb kid, I asked for meat, which totally confused everyone and brought tremendous shame to my family. You know that saying, 'We'll remember this later and laugh'? Well, in this case, we remember it, all right, and I still get pointed at and hear things like, 'What a total fool you were!'

In every Romanian book on raising children, the chapter on 'every child gets a prize' seems to have been purposely omitted. Instead, we were constantly reminded of our stupidity and ineptitude, as if they weren't already obvious enough. And let's not even





*Parmac Sunrise, The  
Capitan, and The Boat*





get started on the comments you'd get if you were bad at sports – everyone made sure the kid knew, loud and clear.

Nowadays, Gura Portitei has become a very civilized, touristy place, with sunbeds, beach umbrellas, beach houses (beautiful, I'm forced to admit), a swimming pool, a bar, a fancy restaurant, and, of all things, a helicopter landing platform, which made me sad. It was the last thing paradise needed. Goodbye, wilderness. Hello, civilization.

We slept in the boat, which was quite interesting. I resisted an onslaught of mosquitoes and barely convinced myself to stay behind the net instead of taking pictures of the moon and stars reflected in the quiet waters of the channel, like in a mirror. We fed ourselves, and the fish (with scraps), and stayed well-hydrated. Suddenly, the boat didn't seem so big anymore – I think I spent half the time just moving things around. Sleeping in a small boat is not for the faint of heart. You want vegetables? Move the water bottles. You want bread? Make sure the coffee doesn't spill on you. You want a beer? Move the luggage on the right. You want to sleep? Move everything out of the cabin. No pillow? Well, you brought a backpack – use that, but be careful not to get a buckle in your eye. But we managed, and the basic needs were covered: water, food, sleep, potty.



Being somewhat obsessed with clotheslines, I quickly pulled a stump of twine from my bag and started laying it out. Wow, did I get an earful from Mişu: "Yo, Fane, open your eyes and see how many ropes of all kinds I already have on the boat. I know them all and what they're used for—each has its purpose. If you keep adding your string, we're going to mess up because we won't be able to handle it anymore. Please put it back." Ashamed, I put it back. How could I mess up the boat's feng shui with such a small string? But those socks had to be aired somewhere, so I put them on the curtains. And then I forgot about them! Mişu found them at Snagov while cleaning the boat after the portable toilet disaster, which had spilled on the way back. But let's not get ahead of ourselves.

### **Day 3 – Gura Portitei – Perisor Beach**

Of course, I got up early in the morning to take some photos. Behind the reeds, quite close, is the Black Sea, the waves of which could be heard all night, and we wondered if those were war noises or if there were only waves. We decided, unanimously, that they were waves, and slept soundly.

Misu's boat, described in great detail in my previous post, doesn't go over 10 km/h (around 7 mph). It's very smooth sailing, very relaxing. Speedwise? Well, we could never afford to be in a hurry. There are other boats for speed, this one is for sightseeing.

The lake that had been windy, stormy, and choppy the previous day was now scary calm. We sailed about 20 kilometers. It was foggy, and all you could hear was the engine purring: thick, like an old tiger.

We took turns searching for a cellphone signal to figure out where we were. At first, Mişu said they were jamming the signal because of the war, but after about two hours, he admitted that his phone was old and quite a piece of junk. Who was jamming? "They," of course. While he looked for the signal, he handed me the rudder to keep the boat straight. I managed the impressive feat of turning the boat almost 180 degrees while trying to keep it straight. I don't know why Mişu was so amazed - if he'd let me go a little longer, I would've gotten it back on the right track.

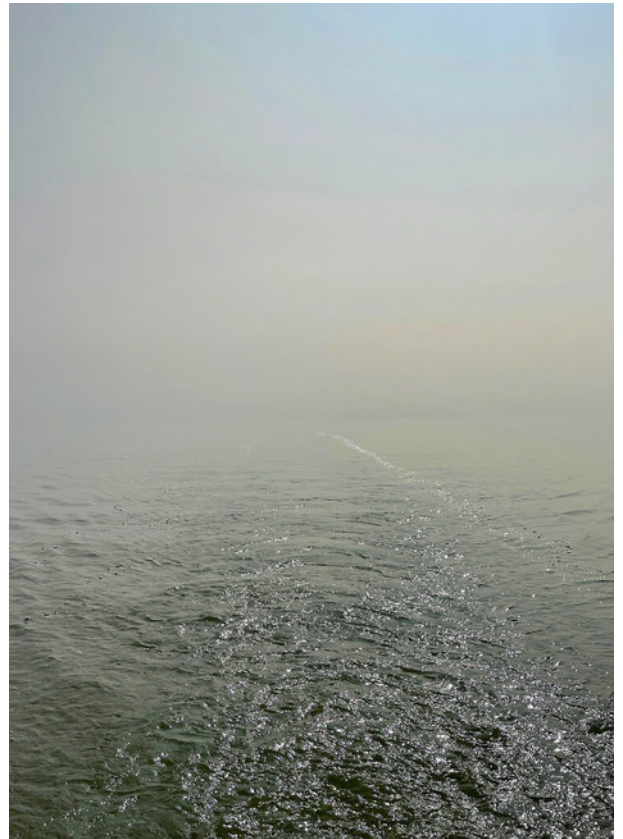
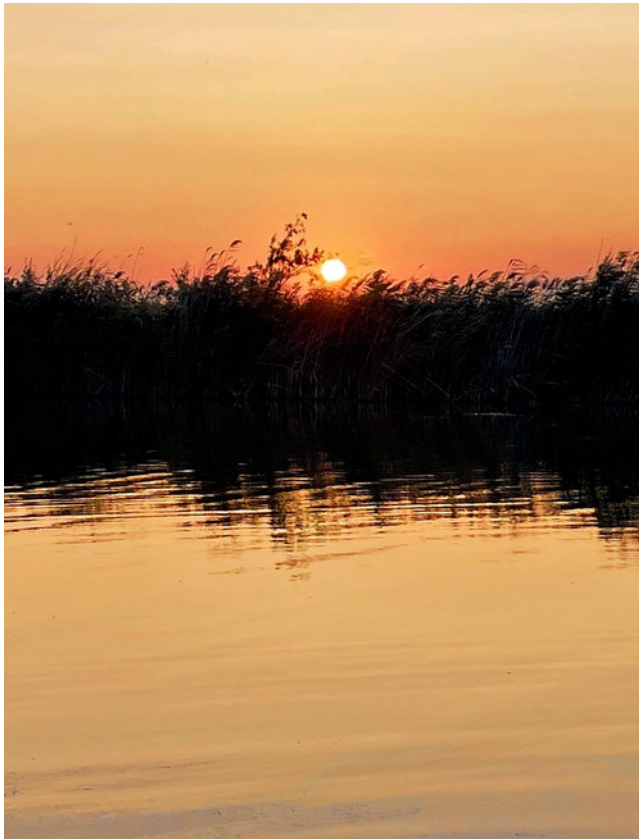
Perisor is considered the last wild beach of the Romanian side of the Black Sea shore. Probably not for long, as one of the "smart boys" bought the old fishermen's house and







*Gura  
Portitei,  
beach and  
sunrise,  
Razelm  
Lake*



the unsellable protected adjacent land and started building a resort, added some tall and solid fences, video cameras, and hired one or more guards who were remotely keeping an eye on the property.

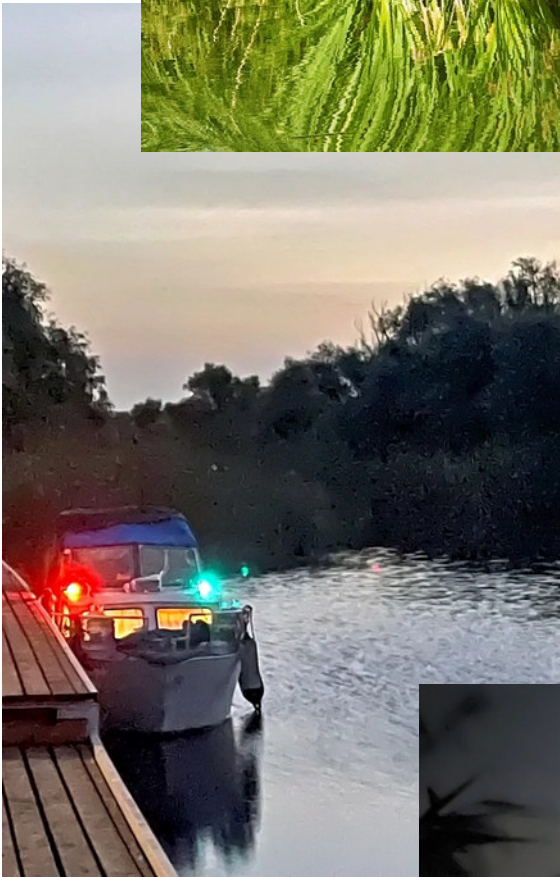
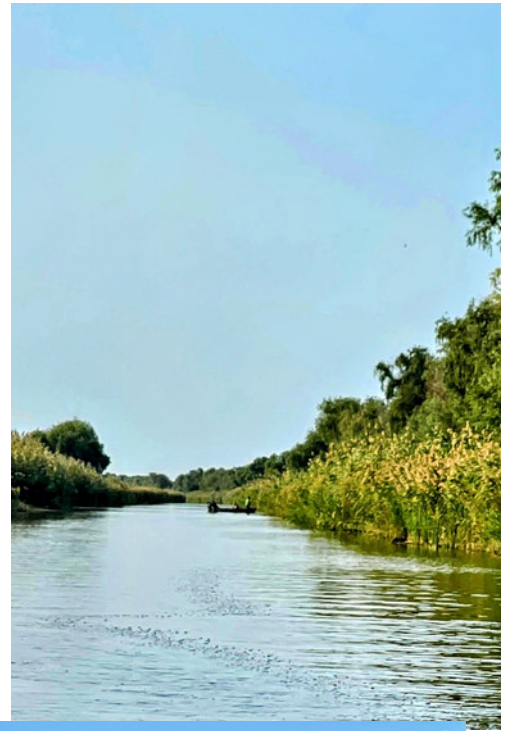
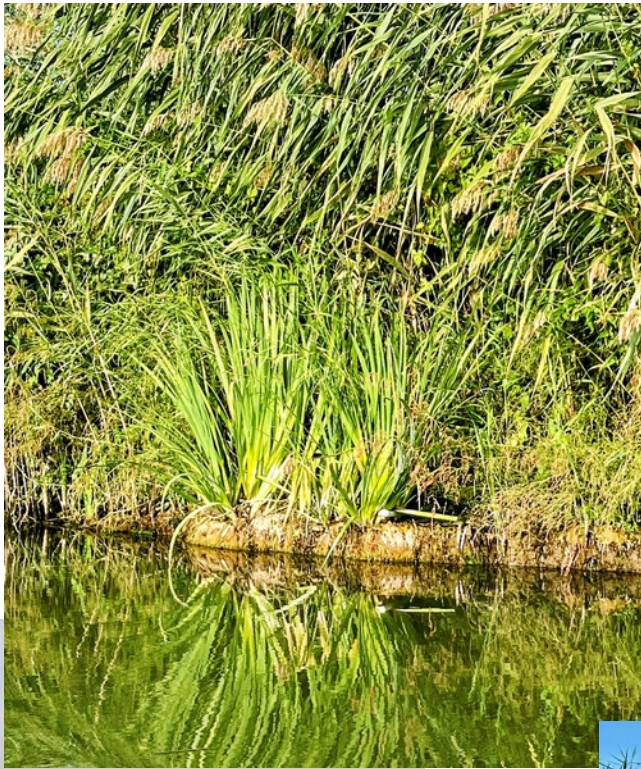
After a whole day of navigating the canals, avoiding hidden or submerged trees, we were unceremoniously asked to move the boat from the now-private dock to the public side, 10 feet to the right, and to set anchor on a mini beach. Misu scratched his head, explaining the guy (who was riding the latest model of an ATV - a bit of envy here) that the dock was built way before the land acquisition and that is not private property. The guard's face was expressionless, as if we were talking to a wall and, when he opened his mouth again, he said, "The boss is looking at me, and he is also looking at you. If I let you stay, he'll fire me."

We moved.

## **Day 4 – Perisor – At Parmac's House**

Who was up at 6 am to see the sun rising? This guy. Who took some great photos? This guy. And who saw wild horses running, well, wild? Also this guy! By the time Misu woke up, I was deep in conversation with the guard's dog, playing games of who's smarter, you or your master?







Perisor Sunrise





## Perisor Wild Beach



Perisor is the place where The Danube Delta and The Black Sea meet. In its narrowest place, the strip of sand is around 20 yards (at Gura Portitei, it's about 100). As Misu puts it, it's the place where the European Union ends and the Big Unknown begins.

We started the long journey back, taking a slightly different route to save time. We passed through some very narrow canals leading into larger lakes filled with hundreds of birds, but we stayed at a distance so as not to disturb them. There were already enough tourists ruining their day. Finally, on our second attempt, we reached Holbina Bay, where we were once again met by strong winds and high waves. This time, however, we had no Plan B. Our only option was to push through the waves and wind and try to reach the resort, La Parmac. After 45 minutes of so-called sailing—mostly up, down, left, right, and occasionally forward—the boat's engine died. Just like that: it coughed twice and stopped running. With the last drop of fuel, Mișu steered the boat into the reeds, and that's where we got stuck!

Me being me, I immediately assessed the food and water situation: we had enough supplies for three days. I had a flight to Germany in two days, so we were fine. But it would be even better if we could manage to get ourselves out of the reeds. Mișu, being Mișu, dove into the belly of the boat to check the engine. All the movement had stirred up the sediments at the bottom of the fuel tank, clogging the fuel system. The engine was done! Dead! Kaput!

While we awaited the tow boat, the wind was so strong that it kept pushing us deeper into the reeds, making the boat nearly impossible to spot from the water.

Communication with the outside world was spotty. My iPhone 12 worked semi-decently, meaning it had a signal on and off—mostly on, but with a major issue: calls showed up as 'Restricted Numbers' due to Vodafone Romania's settings. Mișu's old and much-loved iPhone was, once again, useless. By chance, when I left Casa Parmac two days ago, I had taken a brochure with me. We started calling every number listed, and to our surprise, a nervous guy finally answered (he was the one who pointed out the restricted number issue—thanks, Mr. Admin). He was about to start yelling at us when we shouted, 'Mayday, Mayday!' Not only did he listen, but he also helped: he knew a guy, who knew Mache, who knew another guy, who was a cousin of another guy. Whew!

An hour later, a small boat with a huge, noisy engine blew past us. Unfortunately, we were so well-hidden in the reeds that they couldn't see us, and of course, they didn't.





*One Canal, like many others*

*Our hiding spot in the reeds*

*La Parmac Resort by night*





The Pin Drop on Google Maps placed us half a mile away, in the middle of the lake. A very angry fisherman with a very small boat eventually found us (the big engine had chopped up his fishing net).

After much noise and fuss, we were finally towed away. I was taking pictures and making reservations for the night while Mişu was trying to steer the boat straight—the only thing he could do to help those guys as much as possible.

Three hours and 30 kilometers later (about 20 miles), we finally saw the lights of the resort. To say Mişu was tired is an understatement: it was pitch black on the lake, and he had to follow two tiny flashing red lights from the tow boat. Actually, those lights turned out to be burning cigarettes. The two guys were having a good time smoking, listening to music, maybe drinking a little something. But hey, I'm not judging. Of course, in the end, money changed hands, and gratitude was shared on both sides.

And guess what: the room we got was another Honeymoon suite (I think they only had honeymoon suites) on two levels, with an internal staircase. All we wanted was a hot shower and a comfortable bed. Or so I thought, but Misu had to cook something. Right in the middle of the suite. He was hungry and very thirsty. But mostly hungry.



*Sunset on Lake Razelm*



## Day 5 – At Parmac’s House – Bucharest

To my surprise, Misu was up super early, serenading me with some not so sweet words, wondering why he suddenly got into the habit of waking up early. I was already up, though, taking advantage of the crisp air and the balcony, looking at the amateur fishermen who were getting their equipment ready.

During the previous evening’s adventure, the deal with the front desk was that we would look for the guard when we arrived and get the key to room 6. When we arrived at 9:30 in the evening, there was no sign of the guard, and the group of slightly drunk guys who were relaxing on the porch had no idea where he was. In fact, they didn’t even know there *was* a guard. The door to room number 6 was happily unlocked, so we got in and put an empty frying pan with a fork in front of the door overnight as an alarm. The look on Georgiana’s face (the concierge) when I showed up the next morning to pay for the room was priceless. She looked at me as if she had seen a ghost. The word out at the resort was that there was no way we could have made it, although that boat anchored in the harbor was a dead giveaway, both literally and figuratively.

Getting the boat out of the water and onto the trailer was a job for a super-skilled person and his sidekick. For ourselves, on the other hand, we had to use an extender, and so I learned a new word (and resurrected a few others) and found out what that very long iron pipe was for. Everything had to be done by hand and with a rope (because there was no longer an engine), pulling to the right, to the left, braking with a big stone at the wheel, science, art, and precision, calculating speeds, vectors, wind, forces and, when all else failed, relying on plain dumb luck. Finally, the boat was out, even if slightly tilted to the left on the trailer.

And so, we returned to Bucharest, whole, with some good stories and tons of pictures.

## Miscellaneous (and almost final) thoughts

If you’re looking for Casa La Parmac (At Parmac’s House), you may still find it on Google maps, but not as a physical location. By the time I’m writing this, it’s probably already been sold, and those wonderful people have been unceremoniously fired. The resort was in a bay, on the left side as you face the lake. On the right, there’s a luxury resort. To compare: from \$65 a room at Parmac to a minimum of \$350 on the other side. From Fords and Skodas in the parking lot on the left to Bentleys and Porsches on



the right. Goodbye double bed, goodbye organic eggs for breakfast with orange yolks, goodbye real sheep cheese, tasty tomatoes, and that amazing local Babadag wine for only \$7 a bottle.

Throughout this trip, I've witnessed the Delta becoming more and more of a luxury destination and less accessible to common people. I saw three places undergoing this transformation. As for the rest, I don't know, but for those three, each one changed from comfortably affordable to pure luxury.

On the way home, we passed many large and small vineyards where you can taste and buy wine directly from the producer—something to keep in mind for the future.

And because something had to smell bad during this escapade, it was the camping toilet—a cube the size of a microwave with drawers. In fact, it wasn't the toilet that



smelled, but the excrement. The idea is great: you put some chemicals in a tank, and all the waste dissolves into the infamous black water. The concept isn't new; it was inspired by Soviet scientists who were tasked with making butter from human waste. They worked and worked, then went to the party secretary and said, 'Look, comrade, we've managed to change the color, give it a new shape, and the consistency of butter, but we can't get rid of the smell.' So even though the waste dissolved into black water, a bit of the smell remained.

In the whirlwind of departure, I didn't check whether the valve was properly closed, and the black fluid slowly leaked out. Luckily, the carpeting in the boat was rubberized and could be easily cleaned with a hose. Let's remember that for next time.

I know you're expecting me to say that the cheese was the thing that smelled bad, but no, it smelled exactly as it should. It was a perfect cheese. Anyway, when we said our goodbyes, I was pretty please asked to take the leftovers with me. I happily obliged and gave them to my cousin in Aachen, a real connoisseur of stinky cheeses. He religiously ate it for breakfast two days in a row, while his father, who proudly tells everyone, 'In Germany, you can find anything,' muttered under his breath, 'even *we* don't have THAT.'

Back at Snagov (a village 30 kilometers from Bucharest, near a lake), where Mișu keeps his boat, it took him less than an hour to repair the engine (with the right tools) and get the boat properly on the trailer. Winter can come.

## Glossary of Terms

**Telemea (feta) de Ibănești** is a traditional Romanian cheese that hails from the picturesque Gurghiu valley. Known for its unique texture that is simultaneously wet and crumbly, this cheese is a culinary delight that is deeply rooted in Romania's rich gastronomic heritage.

The name 'Telemea' is traditionally associated with Romanian cheeses made from sheep's milk. However, over time, it has also come to represent cheeses crafted from cow's milk. Telemea de Ibănești can be made from either of these milks, adding to its versatility and appeal.

But what truly sets Telemea de Ibănești apart from other cheeses is its prestigious distinction as the first Romanian cheese with a protected designation of origin (D.O.P.) protected by the European Union.

**Brânză de burduf** (also known as “Brânză frământată” (English: Kneaded cheese)) is a soft sheep’s milk cheese produced in Transylvania, on the slopes of the high Bucegi Mountains in the Carpathians, Romania.

To make this cheese, fresh caș produced from the raw milk of heritage sheep breeds such as Turcana and Tigae is cut into small pieces, salted and mixed in a wooden bowl. It is then left to age from 20 days to 2-3 months inside *coajă de brad* (fir tree or pine bark) or sheep’s skin. As it ripens, its flavor becomes increasingly spicy and salty.

Brânză de Burduf is produced from May to July when the pine bark is rich in flavour. They are processed and sewn together to produce cylindrical containers that are sealed with bark discs at the edges.

The cheese is specific to different areas from the historical regions of Transylvania, Moldavia and Wallachia (also called Brânză în coajă de brad (Cheese in fir shell)).

**Dacia** -Romanian car manufacturer that takes its name from the historical region that constitutes present-day Romania. The company was established in 1966. The first Dacia 1300 left the assembly line on 23 August 1969.





# The Carpathian Master Driver and His Flying Engine

*This post is an exercise in imagination and any resemblance to real or fictional characters is absolutely intentional*

Once upon a time, there were two men, quite mature and in their sixties, The Carpathian Master Driver and his Companion. The companion's name was Puffy.

They decided to take the tar.dutch, Romanian Edition, hook it up to the Engine, and hit the road. The tar.dutch didn't have an internal engine; it just had wheels and was towed with all the modern towing equipment, but towed nevertheless: chug-chug, chug-chug, not whoosh-whoosh-whoosh-beep-beep like the original. A third-world tardis wannabe, you know!

Around three in the morning, as per the good ol' country's tradition of leaving at the crack of dawn to beat the traffic, the tar.dutch was loaded, the Engine revved up, and The Carpathian Master Driver announced in a very casual tone: "Puffy, I don't have lights in the Engine's cabin because my battery isn't new; it's the original one, about sixteen years old, so don't freak out, but I have to run only the essentials."

Just as casually came the next announcement: "Puffy, go to the back of the tar.dutch and tell me if the brake lights come on. I don't think they're working. Something's wrong. Talk to me loud and clear, I can't understand a thing, speak up, I can't hear you!"

Half an hour later, the brake lights still didn't work, but the turn signals had started flashing, and they had woken up the neighbors with all the yelling and testing. The neighbors were shouting from their windows: "Yo, Puffy, tell him the damn lights work and get lost already, so we can get back to sleep!"

They left, and finally, a blessed silence fell over the neighborhood. They set off on a long journey, estimated to be about seven hours.



### *The Engine and The tar.dutch RE*

In the Romanian tar.dutch, you're not allowed, by law, to sit inside while on the road, so the guys were riding the Engine: The Carpathian Master Driver at the wheel (obviously), Puffy to his right, navigating from between his legs. The Engine, like the battery, was about sixteen years old and had no navigator, no Bluetooth, nothing. It was just an honest, reliable Engine running on diesel fuel and oil. Between Puffy's legs was a phone, which had Bluetooth, wi-fi, and a navigator. The Bluetooth and wi-fi were useless, but the navigator proved itself extremely helpful.

About an hour later, a desperate driver overtook them, signaling with his headlights and gesturing wildly. At 4:30 am they were the only ones on the road. The Carpathian Master Driver felt the need to speed up and overtake him back, because you don't engage with every weirdo, who happens by, especially at that wee hour. The driver, persistent, stuck close to the tar.dutch. At a stop light, he stuck his head and half his body out the window, shouting: "Yo, dudes, your tar.dutch's turn signals are working in reverse order!"

The Carpathian Master Driver muttered a curse and signaled in reverse all the way to their destination, but only after re-testing the signals at a gas station, where they had to stop urgently because the Engine had consumed all its oil. It needed to be fed because an Engine without oil goes "AAaaa PFFFFffff" and stops. Abruptly.



At every stop until their destination (Borsec, for a food festival, because this is what a fat guy needs), Puffy witnessed the practical definition of insanity: doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. It's incredible in how many ways you can fiddle with a contacts adapter with no result. The Yodeling Screwdriver proved to be useless.

Only the arrival of their Friend, who had come down South with his quick and nervous orange Japanese car, solved the problem. The Friend took the adapter from his Car, tested it on the tar.dutch, and the adapter worked flawlessly. The signals signaled correctly, the brakes lit up, and so the adapter quietly changed owners.



*Sunrise over the campground*

Meanwhile, the tar.dutch didn't like to be left out and decided to contribute to the general fun by slightly flooding itself with black water from the tank. For those who don't know, black water consists of chemically dissolved poop and pee. It doesn't smell exactly like feces, but it doesn't exactly smell automotive either. For those who don't know, generally, nothing is left on the floor in the tar.dutch. Puffy didn't know and watched helplessly as his espadrilles floated gracefully away in a puddle of poop. After four washes, he threw them away.

The Friend, happy to have solved the adapter problem, started offering gratuitous



solutions for the black water tank. Unfortunately, he had fallen into a bottle of Carpathian Single Malt, and all that could be heard from inside the bottle was a muffled "...overflow. I made satellites in US, I know, it's the overflow." Puffy is still scratching his head trying to wrap his brain around the connection between satellites and overflow. Puffy's solution, on the other hand, was the epitome of simplicity: "let's just empty the tank proactively."

The Engine, in keeping with its adverse personality, suddenly decided to stop illuminating with the left headlight. It blinked undecidedly for a second, then simply gave up. The Carpathian Master Driver and the Friend tried to fix it as best they knew,



*The Friend, Yours Truly,  
The Fire, and The Alley  
in the Super Park*





*Outdoor things for outdoor people, and  
fun things for hungry people*



without success. Remove the headlight, change the bulb, put the headlight back, change the fuse, call the mechanic, clean the contacts. Again, the Yodeling Screwdriver proved itself to be universally useless.

The Carpathian Master Driver and his Companion continued their trip, down Southeast this time, towards Vadu Beach, as best as they could, quite well actually, but with only one headlight, until the first gas station, where they had to stop urgently because the Engine had, with all its familiar, loudly audible protests, again consumed all its oil. It needed to be fed because an Engine without oil goes "AAaaa PFFFFffff" and stops. Abruptly. When The Carpathian Master Driver slammed the hood in frustration and said, "Come on, Puffy, let's go," the left headlight woke up, and it's still working properly, as it should've from the beginning.

Nothing else to report, except that by the Black Sea shores, in the middle of nowhere, everything had to rely on the tar.dutch's battery because there was no electricity around.

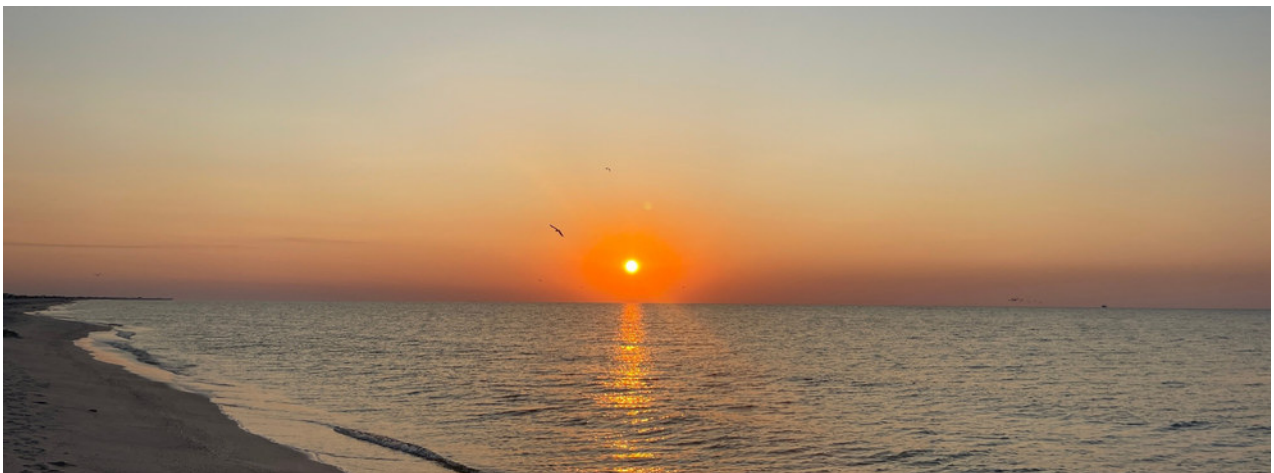
And so The Carpathian Master Driver, in his quest for perfection, almost plunged everything into darkness. Quite the dramatic situation unfolded as the beer, wine, and mineral water slowly warmed up – the second fridge stopped running. Of course, these things always happen when there's no electricity, so there's no point blaming the fridge itself. The first fridge, on the other hand, was a marvel of technology, running on gas. It presented quite the conundrum: should one save the meat or keep the booze chill?

Until then, everything with the solar panels was working swimmingly, keeping the battery at a steady 100%. But then, after a bit of Doctor Whoesque tinkering, the battery decided to pull off an 'eee-ooo-boom' stunt and nosedived to 30%. It stayed there for a while, and just when everyone thought it might recharge itself, it pulled off another 'eee-ooo-boom' stunt and landed right back at 30%. Apparently, some mysterious issues were happening with the '...tor family'—capacitor, transistor, inverter. Surprisingly, it was solved with a simple reset, the last resort of the frustrated, but this required taking half of the tar.dutch apart. The ultimate solution? 'Let's install an on/off switch to make it easier next time. Problem solved!'





*Borsec View, and Vadu Beach Sunrise*



At the end of their parade, their seemingly endless panorama of cosmic futility, Puffy was just chilling, doing his thing, which was nothing. He watched another guy working, trying to look like he knew what was going on, as if his engineering college days hadn't been totally wasted. When he got tired of doing nothing, he strolled over to the Black Sea shore, on the beach, for a quick bathroom break. After that, he took some pictures and sipped on a cool spritzer.

That's what he did for three whole days, and it seemed like he was having a pretty good time, far, far away from his real life!!

## **Glossary of Terms**

**tar.dutch** - serves the same purpose as a tardis, but this one is in the shape of a trailer, made in The Netherlands in 1988, by the Dutch, hence the name.

As with a tardis, "Bigger on the inside" is a very good way to describe it.

**The Carpathian Master Driver** is a simple Romanian Master Driver. Why "Carpathian", though? Because it seemed fancier and I couldn't say Doctor Who, as I originally intended.

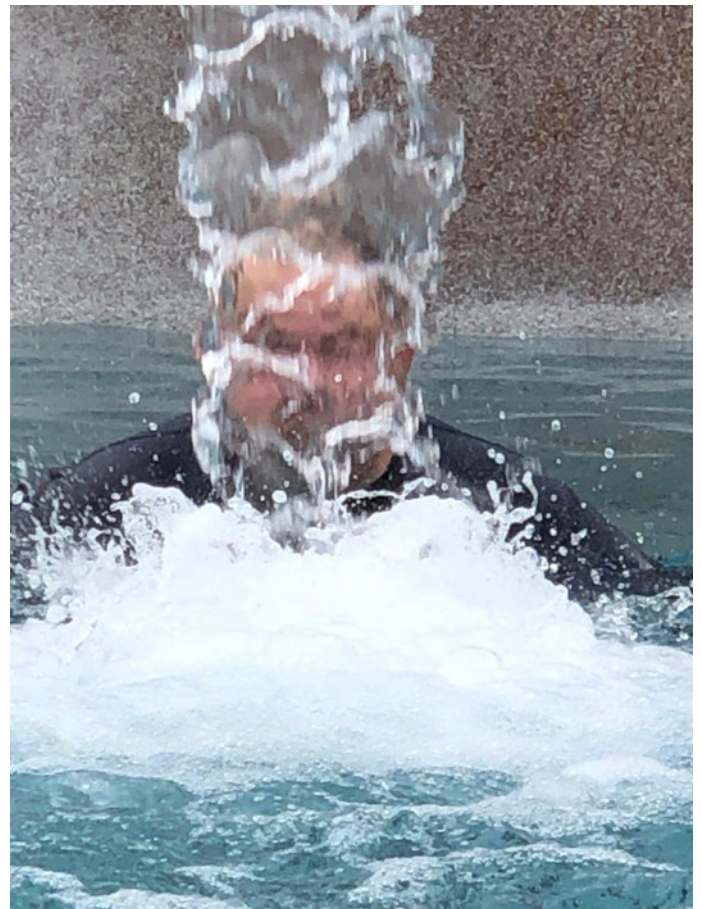
**Yodeling Screwdriver** - is like that fictional multifunctional tool used by the Doctor Who, but instead of being the sonic kind, this one yodels. It's still useless.

**Disclaimer** - *Initially, I wanted to use the characters and names from the BBC series, but at the last minute, I remembered they're copyrighted. So, I rewrote my piece. It lost some of its charm, but I write for fun, and the last thing I want is an army of BBC lawyers chasing after me.*





*Boresec Food Festival, The Spa, and the Mineral Water Spring(s), and the Mineral Water Pool (!!!)*



# My Very Personal Sense Of Humor

## One

It was the early 2000s, and the British company I was working for merged with a Wall Street Giant. They told us it was a “Merger between equals.” Maybe they kept me on the team because of my skills, or maybe because I was always working on weekends, who knows. Anyway, I ended up moving from a Times Square office to a Wall Street office.

I was quite good at what I did, and soon I was training the new team in Excel, PowerPoint, creating templates, manuals, and more. Corel Draw was a different story; I was the only one using that program, and I was quite the expert at it, but the higher-ups decided that everyone should learn it. I expected to be appointed as the Corel instructor but, surprise, they chose a lady from the UK as the trainer. And that’s when the fun began.

We gathered in a special training room where she taught us her first lesson (via video link, which was a big deal back in the 2000s) and gave us homework. I did it as well as possible, meaning perfectly, and, the next day, I got the feedback. She said something like, “For a beginner, you did quite well.” I got a bit puffed up, and my ego swelled.

I sent an email to the trainer, thinking that my subtle, sarcastic humor would be appreciated, but, surprise, it wasn’t received well.

The next day, commotion!

My manager (a super lady from India) called me into her office, and for two whole hours, she ripped into me (to be honest, everything she said was dead-on. I felt pretty crappy for letting my ego get the better of me). Turns out, my sarcastic Romanian humor didn't sit well with them at all, even in the UK where their humor is dry as dust: instead, they got all sensitive and the tears started flowing. During that chat, she suggested I follow the 24-hour rule: if I still felt the urge to bite back within 24 hours, go for it; but most of the time, like 98%, I'd realize no email was worth sending.



For fun, I asked ChatGpt for a limerick  
A manager from Mumbai, quite shrewd,  
Scolded me for my tone that was crude.  
“Mind your manners,” she’d say,  
“In a kinder, firm way,”  
Now I’m careful with words that I try.

## Two

Arizona, sometime around 2006. Corporate environment. Cafeteria. Microwave ovens, paper plates. Not great, but they did the job.

One day, the trusty cardboard plates disappeared to be replaced by so-called styrofoam plates, a wretched plastic of poor quality and notoriously toxic, although they swore it wasn’t. So I wasn’t paying attention and heated my food up on the new plate. When a hole burned through the styrofoam, my food got contaminated with that melted rubbish.

I broke the 24-hour rule and sent an email to Human Resources (of all places), writing something like, “If you should want to compile a list of volunteers to study the effects of melted plastic plates in food on employees, please be advised that I’m definitely not interested.”

The next day, commotion!

My boss called me into his office, with a mix of anger and amusement on his face. He said: “The HR folks wanted to fire you, but I explained that you come from another country, that you have a different sense of humor, and that English is not your first language, so we weren’t sure what you really meant. And they said to tell you that, if you don’t like styrofoam, either bring your own dishes or find a job where they provide paper plates.”

So, I started bringing my own plates.

## Three

USA, 2024. Working from home for a huge corporation, with some Best of Dire Straits in the background: "Money for Nothing" and so on...

In a super spirited Teams discussion, we were talking about getting free dental floss at the dentist. I didn't even think twice before typing: "Money for nothing, floss for free".

Five seconds later, a coworker wrote: "Were you trying to be funny or just dodge an HR email?"

At that moment, I froze!

But I kept silent, even though I had so much to say...

*[For those who may not know, the original verse is "Money for nothing, chicks for free".]*

## **The End?**

My boss was like, "Stefan, I had to hold in my laughter when I saw the HR ladies all worked up about your email. I thought it was great, but hey, it's a big corporation, and they're not really into jokes. Fortunately, there are no specific Humor Rules, so they asked me to have a chat with you. Just watch out for those personal opinions, okay?"

Cosmin always used to tell me, "Dad, with your humor and sarcasm, you're going to get in trouble. If *I* can't always tell when you're kidding and when you're serious, how do you think those people will? Plus, your humor is so personal! And sometimes you have no filter! "

I remember what I wrote when we were getting ready to adopt a dog: "Things started to get serious when we were notified of the home visit. Irina cleaned up, instructed me what to say and especially what not to say: no jokes of any kind, good jokes or bad jokes, so it is better if no jokes at all. Because my sense of humor is very special, it is best kept quiet".

And 'cause I never really learned to be serious, and I just go with the flow, I end up keeping my mouth shut. Fortunately, I have the ability to stay silent in two languages. And every time I get my annual review, I get the same feedback: "Speak up more, let people see the real you!"

"I'm gonna pass," I say to my managers, "it's probably best if I just stay quiet."







*Photos, writing, and amateur text editing Stefan Popescu.*

*Cover photo: Vadu Beach, Sunrise - Stefan Popescu*

*Back cover photo, courtesy of Mr. Misu.*

*Source for Glossary of Terms: Wikipedia*





For Stefan, writing has always been, and continues to be, a therapeutic outlet. As a naturally shy person, he struggles with spontaneity in conversations and often comes up with responses only two or three days later, after mustering the courage through prolonged internal deliberation. This tendency can completely bewilder his conversation partners, who by then may have forgotten the original topic.

On the other hand, he finds writing and telling stories quite enjoyable, so that's where he focuses his energy. He remains quiet for long stretches, observing the world around him and writing about it. His sense of humor is very personal and not always appreciated by everyone, but he is determined to help others understand it.

*Stefan, about Himself*