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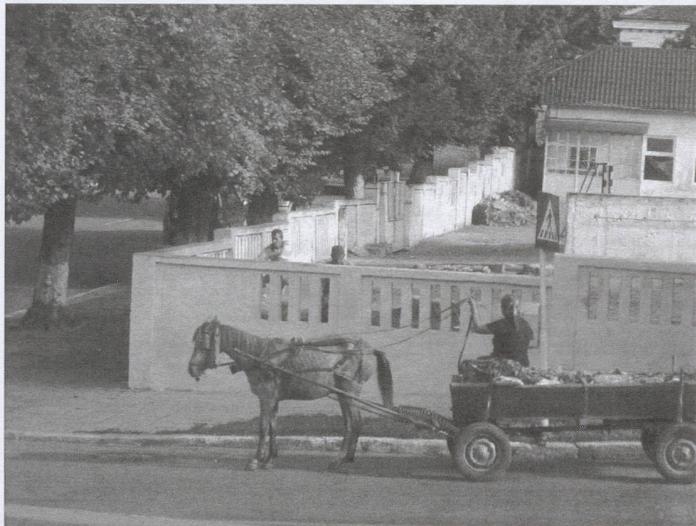
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Timing is everything, isn't it? We arrived back in New Zealand the day *after* a big storm, and the day *before* Air NZ's systems all went down.

Switzerland had been having a glorious *alte wiiber sommer*, so we thought perhaps we'd left a little early, but it has snowed since (smile!). The image in that phrase is lovely - those summery days of early autumn where old ladies sit out in the sun. Actually, it was the old *men* sitting in the sun that's a lasting impression of many small Eastern European towns. The streets were bordered by deep ditches, then the footpaths, and the garden fences. In front of most fences was a bench - and on most benches, an old man dozing in the sun, waiting for someone to come past with time for a conversation. The old women were much more likely to be walking, carrying shopping bags or fieldwork tools. I refrain from comment!

The fences were themselves fascinating. There must have been a period in Hungary and further east when having a fancy front fence really mattered. We imagined whole factories turning out decorative iron and wire fences, and salesmen going from house to house ... "this one is much more elaborate than the one I've just sold Mrs Jones....". Even now, it's much more likely that a new coat of paint will be going on the fence, not on the house.



Rubbish cart horse with ribbons

Decoration matters! The mangiest horse drawing a cart will have a bunch of red ribbons tied on its bridle. The fabrics in the curtains in otherwise very ordinary hotels were rich. Towels (ridiculously small by our standards) would have hand-embroidered bands. There were house frontages entirely covered in vivid glossy ceramic tiles in elaborate patterns, and others with fine architectural detailing around windows and doors. Graves in cemeteries were fully furbished with memorials and plastic flowers. It seemed as if people were defying the greying effect of poverty and decay in whatever ways they could. So many houses - in Romania especially - reminded me of an old woman badly treated by time, but you can see that she was once beautiful.

I've been thinking about how travel affects your stereotypes. Some get affirmed. Others challenged. Affirmed was the idea that the further south you go in Europe, the more the rubbish accumulates! We first noticed it some years back travelling from northern Italy which is almost as tidy as Switzerland (our gold standard!) down to Sicily, which was awful. Similarly on this trip ... Macedonia and

Albania were heavy with litter, Bulgaria tidier and Romania tidier still. Of course, people have their stereotypes about Swiss preoccupations with cleanliness too - the first thing anyone offering us a room would stress was "*sauber*" - how clean it is - even if they had no other words in German!



The gun in the wardrobe in Albania

Yes - a hotel-room in Albania revealed a shot-gun and two cartridges when I opened the wardrobe. Unfortunately we couldn't share enough language for me to find out if that was a standard fitting!

A stereotype challenged was the common talk that travelling in the east was dangerous. Apart from the driving, we had no worries at all about our personal safety. And challenged was the idea that the EU was just about straight bananas and other bureaucratic nonsense. The investment is visibly paying off. Hungary is a different place to when we first travelled there eight years ago, and Romania and Bulgaria are showing signs of early benefits. Little things show... like the work created by roading projects. We returned to Switzerland with our thinking as well as our bones shaken!

And then - just 3 weeks to NZ-wards. We've got really good at knowing we'll never do everything and see everyone, and saying "next year!" with a smile and a shrug. Ah, but we found time to have the *holdermues* party. Our garden produced enough elderberries to feed 14 people, and have juice left over to make *holder* liqueur as well.

And we found time to go to Guarda. It's a 600-year old mountain-side village in classical Engadin style which we happened on a few years back and is now a favourite place for its wonderful architecture and building decoration. It was a perfect autumn day, sunny and clear, with the light making the gold of the autumn leaves glow as if they were incandescent. We went there over the Flüela Pass, and back across the Julier Pass, and drank our customary champagne toast on the top of each, much to the amusement of passing motorists!

And we found time to do something we'd said "next year" to, last year. We visited the *Stiftsbibliothek* - the wonderful baroque library full of ancient manuscripts in the *kloster* in St Gallen. Seeing books from 800AD was breathtaking. You can even look at them on line now - [www.stiftsbibliothek.ch](http://www.stiftsbibliothek.ch) to look at the library, and click through to CESG e-codices to see the digitised books. What would the monks have thought about such technology as they handwrote and decorated their precious texts!

The final pleasure before we left was a fondue with friends, so the perfect counterpoint was to return to the Wellington Swiss Club Fondue Evening to reconnect with old friends here, and find so many new, young people thronging the hall. Swiss know how to have conversation