

Darkness behind the curtain

Michael Berry

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About half the passengers on the small plane from Bristol to Amsterdam were going to Romania to see the eclipse. For many – including me – it was the climax of a lifetime’s ambition. It had been surprisingly difficult to book a hotel from Bristol, so I contacted a physicist I had never met, but whose work I admired, and asked for his help. The generous response was an offer hard to refuse: if I would give a lecture there, his institute would provide accommodation. The institute was outside Bucharest, in the village of Magurele, where Ceaucescu had ordered it to be built “to promote the natural friendship between peasants and intellectuals”.

We stayed in a huge villa built for Ceaucescu himself, and maintained (like many others throughout the country) in a state of constant readiness (shoes polished by the bedside) in case the dictator should decide to stay. In fact he never slept there, and after the revolution in 1989 the house decayed into elegant decrepitude before being acquired as the institute’s guest house. Efforts are being made to restore it, but as so often in the former communist world much evidence remains of shoddy workmanship beneath the appearance of luxury (none of the four toilets worked properly).

There was an extraordinary number of external doors – we counted six - perhaps to provide Ceaucescu with escape routes. Unfortunately one was left unlocked, enabling somebody to creep in during the night and steal my daughter’s purse. Perhaps the thief was attracted by our fancy rental

car (two free upgrades above the modest one we had deliberately requested). This event was distressing, and especially embarrassing for the institute's administrator responsible for the villa. In a kindly gesture of compensation he presented us with a big box of fresh eggs and vegetables from the little farm he owns.

We spent several days exploring the countryside. Each village consists of many small farms, all private. Produce is consumed by those who grow it, or sold by the roadside. We never understood the enormous numbers of watermelons; it seemed impossible they could all be consumed - perhaps the unsold ones are ploughed back into the earth. Cows roam the streets, and much farm transport is by horse and cart. Rivers are dammed to produce beautiful quiet lakes. People swim there, and many carpets create a colourful tapestry as they dry on the concrete slopes after being washed. In the countryside a peasant economy seems to reign, parallel to the growing business culture in the cities and replacing the former centralised industrial economy.

To me, and to the children, this seemed a rural idyll. But to my wife, who grew up in Romania and had not returned since leaving in 1973, it was depressing. Piles of uncollected rubbish rotting in the streets, patrolled by feral dogs, especially in shabby Bucharest which had once been a proud clean city with manicured lawns, indicated to her that regression of the country almost to third-world level. Probably the truth lies somewhere between. All the people we encountered were helpful, positive and sunny – all, that is, except officials, who withheld information while managing stonily and paradoxically to stare without eye contact, in the old communist way; among these, the surprising ‘exceptions of the exceptions’ were the police, who delighted us with their politeness.

Our map indicated an M25-like ring road round Bucharest, and all direction signs indicated this as the way to any main road out of the city. Evidently the signing was designed by a theorist, as we discovered when we ventured onto the ring road (one carriageway for both directions) and saw that no other vehicles were using it, apart from enormous lorries. The surface was riddled with potholes and cliffs a foot deep, and barely negotiable. It traversed the worst industrial pollution I have seen: yellow smoke obscuring the sun in a foul travesty of the eclipse. Later, driving east to the Black Sea, we found a real motorway, and were happily speeding along our own carriageway, enjoying its smooth surface, when we were suddenly confronted by cars racing towards us on a collision course. Returning, we found that the eastern end of the westbound carriageway was nonexistent; it began after several miles, but the sign directing us onto it was so insignificant that we drove past it, illegally terrifying the oncoming traffic as we had been terrified earlier. As a road designed to kill as many people as possible, that motorway could hardly be improved upon.

Our plan for the eclipse had been to drive west, into the mountains, and find a high viewpoint from which to see the moon's shadow sweeping across the landscape. But the day started with clouds in the west, so we headed east, where better weather was forecast. We decided to stop at a lonely field, and saw the moon's first bite in a sky perfectly clear apart from a few clouds near the horizon. But those clouds soon spread, and covered the sun before it was half eclipsed. We rushed further east, but the clouds got worse. Then we noticed a break in the clouds in the western sky, and dashed desperately back to the original field, imagining the moon's shadow-point racing towards us, a felt-pen tip tracing a fine line of black light across the land.

I estimated that if the clouds moved uniformly the sun would emerge from the clouds about a minute before totality. My credibility as a physicist was on the line. Fortunately the sun did appear – as the thinnest crescent – and we were able to witness the orbiting of a celestial body in real time as the entire totality unfolded. No photograph of the diamond ring compares with the glorious reality. Off came the protective glasses, as an eerie brown light (oxymoron to colour theorists) descended on the silent landscape: a sunset without the sun. In the concealment the corona was revealed, also Baily's beads – glints where sunlight pours through valleys on the moon's ragged edge – which surprised me by persisting throughout, indicating the extraordinary dimensional coincidence that makes eclipses possible.

Afterwards, as the heavenly orgasm went swiftly into reverse, my impossible desire was to rerun the tape and see it all again, as I dreamed of Zimbabwe 2001 amid the dappled sun-crescents beneath the trees before lapsing into post-eclipse melancholy.

Caption for the figure

Romanian eclipse banknote (2000lei=10p)

