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THE RYDER



VISITING NONEXISTENT COUNTRIES

by John Linnemeier

**THE BURD
CHRONICLES**
BLOOMINGTON'S
PUNK SCENE

by Bob Sloan

CAIPIRINHA:
REFLECTIONS ON A VERY
POPULAR DRINK

by Jackson Caldwell

Sending letters from Transnistria.

TRAVELING TO NONEXISTENT COUNTRIES

Small Wonders in Transnistria, Somaliland, and Kurdistan

By John Linnemeier

If I expected to be taken seriously as a war correspondent, I figured I'd need to make it to Kiev. Even at 77, I could still use the golden cupolas of that magnificent 2500-year-old city as a photo backdrop, just like the talking heads covering the war in Ukraine. I'd put down money that most of them were spending the majority

of their time at the bars of their hotels, before going on camera, then regurgitating dueling press releases from rival combatants to the folks back home... All delivered with a serious demeanor and loads of gravitas. In the journalistic biz, it's referred to as reporting on a war from Mahogany Ridge.

To get to Ukraine though, I'd need to cross through the non-country of Transnistria. As I approached the frontier, a little knot was starting to form in my gut. Transnistria is the only country in the world that has never accepted the dissolution of the USSR. It's been recognized by just three other countries that aren't really countries either. All are similarly pro-Russian enclaves that have broken away from larger states. Some view them as nothing more than "frozen conflicts." But if you can surround a piece of land with enough armed, resolute troops, who's going to say you're not a sovereign state? Transnistria has its own local oligarch who supposedly made his serious money smuggling weapons. Then he bought up virtually everything in this micro-country worth owning, including supermarkets, gas stations, a distillery, and naturally, a football club. The guy loves everything about the old American wild west. He named his corporation, "Sheriff."

Transnistria is the size of Dallas-Fort Worth. Its string-bean shaped and hugs the Dniester River, partially separating Moldova and Ukraine. It was born after seceding from Moldova, a country formed after it seceded from Romania which previously had been a part of the USSR, making it a breakaway country from a breakaway country from a breakaway country. Not even Russia recognizes it.





Sherriff market in Transnistria.

That notwithstanding, Transnistria checks all the other boxes for self-respecting nationhood, including cops, borders, a cemetery, a flag, two heroic statues, and even a national anthem, "We Sing the Praises of Transnistria." You can listen to it on their Wikipedia page if you're curious. They have a passport, but it only works in Moldova.

Fierce fighting might be going on between opposing armies a short drive from us in southern Ukraine, but here you could hear the sound of the bees.

Nonetheless, this little country contains the largest ammo dump in Europe. I'd been told that if it was ever to blow up, the explosion would be ten times greater than the one in the port of Beirut a few years ago. Fortunately, or maybe unfortunately, it's surrounded by 15,000 Russian soldiers. The week before I arrived there'd been two radio towers toppled and some unexplained explosions along the border with Ukraine. No one seemed to know who did it or why.

For the past few days, I've been resting up at the Château Purcari, a century old winery, and an island of tranquility in eastern Moldova, with well-kept grounds and twin ponds replete with stately swans. It has the strategic advantage of being only a short, problematic, bus ride from the fighting going on around Kherson, a couple hundred kilometers beyond the Transnistrian border. At the chateau, free from the cacophony of civilization, with only the sounds of copulation from the frogs in the two nearby ponds and my next-door neighbor's suite, I had time to write a few lines while reading a one kilo book printed in small type.

I was taken aback when we drew up to the sleepy looking guard house at the Transnistrian border. Fierce fighting might be going on between opposing armies a short drive from us in southern Ukraine, but here you could hear the sound of the bees. Two disheveled looking border guards lifted our trunk lid, took a perfunctory look inside, leafed through our passports, then instead of the exotic visa stamp I was hoping for, issued us a tiny slip of paper resembling a receipt from Kroger's. With that they waved us through and got back to their game of checkers. Covid, what's that?

Part of the fun of nonexistent countries is that you never know what to expect. Over the past few decades, much of the



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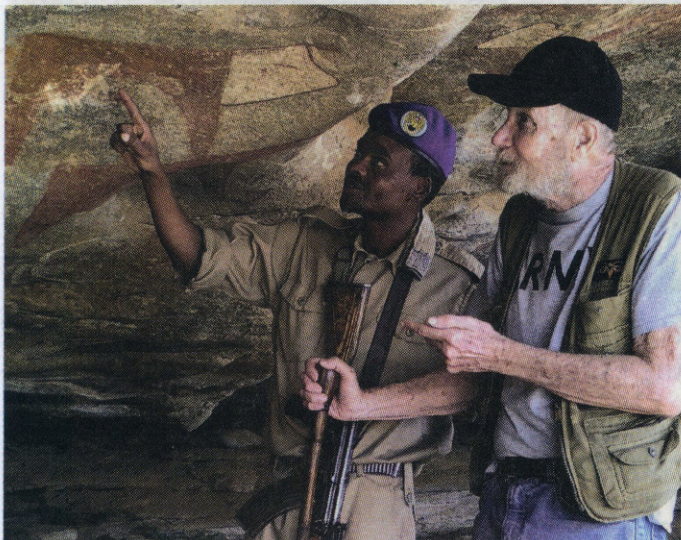
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Thankfully, these days the beggars hovering outside the doorway are well fed, but inside, you're more likely to run into well heeled Indians, insurance agents from Omaha on a tour of the mysterious East, or Mercedes Benz assembly line workers from Stuttgart there for the cheap weed.

world has become increasingly homogenized. In a way, it's nice to be able to get a great bowl of French onion soup in Jakarta, or a reliably comfy bed at the Hilton in Cartagena. At the same time, it occasionally makes you feel like you've never left home. I've visited 154 countries, and hate to sound like that old guy who's always saying, "you should have seen this place back in blah blah blah." Sorry, but there's something to it.

Just as a very small example, Leopold's, the quintessential ex-pat bar/restaurant located in Mumbai, still has the same mural on the far wall, but it just ain't the same as when I first saw it back in the day. Gone are the earnest missionaries, the dhoti clad searches and seekers, and the black tar addicted hookers from Marseilles taking care of business upstairs. Thankfully, these days the beggars hovering outside the doorway are well fed, but inside, instead of the colorful denizens of earlier days, you're more likely to run into well heeled Indians, insurance agents from Omaha on a tour of the mysterious East, or Mercedes Benz assembly line workers from Stuttgart there for the cheap weed. If you know what you're looking for though, you can still make out pock marks in the old marble pillars that give evidence to a Pakistani raiding party that came ashore one night in a rubber dinghy, occupied the Taj Mahal Hotel, and almost as an afterthought, visited this classic hangout just long enough to spray the place with automatic weapons fire. The barely discernible patina speaks of another era.

Somaliland stone age art.



One thing's for sure about nonexistent places; you won't run into harried tour guides holding up numbered signs that keep stragglers from straying too far from the flock. A few years ago, I visited Somaliland, another unrecognized country. It split off from the rest of Somalia, which some have called the most dangerous country in the world. The only way in is by air, and obtaining a visa is a real pain. Within the capital city of Hargeisa, money changers sit peacefully on full sized bales of Somaliland currency (the Somaliland Shilling), with no apparent fear of being ripped off. But outside the city limits you're required to travel with an armed guard. In Somalia you need three, and you run the possibility that they could all turn on you and hold you for ransom themselves. Standard operating procedure in the Somalian ransom business when negotiations stall, is to begin sending ears and noses in little parcels to the relatives back home who hold the purse strings.

A few days into my stay in the far more peaceful Somaliland, I found myself a couple of hours drive south of Hargeisa, sitting quietly next to my bodyguard in the late afternoon sun, on a rocky promontory surrounded by a dusty, arid landscape with only the whisper of a cooling breeze. Our polished seat was perched at the end of a winding trail atop a series of overhanging cliffs decorated with beautifully rendered Stone Age art depicting dozens of massively horned, ochre-colored cattle, with udders the size and shape of kettle drums. Scattered amidst the herd were stick-limbed human figures and dogs, which my guide, pointed to with his gun barrel, gravely intoning the single word... "security!"

The whistling wind gently tousled my hair as I gazed off into the distance at the parched ravines and stunted bushes. Suddenly it struck me that this rock had been polished to a sheen by God only knows how many tens of thousands of butts, at this exact spot, on this very stone, for 20,000 years, as other men in other millennia gazed off at this same horizon.

A few years before that, I visited another non-country, Kurdistan, a Maryland-sized nation, carved out of northwestern Iraq. I can still remember squinting through a pair of binoculars that looked like they'd survived the Normandy invasion, over a barrier of sandbags and razor wire at a pile of recently rearranged rubble below us that used to be a town, with its ruined bridge, that used to span a muddy little river flowing through a dun-colored valley. My companions, two Peshmerga (Translated from Kurdish it means "those who look at death."), pointed out a rusty sheet of corrugated metal, barely covering a bombed-out crater... The epicenter of an ISIS position. For the time being, all was quiet, so we retired to the basement and shared a pot of tea.

It's amazing where a cool looking *Ryder* magazine press pass, a couple of self-published books, and steaming heaps of chutzpah can get you. Incidentally, unlike the security guards at college

Suddenly it struck me that this rock in Somaliland had been polished to a sheen by God only knows how many tens of thousands of butts for 20,000 years, as other men in other millennia gazed off at this same horizon.

football games, no one ever bothered to search my backpack!

Transnistria turned out to be far tamer than either of those places. With the help of my guide—Natalia, who's knowledge of all things Moldovan and Transnistrian was nothing short of encyclopedic—here's what I learned, saw, and didn't see during, what turned out to be, only a day long outing. Immediately, I noticed the absence of billboards and franchises. Plenty of Sovietlicious architecture lined the streets though, along with what looked to be the oldest coin operated coffee dispenser in all of Christendom. As for the people, the population was sharply divided between pre-perestroika babushkas and post-perestroika bombshells.

In front of the parliament building, there was a monstrous statue of a severe looking Lenin, wearing a Superman cape, staring off into the far distance, resolutely contemplating some future workers' paradise. Nearby, a post office had a selection of great retro postcards picturing, among other things, the statue of some long forgotten general mounted on a rearing horse, 50's style MiG's, busts of Lenin, and WW2 era T-34 tanks. When we mailed them off, the lady at the window warned us not to expect early delivery. It's been a month.

And perhaps the most lauded fact of Transnistria occurred two years ago, when the home team defeated Real Madrid three goals to two in what may have been the greatest upset in modern soccer history. The whole country went mad! Incidentally, there's an international soccer competition called CONIFA taking place next year in Skopje, North Macedonia, where football teams from unrecognized countries can compete for the championship. The Transnistrian Sheriffs are coiling.

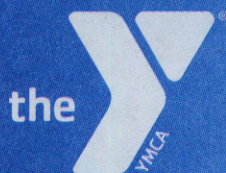
More than one friend has said that they'd never come so close to dying, so many times, in such a short period of time, as when



WWII T-34 tank in Transnistria.

they were traveling with me, so when my nifty looking press pass wasn't enough to get me into Ukraine, I figured it might have been a blessing in disguise. Fifty years ago, in Vietnam I took a bullet to the chest that missed my heart by a centimeter. Insofar as war goes... been there, done that.

John Linnemeier hails from the Hoosier State. He served in the United States Army in Vietnam, where he was shot twice. He has worked in mines, oil platforms, steel mills, and inner city schools, has attempted to stow away on ships and hopped freights, and has seen plenty of ugliness but plenty of beauty as well. By his most recent estimate, he has visited 154 countries. At 77 and approaching geezerhood, he stubbornly refuses to quit having fun.



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