

BORDERS UP!

Eastern Europe through the bottom of a glass

by Vitali Vitaliev

SAMPLE CHAPTER:

ONE FOR THE ROAD

The six nations that registered the greatest per capita consumption of alcohol in liquor since 1991 are Germany, Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia (prior to its break-up), Romania and Bulgaria.

Compton's Interactive Encyclopedia

How can I forget those Moscow drinking sessions with my friends: a bottle of vodka in the centre of the table, and the telephone covered with a cushion to give us an illusion of privacy . . . We believed naively that a cushion could somehow neutralise the KGB's ubiquitous bugging devices.

Drinking under communism was far from a hedonistic occupation. It provided us with an outlet – a coveted, even if short-lasting, escape from the gloomy reality and the all-permeating political dogma. A bottle of vodka was therefore a sort of a liquid hard currency, much more reliable (and certainly much more stable) than money. Anything, from a trip abroad to difficult-to-obtain roof tiles, could be bought and sold for alcohol, and had its inflation-free vodka equivalent.

A Moscow colleague of mine was suffering from a bleeding stomach ulcer, but kept drinking vodka, washing it down with Almagel, a nauseous lime-like medicine. 'What are you doing? You are killing yourself!' I told him off once as he was coughing up blood after another glass of vodka. 'I don't care if I die tomorrow,' he grimaced, swallowing a spoonful of Almagel. 'I don't care whether I survive for another twenty years of queuing. I don't like this life. Do you?'

What could I say? By that time, like most of my friends, I had acquired a duodenal ulcer myself. In a tragi-comical arrangement, a bottle of Almagel was routinely put in the middle of the table during our friendly get-togethers. Next to a bottle of vodka, of course. But the tragedy of our heavy drinking by far outweighed its comedy: several of my university mates and fellow-hacks died of alcoholism in their twenties and thirties. Such was the vicious circle of our Soviet existence, which only death or vodka could break.

Westerners implicitly assumed that with the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, people in that part of the world would drink less – a democratic society would provide many more means of escape than alcohol, such as books, free press, foreign travel and the cornucopia of consumer goods. The reality, however, has been different. As statistics show (see the epigraph), drinking in the post-communist Eastern Europe has increased dramatically since the fall of the Berlin Wall.

And isn't it more than just a coincidence that *all* the new democracies of Europe (except Albania, which *Compton's Encyclopaedia's* researchers must have simply overlooked on the map, and conflict-torn former Yugoslavia, which they were probably too scared to survey) are now at the top of the list of the world's fastest-growing drinking nations? What is it? A paradox? A curious historic aberration? Or a logical result of years of social turmoil, lies and double standards that have created a vacuum in people's souls – a Torricellian spiritual emptiness, which spirits alone can fill?

I spent eleven months trying to answer these questions travelling around Eastern and Central Europe. It was a journey not so much through the countries, whose old political borders had largely become blurred, ill-defined and often irrelevant, but rather through drinks – through vodka and beer, palinka and slivovitz, zubrovka and riesling, Tokaji and cabernet sauvignon – whose spheres of influence and areas of consumption were as stable and impregnable as ever before. Each of the countries had its own 'endemic' drinks, with which every single aspect of its bewildering reality was somehow connected. In fact, by the end of my journey, I had come to believe that the only real present-day borders of Eastern Europe were those of drinks, not of states – hence the title of this book.

'Not for the first time, it struck me that the only way to make sense of the cultural map was to ignore the political boundaries and go back to the oldest divide of all,' wrote Nicholas Crane in his magnificent travel book *Clear Waters Rising: A Mountain Walk Across Europe*. And although his 'divide' was 'between plains people and mountain people and coast people – and of course the nomads', my proposed drinking divide is no less old and no less well manifested: different geographical areas have been characterised by different drinks since time immemorial.

Let's face it: for many Westerners, Eastern Europe has largely lost its attraction. At least under the communists it was different and hence exciting (so they thought). The dominating perception of Eastern Europe in the West has not changed much since 1910, when *Near Home or Europe Described*, the pride of my collection of old travel books, was published in London by Longmans, Green & Co (to provide you with a retrospective, I've used extracts from this extraordinary volume, aimed at dumb and hooray-patriotic turn-of-the-century English teenagers, as epigraphs to some of the chapters).

A similar attitude prevails among a number of modern travel writers, who make up for their lack of knowledge and insight with pseudo-omniscient arrogance and unusual means of transport: they travel around Eastern Europe by bicycle, they criss-cross it in old Trabants, they fly over it in colourful balloons, or walk across it on their hands, whereas the only thing they really need is a pair of sharp and compassionate eyes.

A stereotypical paragraph from a stereotypical Western travel book on Eastern Europe would read approximately like this:

On a dull rainy morning, my Hungarian (Polish, Czech) unemployed friend Gyula (Stanislaw, Bohumil) kindly – for just a hundred US dollars, the equivalent of his salary for ten years – offered me a lift to Warsaw (Bucharest, Bratislava) in his dilapidated Skoda (Dacia, Polish Fiat). We are chugging towards the drab capital city along a bumpy, pot-holed dirt-track, lined with destitute prostitutes, prostituting destitutes and corrupt, bribe-seeking policemen in their grey uniforms. We drive past gloomy apartment blocks with peeling stucco on their facades and filthy washing hanging from the balconies. Hungry, skeleton-like children, dressed in rags, play in the debris and follow with their sad eyes the gleaming BMWs of the new rich and the mafiosi

– with sub-machine-guns and rocket launchers sticking out of their bullet-proof windows.

And so on.

And although you might think this a pretty adequate description of some parts of present-day Romania or Bulgaria, nothing can be further from reality, for Eastern Europe these days is an extremely interesting and (yes!) exciting place which is worth visiting more than ever before. This uncomplaining and long-suffering part of Europe is now balancing precariously – like a drunk on a tightrope – between the past and the future, between so-called socialism and the so-called free market, between the so-called East and the so-called West.

In an amazing twist of history, many post-communist countries are now again ruled by the communists, who have been voted back into power by the very people who overthrew them. The post-communist hangover is being cured by a ‘hair of the dog’, a proven recipe. The problem with such a cure is that it usually triggers another drinking bout.

And although the communists, who used to call themselves ‘communists’, now call themselves democrats and champions of the free market, their mentality remains unaltered. If you stick a wine label on to a bottle of vodka, it won’t affect the contents. The only way to bring about a real change is to pour the vodka out and to pour the wine in.

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