

TRANSDANUBE TRAVEL STORIES

Danube for the soul

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Danube for the soul

The circular eyes of the squatting figures stare upwards as though seeking for help, while the downward-pointing corners of their fish-lipped mouths lend their faces almost exaggeratedly desperate features. It is as if these hybrid creatures, half-man, half-fish, had turned into stone the very moment they escaped the Danube, and wished nothing more than to be allowed to return. Since their sensational discovery, the intriguing sculptures of **Lepenski Vir (POI), Serbia**, have become icons of Stone Age art in the Danube basin. What might have driven people to create those stone sculptures, which still fascinate us today despite – or precisely because of – their crude features?

We cannot be sure what the figurines were supposed to embody. They were placed in the same spot in almost all houses and obviously had a cultic function. Perhaps they reminded their owners of mythical ancestors, or embodied guardian deities. The excavators, very much like loving parents, proudly chose such imaginative names as “Danubius” or “Water Fairy” for the most remarkable figurines, and it does indeed seem likely that the fish-like sculptures would have been associated with the one element that shaped the lives of the people of Lepenski Vir like no other: the river Danube. Like virtually every Mesolithic and Neolithic settlement in the Danube basin, Lepenski Vir was built directly on the riverbank, above a whirlpool in the river. The Danube provided food and protection, and especially the annual spawning migration of gigantic sturgeon must have seemed to the people to be a gift from higher powers. So why not introduce the life-giving stream to their system of faith? In fact, the deification of rivers can be found in many cultures. It is well known, for example, that Celts and Germanic tribes attributed a river god to the Danube whom the Romans appropriated in their pantheon under the name of “Danubius”.

The prehistoric realm of faith will always remain a mystery to us for lack of records. Yet there is every likelihood that such a realm existed. The oldest archaeological evidence of beliefs that could be regarded as cultic-religious can be found in the form of burials and funerary goods dating back approximately 120,000 years. So, the search for explanations for the inexplicable, the pondering over the supernatural, has occupied mankind for quite some time. The relationship between man as an individual, society, and the transcendental has since assumed countless forms ranging from sincere personal piety to unscrupulous instrumentalisation. Even today, in our supposedly rational age that boasts of having pushed faith into the background, the search for spirituality remains a constant of human life that continues to generate new forms of expression.

A quest

In many ways, the Danube region resembles a laboratory in which not only the history of Europe but the entire spectrum of human behaviour, political organisation, and social upheavals can be observed – a microcosm, as it were. Travelling along the Danube with open eyes and an open mind will teach you a lot about the relationship between people and the supernatural. The Danube basin has always been a melting pot of the most diverse religions, a place of exchange, compassion and tolerance, but also a breeding ground for radical views and a battlefield where the heated controversy over true faith was all too often fought out with the sword.

The individual quest for spirituality never takes place under sterile laboratory conditions. It is always informed by experiences and expectations, and is in permanent interaction with contemporary discourses, living conditions, and power structures. As modern-day travellers, we come across past manifestations of faith in the form of monuments, rituals and stories. But we also often stumble upon traces of the lost and forgotten, and when we do, abandoned Roman temples will usually move us far less than decaying synagogues. Sometimes the reconstruction of the past has to draw on stories, photographs, or archaeological finds. Just think of the countless mosques and Muslim cemeteries along the Lower Danube, which were deliberately razed to the ground after the respective “war of liberation”.

The Danube region has brought forth its own religious practices, myths, legends, and artistic forms of expression, but also its own saints and religious luminaries, whose commitment to faith was – and still is – emulated by others. We shall meet some of them during our quest.

The journey is the reward

Buda, 1541: Everyone flocked to the burial of the great dervish Gül Baba. Even Sultan Suleyman and his generals were present. Only a few days before, the fortress of Buda had fallen into their hands. Yet Gül Baba could only savour this triumph in the name of Islam for a short time. He collapsed during the first Friday prayer and died. The world had lost a charismatic benefactor, gifted poet and leading religious figure. While the funeral was still proceeding, Suleyman decreed that Gül Baba must never be forgotten. He would declare him the patron saint of Buda and have his tomb turned into a magnificent pilgrimage site so that the faithful could continue to be close to him and cherish his work.

The **tomb (türbe) of Gül Baba (POI)** that Suleyman the Magnificent had erected on Budapest’s so-called Rose Hill is still a fascinating relic of the Ottoman rule and is now regarded as the northernmost pilgrimage site of Islam. The sultan probably had no idea at the time that he himself would soon become a subject of veneration. He died during a campaign near Szigetvár.

His body was taken back to Constantinople, but his heart and other organs were buried near Szigetvár, where a pilgrimage centre developed very soon. Its remains were forgotten after the expulsion of the Ottomans and were only rediscovered a few years ago in the vineyards outside the city.

One might think that the human approach to the supernatural is primarily a spiritual one, and yet people long to see the invisible, to feel the intangible, and grasp the ungraspable (in the truest sense of the word). Statues of gods, images of saints, relics and ritual acts, but also pilgrimages to sites regarded as holy bear witness to this deeply human longing for the haptic and physically tangible. Take Islam, for example, where the hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca, is a pillar of faith.

Pilgrimage has also always played a major role in Christianity. By the 4th century, the infrastructure was expanded in the Holy Land to accommodate pious travellers, including a souvenir industry and tourist guides. When Christianity spread across Europe (more on this later), many other sites of pilgrimage were established, while a trip to the Holy Land remained the ultimate objective. The land route to the East followed the course of the Danube approximately to Belgrade, then across the Balkan Peninsula to Constantinople. This was also the route the Irishman Coloman had in mind when he made his pilgrimage down the Danube in the early 11th century. However, his pious journey came to an abrupt end in Stockerau, Austria, where inhabitants suspected the stranger of being a hostile Bohemian spy and hanged him on a scrawny elder bush. When the corpse did not decompose and the shrub suddenly began to blossom again, it dawned on the Stockerauers that lynching the man had been an error of justice. Before long, the unfortunate pilgrim was a revered saint. Saint Coloman can be seen as an example of the risks people were willing to take in order to find, strengthen or display their faith on a pilgrimage.

When Jerusalem, which had already been under Muslim rule for centuries, (temporarily) closed its gates to Christian pilgrims, the crusade movement was born. The idea was plain and simple: pilgrimages, which had enjoyed great popularity before, would now become “armed pilgrimages”, or organised war tourism, as it were, with the aim of wresting Jerusalem from the pagans. From then on, pilgrims travelling east down the Danube with their sticks were increasingly joined by armed fundamentalists. Those unwilling to embark on the long journey to the Holy Land could opt to make a pilgrimage to **“Jeruzalem” (POI)** in modern-day Slovenia from the late 12th century onwards. The place, which is now located in the heart of a picturesque wine region, received its prestigious name from German crusaders who were grateful for their safe return. From Palestine, they brought an icon in reminiscence of real Jerusalem. A Baroque copy of the icon still adorns the church today.

This goes to show that man is riveted by anything haptic-sensual. Those striving to rid themselves from materiality and to approach divinity through asceticism and meditation were well-advised to resist as many temptations as possible and seek happiness in deserts, remote caves, or behind high monastery walls.

Watch or act?

Basarbovo, 1937: With every step Hrisat the priest took amidst the ruins he became more and more aware of how much work lay ahead of him. For centuries, the rock monastery had been a home to monks who had turned their backs on the hustle and bustle of the rest of the world in search of God. The ascetic Dimitrii, for example, had left his mark on the monastery over 300

years ago and had become its patron saint. Back in the day, there had been a thriving community in Basarbovo, but the last monks had left the monastery long ago. Hrisat was not in the position to compete with the great Dimitrii, but he did have a vision: he would settle here and sow the seed for a new monastic community.

Hrisat's efforts were crowned with success. The rock-hewn **monastery of Basarbovo (POI)** near the Bulgarian Danube hub of Russe is now home to a vibrant community of monks. The same cannot be said of the nearby **rock monasteries of Ivanovo (POI)**, which are even more imposing. These may only be mere museums today, but they are just as spectacular witnesses of the hardships that some people are willing to shoulder in search of God.

Little seems as anachronistic in our globalised and networked world as the deliberate decision to retreat into solitude. And yet the longing for an introverted life makes itself felt in every one of us occasionally, for it seems to be an inherent part of human existence. It is no coincidence that most religious movements also apply techniques of meditation, asceticism and reflection on the self. The ideal of a *vita contemplativa* (contemplative life) had already been declared a maxim by Plato and Aristotle. Early Christian Egypt produced hermitism and the first monastic communities based on a military model. These two forms of contemplative life were to be exemplary for orders of the Latin Church and for the monastic traditions of the Eastern Church and had a massive influence on Europe for centuries. In times of crisis, monasteries both in the East and in the West proved to be bastions of culture and education and could be even powerful political players in spite – or because – of the fact that they sometimes took liberties with their own, self-imposed ideals of modesty. But their secular power and contemplative orientation would spell doom for a lot of western monasteries. Reformation put an end to many of them, while others were secularised in the course of Enlightenment reforms or were given charitable or pastoral tasks. In the Eastern Church, monasteries were able to hold their own even under Ottoman rule and were celebrated after the withdrawal of the Ottomans as preservers of national identity. These include the Serbian monasteries on Fruška Gora south of the Danube near Novi Sad.

The call for secularisation only resounded later in the East. The prestigious **Kovilj Monastery (POI)** near Novi Sad was abandoned by its monks in 1980 after the communist government had deprived it of its means of existence through extensive expropriation. Thanks to the efforts of three monks, the monastery was given a new lease of life in 1990. Today, Kovilj is particularly famous for its choir, honey and rakia, but also for its social commitment. Since 2004, the monks have been running a rehabilitation centre under the project title “Zemlja živih” (“Land of the Living”), where monks and former victims support drug-addicted young people on their way back to normal life.

This illustrates that the *vita contemplativa* cannot always be strictly separated from the *vita activa*, i. e. active life. The latter includes work, politics, but also charitable activities, in short: interaction with other people. According to Christian interpretation, to fulfil these tasks of the *vita activa* is to please God and thus find salvation. Yet sometimes the Lord moves in mysterious ways, as even some saints were to find out. Saint Severinus, for example, had gone into the desert as a hermit, but then made a name for himself in the area between Passau and Vienna as a busy crisis manager and skilful refugee coordinator (presumably with no official mandate), while Roman rule was imploding in Noricum Ripense. Or take Saint Martin of Tours: born in Savaria (now Szombathely, Hungary), he eventually gave up both his famous officer's coat and his Roman faith and retired as a hermit near Poitiers. However, the people of Tours made him return to active life by acclaiming him bishop. Apparently, the treacherous cackling of the geese had betrayed his hiding place, but it was his unblemished reputation that had driven the people into his arms. By

the way, you can now make a pilgrimage in his footsteps along the Via Sancti Martini through half of Europe.

According to Christian understanding, missionary work was also considered honourable in terms of a *vita activa*. And so the circle comes complete, because faith could hardly be spread if it weren't for the monasteries' untiring efforts.

Everything flows

Pannonhalma, 1001: King Stephen and Queen Gisela took great delight in the monastery on Saint Martin's Hill, which had just been completed. The King granted generous privileges to the Benedictines summoned from Bavaria, his wife's homeland, and placed the abbey under the control of the Pope himself. The monastery was to become a bulwark of the new faith, the key to baptising Hungary, since most of his subjects were still pagans. Papal envoys had been tirelessly pointing out to Stephen for years that the Christianisation of Hungary was in his own best interest and that he would no doubt benefit from a good relationship with the Holy See. Only recently had the Pope sent him the long-awaited crown with which Stephen had had himself crowned the first Hungarian king. Now it was a matter of convincing the sceptics among his subjects of the benefits of the new faith.

In fact, the **Abbey of Pannonhalma (POI)** on Saints Martin's Hill near Győr turned out to be the engine of the Christianisation of Hungary. The Magyar horse people had migrated to Europe from eastern steppes relatively late and had long remained faithful to their gods. Stephen's father Géza had been the first to be christened, which apparently did not prevent him from continuing to sacrifice to the old gods, just to be on the safe side, so to speak. The Hungarian elite had plunged into a crisis after a number of disastrous defeats at the hands of German knights. Géza realised that the time had come to break up old clan structures and establish a monarchy following the Western example. To that end, the acceptance of Christianity was at least beneficial, or even indispensable. Under his son Stephen, the process of Christianisation and the establishment of a monarchy was concluded for the time being. Stephen introduced Hungary to the concert of Christian powers and was eventually canonised for his services to Christianity.

The Christianisation of Hungarians is only one of countless examples of how religions competed for the souls of people in the Danube basin. As is often the case, the only constant was change. Although it has to be said that the real dispute over truth only arose when the monotheistic religions claimed exclusivity. When the Romans ruled the Danube region, their pantheon offered identification figures for most of the subjugated peoples' gods. If there was no equivalent, new cults could simply be integrated, provided they were compatible. Because the Roman provinces were closely connected and the legions regularly relocated, local cults spread often throughout the empire. It is not at all surprising, therefore, that in Savaria, now **Szombathely (POI)**, Hungary, we should find the renovated remains of a temple dedicated to the Egyptian goddess Isis. This must have been one of the largest and most important cultic sites in all of Pannonia. The Oriental cult of Mithras, whose traces can be found everywhere along the Danube, for example in Carnuntum, Aquincum (Óbuda), Nicopolis (Nikopol) or Durostorum (Silistra), also enjoyed great popularity.

Only the monotheistic religions of Judaism and Christianity could not be squeezed into this mosaic. They stretched the Roman tolerance to its limits, and the rulers weren't reluctant to take drastic measures against the mulish troublemakers. But the rise of Christianity was unstoppable.

Emperor Constantine the Great was openly sympathetic to the Christian God, regarded himself as some sort of apostle and allowed Christians to practise their faith. About 80 years later, Christianity was elevated to the status of the only permissible religion in the Roman Empire. Ecclesiastical administrative structures developed across the empire and churches mushroomed everywhere. The Danube region also underwent a profound Christianisation.

Back to the drawing board

Yet this stage victory of the cross was not yet its final triumph. The turmoil during the Migration Period heralded the decline of the Western Roman Empire, although at least its bankrupt estate was liquidated mostly by Christianised Germanic peoples (of Aryan denomination). The Hungarian “late adopters” mentioned before were an exception.

The Eastern Roman Empire, on the other hand, survived the crisis, but lost almost the entire Balkans to the pagan peoples of the Avars, Slavs and, later, the Bulgarians. So, it was back to the drawing board. The Danube region was now Christianised for the second time, but the circumstances had changed completely. This was no longer a matter of religious imperial reform, but one of convincing independent rulers of the benefits of the Christian faith. Moreover, Western and Eastern Christian views on true faith had by now drifted apart considerably. Rome and Constantinople engaged in a downright race for the souls of the Slavs in particular, who had become the decisive factor in the middle and lower Danube regions. At the end of the day, Rome managed to proselytise the northern Slavs in Poland, Bohemia and Moravia, and to baptise the Hungarians (including Croatians), while Byzantine Christianity was adopted in the Russian region and along the lower Danube (and in present-day Russia, of course). The Serbs and Bulgarians founded strong and independent sister churches of Constantinople, which adopted essential features of Orthodox spirituality. The overwhelming **Temple of Saint Sava in Belgrade (POI)** still symbolises the orientation towards Byzantium today. While other buildings of the young Serbian state followed Western models, Saint Sava was given a Neo-Byzantine look with a dome and gold mosaics. One of the latter ranks among the largest mosaics in the Orthodox part of the world, covering an area of about 15,000 m². It was completed only recently, with expertise and capital from Russia. The centuries-old ties between the Orthodox sister churches are traditionally strong. Religion and politics are still closely linked today.

In the light of the crescent moon

While the Byzantine Empire was still struggling to survive in the Balkans, Islam began to gain a foothold in the Danube basin from the 1260s onwards. The first Muslims did not come as enemies. The Byzantine Emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos granted a group of allied Oghuz Turks from Anatolia settlement areas in what was then the no man’s land of Dobruja. Among them was the dervish Sari Saltuk, who was one of the first generation of Muslim missionaries in the Danube region. He was a member of the Bektashi, an Alevi dervish order that had been founded shortly before in Anatolia. The famous Sufi is described as charismatic, sociable and tolerant. From early on, his life was surrounded by fairytale legends, one being that he came to Dobruja with 40 companions on flying carpets. In some stories, the figure of Sari Saltuk even merges with the Christian saints George and Nicholas. In the Romanian **Babadag (POI)** (“Mountain of the Father”), an unspectacular *türbe* commemorates the fascinating dervish, which became a popular Muslim pilgrimage site visited even by sultans in the Middle Ages. Sari Saltuk is held in great esteem across the Balkans, as is also reflected in the fact that six other sites claim to be the saint’s final resting place.

About a generation after Sari Saltuk's death began the Ottoman military expansion on European soil. Along with Ottoman conquests, the Muslim faith spread northwards in the Balkans and along the Danube. The Bektashi, who were also closely associated with the Janissary elite corps, continued to play a major role in the missionary work. Bulgaria was to remain under Muslim rule for almost half a millennium, Serbia for almost 250 years, and Hungary for 150 years. The rule of the High Porte went along with profound cultural and religious changes which are barely visible today. Virtually nothing remains of the once-rich Muslim heritage in modern-day Belgrade. Very much like Bulgaria and Hungary, Serbia was eager to erase the traces of an era that had persistently been stigmatised as a dark age of subjugation by a foreign power in a national "struggle for liberation". This reduced scruples about converting or demolishing Muslim places of worship and turning their cemeteries into building plots.

Belgrade is an example of how Islam was pushed back. Of approximately 80 mosques in the city, which must have seemed even to 19th-century travellers an almost surreal threshold to the Orient, only the **Bajrakli Mosque (POI)** has survived. Situated at the foot of the Kalemegdan Park, the domed structure with its massive ashlar block walls looks a little lost between the taller neighbouring buildings. In the 18th century, the "flag mosque" used to be the leading mosque in the city, with a flag hoisted on its minaret to set the tone for other Muslim places of worship. Today, the Bajrakli Mosque is the centre of Belgrade's Muslim community.

Between protection and pogrom

It almost goes without saying that Judaism was also firmly rooted in a multicultural area like the Danube region. The Jews in Christian Europe were always in a precarious situation and were dependent on the protection of local sovereigns. However, they usually only enjoyed this protection if their presence was economically beneficial to their patrons. They constantly faced the risk of being expropriated or banished.

Life was easier for most Jews living in the Ottoman Empire at about the same time. In return for paying a poll tax, they enjoyed a higher status than their brothers and sisters in Christian empires. In 1470, Rabbi Isaac Zarfati even sent a letter to the German-speaking Jewish communities recommending that they settle in the Ottoman Empire. In 1492, when all Jewish subjects were expelled by the Spanish Crown (i. e. more than a hundred thousand people), they were welcomed with open hands by Sultan Bayezid II. The cities along the lower Danube can also look back on a great Jewish tradition. In the commercial metropolis of **Galați (POI)**, for example, Jews made up about one fifth of the population before the Holocaust, that is approximately 20,000 people. Today, the Jewish community numbers about 250 members. Only one of more than 20 synagogues has survived. The former size and wealth of their communities is still (or again) reflected in their magnificent synagogues, such as those of Constanta and of the factory settlement in Timișoara, but especially that of **Subotica (POI)**. The latter is the only synagogue in the world that was built in Art Nouveau style. It has only recently been restored to its former glory. It is a cultural monument of the highest order. But it is also too large for the needs of the city's 250-soul congregation, which does not even have a rabbi and uses a modest room in the community centre for prayers.

It is almost impossible not to fall into a melancholic mood when you look at these former prayer houses. They used to be beacons of a religious worldview and intellectual culture that had a

decisive influence on Europe; now, they stand as memorials reminding us of one of the darkest eras of our continent. Traces of this crime against humanity can be found throughout the Danube basin, including in the Slovenian region of **Prekmurje (POI)**, which has been a paragon of multilingualism, multiculturalism and religious openness for centuries. Religious leaders stood out as examples for interfaith dialogue, and close contacts were kept between Catholics, Lutherans and Jews. Nonetheless, the Jewish community was also deported from this region in 1944: the abandoned synagogue of Murska Sobota was destroyed, while that of nearby Lendava was brought into use again for cultural events. Lendava is also home to the only surviving Jewish cemetery in the region.

Of course, the attempt to exterminate the Jews was not primarily religiously motivated. Like the Roman persecution of Christians, the partly forced Christianisation of “pagans”, and the mutual victimisation of Muslims and Christians, it was driven by power-political interests, deliberate sedition and the instrumentalisation of faith. And yet, despite all struggles for supremacy, the Danube region always remained a melting pot of minorities of any religious orientation. Even the duel between the Habsburgs and the Ottomans, which has frequently been described as a religious war, conceals at first glance that the two seemingly monolithic giants were in fact colourful conglomerates, at least in the Danube region.

United in faith?

Ilok, 1456: It was clear to John that he would not recover. Here, in the Franciscan monastery of Ilok, amidst his brothers, he would breathe his last. He was at peace with himself. Throughout his life he had fought for the right faith, be it as an advisor to kings and popes or as a merciless inquisitor, preacher and religious warrior. He had always taken courageous action against those who defended Jews and Hussites and thus undermined Catholic doctrine. Hadn't he been one of the first to warn of the Turkish danger? His golden tongue had convinced thousands to take the cross and follow him down the Danube to defend Belgrade. Against all odds, the fortress stood the siege, but the victory claimed many victims. John escaped the bullets of the Ottomans, but not the rampant epidemic in the army camp. He knew that his hours were numbered, but he would take his leave pure in heart, for he knew that he had fulfilled God's mission.

John of Capistranus, the heroic defender of Belgrade, who died in the **Franciscan monastery of Ilok (POI)**, would probably be regarded today as a fundamentalist hardliner and radical preacher of hate. In fact, it seems his achievements were controversial even back in the day. Soon after John's death, voices were raised calling for his canonisation. But there were strong objections, arguing that John had been full of rage and anger in battle and had played up his own role, thirsty for glory. Apparently, the accusations were not entirely unfounded.

It was not until 200 years later that time was ripe for a new attempt. John's devotees had gathered supposed evidence of miraculous healings which, albeit disputed, seemed sufficient for a canonisation in 1690.

It is obvious that John's canonisation must be regarded against the background of the “Great Turkish War” (1683-1699). Seven years before John's canonisation, the onslaught of the Ottomans had crashed against the walls of Vienna for the second time. But in contrast to the defeat of 1529, the Sultan's army was now driven down the Danube by a Christian army. For the first time in what felt like an eternity, the Occident seemed to have gained the upper hand in the middle Danube

region. When it came to fuelling the burgeoning enthusiasm for the fight against the Turks, the canonisation of the pugnacious war preacher Capistranus came in handy.

The inner-city **parish church of Pécs (POI)**, Hungary, is a wonderful example of how the human species uses places of worship to mark its territory: after the Ottomans had taken the city in 1543 on their advance up the Danube, they had converted the church of Saint Bartholomew into a mosque. Later, they demolished the building and erected a “proper” mosque in its place. When the Christians drove out the Ottomans in 1686, they in turn consecrated the mosque as a church. Despite several reconstructions, the building is still a bizarre hybrid today, bearing witness to the long Christian-Muslim tug-of-war on the Danube.

At the end of the long conflict, the Ottomans were forced to cede their territorial claims to Hungary including Transylvania and most of Croatia (roughly Slavonia), later also to the Banat. Naturally, the geopolitical chess game was accompanied by a constant mixing of populations. The areas conquered by the Christian armies, especially Vojvodina and Banat, became a magnet for Christian immigrants. In 1690, Serbs in particular left their Ottoman-controlled homes for the areas north to the Danube and the Sava. This migration movement, which Serbian historiographers have glorified as the “Great Migration”, was led by Patriarch Arsenije III. Emperor Leopold I immediately granted the newcomers privileges and allowed Arsenije to establish a metropolis that would henceforth be responsible for all Serbian Orthodox subjects of the Habsburg Empire.

Christianity undoubtedly formed a strong bond in the “Wild Southeast” of the Habsburg Empire. The fact that the Orthodox and the Catholic churches were sometimes irreconcilably opposed on many issues did not matter at first, as long as they were united in the defense against infidels. In fact, the Serbian and Croatian frontiersmen justly earned a reputation as Habsburg’s most loyal soldiers.

Very much like the Ottoman rule, the Habsburg rule entailed cultural changes that are still visible today across Vojvodina in the form of Serbian Orthodox churches executed in perfect Austrian Baroque style. Built in the 18th century, the **Church of St. Nicholas in Szeged (POI)**, Hungary, is a wonderful example of this cultural reference. It is hard to distinguish from Baroque Catholic churches with neo-classicist elements from the outside and only reveals itself as a Serbian Orthodox church inside. But even the pompous interior decoration and the iconostases in Baroque and Rococo styles contrast strongly with Byzantine-Serbian models. The same goes for many other churches. In fact, most Orthodox churches in Vojvodina that were built in the same era have similar features. Other examples include the Cathedral of St. Nicholas in Sremski Karlovci and the Cathedral Church of Novi Sad from 1734, which was largely rebuilt in its old form after destruction in 1849.

However, we must not regard cultural appropriation as evidence of a smooth coexistence of confessions at eye level. As soon as the Ottoman danger seemed averted, the Viennese Court made occasional attempts to Catholicise the Serbian Orthodox population. Under the increasing pressure, many Serbs emigrated to Russia, while the metropolitans of Karlowitz promoted the consolidation of the Orthodox religion, but also of the Serbian language and culture, thus promoting a national identity. The Byzantine form language was reinvigorated in the search for this Serbian identity and past. Baroque churches were no longer much in demand.

The House of Habsburg was not exactly squeamish about its Protestant subjects, either. The situation in the Austrian Hereditary Lands came to a head during the 16th century, when many reformists were forced to emigrate to the Kingdom of Hungary, where they were granted more

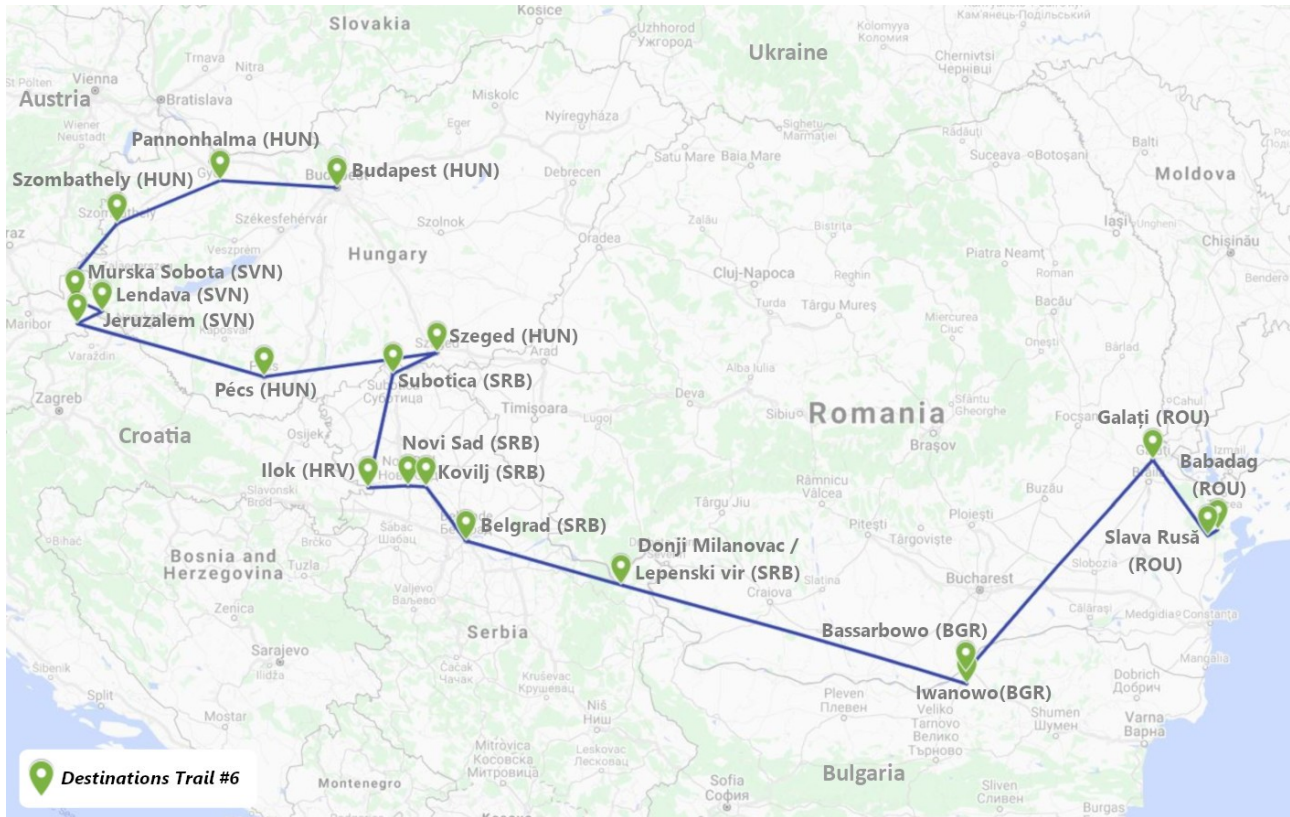
liberties. The Viennese court also indirectly encouraged the spread of the Protestant faith through its settlement policy in Vojvodina and Banat, which had been conquered by the Ottomans and were partly deserted. Looking for colonists, they recruited Hungarians, Slovaks and the German-speaking community, including many Protestant families. These, too, were more likely to be tolerated in the border region, but when the Ottoman danger was averted, the Slovaks became the target of Hungarian nationalism. Nevertheless, they continue to be a significant minority in northern Serbia. Their main church is in **Novi Sad (POI)**.

The mosaic of peoples in the Ottoman Empire and its vassal states was about as colourful as Vojvodina. Clusters of various Christian churches, synagogues and mosques in commercial centres such as Galați or Brăila are still an expression of multiculturalism in the Danube region.

The “exotic” Lipovans continue to live in the Danube delta. Their roots are in the Russian Orthodox Church, but they were forced to emigrate after rejecting Patriarch Nikon’s reforms. They gradually left their homeland from the 1660s onwards. Most of these “Old Believers” initially settled in southern Bessarabia and in the Danube delta, whose inaccessible location provided protection from the state. Later, they also migrated to northern Dobruja. One of the Lipovans’ most important places of worship in the Delta is the **Uspenia Monastery near Slava Rusá (POI)**, not far west of Lake Razim. Today, about 100,000 people still regard themselves as Lipovans, mostly in Romania and in Ukraine. They have succeeded in preserving not only their old faith but also their language and culture. Many Lipovan villages have bilingual town signs, and there is a Lipovan political party in Romania.

This is where both the Danube, Europe’s river of rivers, and our search for traces of faith in its catchment area end. The diversity of our continent is best – and most concisely – experienced during a journey through the Danube region, which reveals at a glance the abundance of religious currents that have left their traces. If one digs a little deeper and listens to the stories behind the monuments, the full spectrum of individual approaches to faith becomes graspable. There are many grey shades between social engagement and the retreat from the world, between personal contemplation and missionary zeal, between the creation of communities and the exclusion of others. As every journey is a way of getting to know foreign customs as well as oneself, a journey through the Danube region can be a wonderful opportunity to reflect on one’s own spirituality and approach to faith.

APPENDIX – Trail destinations and points of interest



in geographical order (downstream)

No.	Destination	Confession	Country
POI 1	Budapest, Gül Baba Türbe	Muslim	Hungary
POI 2	Pannonhalma Archabbey	Roman-Cath.	Hungary
POI 3	Szombathely, Isis Temple	Roman pagan	Hungary
POI 4	Murska Sobota, synagogue	Jewish	Slovenia
POI 5	Lendava, Jewish Cemetery	Jewish	Slovenia
POI 6	Jeruzalem, St. Mary's Church	Roman-Cath.	Slovenia
POI 7	Pécs, Mosque of Pasha Quasim	Muslim/Roman-Cath.	Hungary
POI 8	Szeged, Orthodox Church	Serb.-Orth.	Hungary
POI 9	Ilok, St. John of Capistrano Church	Roman-Cath.	Croatia
POI 10	Subotica, ghetto and Jewish heritage trail	Jewish	Serbia
POI 11	Novi Sad, Slovak Church	Protestant	Serbia
POI 12	Kovilj Monastery	Serb.-Orth.	Serbia

POI 12a	Belgrade, Bajrakli Mosque	Muslim	Serbia
POI 12b	Belgrade, St. Sava	Serb.-Orth.	Serbia
POI 13	Lepenski Vir, excavation site with museum	prehistoric	Serbia
POI 14	Rock monastery of Basarbowo and rock-hewn churches of Iwanowo	Bulg.-Orth.	Bulgaria
POI 15	Galati, synagogue	Jewish	Romania
POI 16	Babadag, <i>türbe</i> of Sari Saltuq	Alevi	Romania
POI 17	Slava Rusa, Uspenia Monastery	Lipovan	Romania