

On the Road



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Standing in front of the Palace of Culture (p260) in Iași, triumphant and, more importantly, alive, with my old Dacia 1310. While driving that car 1800km around Romania in 2006, I developed superb engine-repair skills, character, a heightened fear of death, and the ability to curse continuously for 12 minutes in four languages. The Daewoo Matiz I drove in 2009 was, in comparison, something of a luxury.



MARK BAKER It was a weekday morning in Baia Mare (p233). The day had begun like every other – with a tentative search for decent coffee and a working wi-fi connection (two necessities no self-respecting travel writer can do without). I got on my bike and wheeled around town a few minutes before I saw it in the distance like a mirage: the Obama Café. Instantly, it felt like my kind of place. The coffee was great and the wi-fi was working fine.

Destination Romania

After decades, centuries in some cases, of an unseen hand leaning on Romania's 'pause' button, breathtaking change and development are under way. Not too long ago, this late-adopting, former communist dictatorship was considered an idiosyncratic, challenging destination, meant only for the hardest of ex-Eastern Bloc travel aficionados. (Only two editions ago, we cheekily, though accurately, described Romania as the 'wild west of Eastern Europe'.) Well, Romania's social, political and economic moons have finally aligned and the resulting tidal shift promises to wash away the old traveller stigmas and surge the country to the forefront of top-value European tourism. Acclaim for its substantial attractions, long mired in obscurity by prohibitive accessibility and comfort issues, is now being roundly affirmed by travellers, including former US ambassador to Romania Jim Rosapepe, who said in a 2009 *Washington Post* interview, '...it is a country that punches above its weight class in history, in culture, in creativity and in attractiveness to Americans who visit'. That said, the country still has plenty of obstacles to overcome.

Romania's photo-finish acceptance into the EU in 2007 has been wobbly. Membership has ushered in the good (repaired roads, reliable utilities, economic reform), the bad (short-term inflation, an ill-considered ban on horse carts) and the ugly (when will giant, bug-eye sunglasses go out of style?). For people familiar with pre-2006 Romania, some of the improvements will be positively giddy. Romanians watching this unprecedented development unfold have let out a collective 'it's about time' sigh, though a sizable subset, usually older generations and traditional rural communities, understandably seem to be a bit more sceptical.

New regulations accompanying EU membership have endangered many aspects of classic Romanian life, such as the free-range roaming of sheep and cow herds, and the selling of unpasteurised cheese on roadsides – both still endure for now. Other changes, such as the strict and, to many, financially unfeasible regulations for slaughtering farm animals, have jeopardised the livelihoods of Romania's considerable rural population. Though by the same token Romanians were aching for a change. One local said, 'We deserve a better future...we deserve a better present!' Pressure from the EU to address concerns such as pollution, corruption, poor conditions for orphans, and destitute farmers have shown mixed results. Brussels still cites Romania, along with Bulgaria, as being one of the most corrupt countries in the EU.

Among the heartening improvements from a tourist perspective is that helpful tourist offices have opened in most major cities (with the notable and baffling exception of Bucharest). Competition is, in many areas, increasing quality and reining in the formerly absurd prices for accommodation and car hire. The service industry too is much improved. A new generation of young, promising, multilingual staff are filling positions formerly held by the combative and ill-tempered – though anyone wanting to acquaint themselves with these classic attributes of Romanian customer service need only visit the nearest post office.

Despite significant improvements to everyday life, many Romanians continue to leave for jobs in the USA, Greece, Spain, Italy or the UK. The latter two have had a few highly sensationalised incidents of crime associated with the tide of arriving Romanians that EU membership un-

FAST FACTS

Population (millions):
22.2

Area (sq km): 238,391

GDP growth (2008): 7.1%

Inflation rate (2008):
7.8%

Official unemployment
rate (2008): 4.4%

Average monthly salary
(2008): 1296 lei (€360)

Life expectancy (male-
female): 69-76

Number of people bitten
by stray dogs in Bucha-
rest (2008): 9000

Price of nice house in
wine-rich Prahova Valley:
€90,000

leashed, which, even at its worst, was only a tiny fraction of their existing crime problems.

Though incidents have lessened, Romanians pursuing false dreams still sometimes find themselves ensnared in the tragic world of human trafficking for forced labour and prostitution. Lured by 'paying jobs' as wait-staff and the like, thousands of boys, girls, young men and women are sold for as little as €3000 in Western Europe, the Middle East and North America. Increased investigations into these incidents have led Romania to prosecute hundreds of traffickers in the past few years.

The reassuring presence of the EU stamp of approval has catapulted Romania to the top of consideration for European companies looking to relocate facilities in an effort to cut operating costs. Some of the bigger names include Ford and Nokia, who have recently opened facilities in Craiova and Cluj respectively. Though no threat to India, Romania's appeal has also been bolstered by its abundance of multilingual, overeducated, underemployed college graduates, making it a popular place for companies looking to outsource pan-European call centres. Employers can easily fill a telephone bank with agents that satisfactorily speak three languages (or more) with starting salaries as little as €300 per month.

Romania is also increasingly being used by international filmmakers as a cheap place to shoot big-budget films, such as *Cold Mountain* and more, ahem, lowbrow efforts such as *The Seed of Chucky*. Sacha Baron Cohen filmed the 'Kazakh village' scenes from *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* in Romania, with villagers unapologetically speaking Romanian – close enough to Kazakh for the film apparently. Meanwhile, Romania's own film industry has exploded out of obscurity, with the international success of Cristian Mungiu's 2007 film *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* riding the peak of the wave.

In 2005 Romania passed a property restitution law allowing former owners of communist-held property – often buildings in town centres – to reclaim their buildings. Most famously, Bran Castle returned to Habsburg hands in 2006. A fund of US\$4 billion was set up for property owners not able to recover former property.

The bitter and hotly contested December 2009 presidential election between incumbent Traian Basescu (elected in 2004 – Romania's first post-Ceauşescu era president that was not a former high-ranking communist) and Social Democrat rival, former foreign minister Mircea Geoana, ended with Basescu leading by a margin of less than 1%. Though both candidates declared victory, with Geoana claiming electoral fraud, Basescu's reelection to a new five-year term was later confirmed.

Celebrations and memorials occurred in late December 2009 as Romania observed the 20th anniversary of the violent revolution that ended with roughly 1300 people losing their lives and the hasty execution of dictator Nicolae Ceauşescu and his wife Elena.

'For people familiar with pre-2006 Romania, some of the improvements will be positively giddy.'

Getting Started

Half the fun is planning a trip – and Romania offers a tremendous range of possibilities. See our suggested itineraries (p23) for more.

Local travel agents offer some excellent trips (or advice) – see p333 for a list of recommendations.

WHEN TO GO

Its winters are quite cold and summers quite hot, but Romania is a year-round destination. There is much variation in its climate: the average annual temperature in the south is 11°C, 7°C in the north and only 2°C in the mountains. In summer months, temperatures have risen to above 40°C in Bucharest and along the Black Sea coast, while winter chills of below -35°C are not unknown in the Braşov depression and around Miercurea Ciuc in Transylvania.

In general, Romania's climate is transitional between temperate regions (the southeast can feel positively Mediterranean) and the more extreme weather characteristics of the continental interior. The average annual rainfall is 675mm; this figure is doubled in the mountains, and in the Danube Delta it's often half that.

Summer (June to August) is an obvious time to visit for beach fun and for hiking and mountain-biking in the Carpathians; all tourist facilities are open then and the weather is usually great, but you will have to share the sites with more tourists. The best times for birdwatching in the Danube Delta are mid-April to mid-May, and in October. Spring in Romania is a pastiche of wildflowers, melting snow and melodious bird songs.

At higher elevations, snow lingers as late as mid-May (the Transfăgăraşan Road doesn't open until June!) and the hiking season doesn't begin in earnest until mid-June. The best months for skiing are December to March, though the season extends either way some winters.

COSTS & MONEY

Cheaper than much of Europe, Romania has nevertheless graduated from the dirt-cheap-trip category in recent years, with basic, modern hotel rooms edging into the 180 lei-per-night level, and a sit-down meal with a beer, some meat and soup costing between 20 and 30 lei (and higher in Bucharest). Car-hire rates can be reasonable depending on where you hire – between 120 and 250 lei per day for short term – and bus and train tickets are quite cheap (about 15 to 30 lei per 100km by train).

Those looking to save can relish the abundant fast-food stands selling burgers, kebabs and pizza slices (about 7 to 12 lei), and the abundance of *cazare* (private rooms) available from entrepreneurs loitering at train stations or the more organised *agroturism* B&B network, which run to about 45 to 70 lei per person, including breakfast. These can provide lunch and dinner upon request.

For a couple wishing to stay in mid-priced hotels, dine out once or twice a day and perhaps hire the occasional guide or go on guided tours, expect to pay 300 to 450 lei per day total, excluding travel. Backpackers staying in private rooms, eating only one meal in a restaurant and excluding guides or travel expenses can expect to pay more like 120 to 200 lei per day.

Some remote areas – such as Maramureş, Transylvania's Saxon churches and Moldavia's painted churches – are far easier to see with a guide or a hired car. Those wanting to go on long-term hikes should consider going with a guide too; see p58.

See Climate Charts (p319) for more information.

TRAVELLING RESPONSIBLY

The notion of low-impact travel in Romania is nascent, at best. Even people only distantly familiar with sustainable travel will note the sometimes distressing and widespread habit of littering throughout the country – often mere metres from a rubbish bin. In cities this behavior is counteracted by thorough street-cleaning crews, but in rural locations the garbage just accumulates, sullyng otherwise pristine vistas.

For now, the best you can do is look after your own rubbish and resist the urge to rebuke others as they contribute to piles of soft-drink cans and candy-bar wrappers along mountain trails. See the boxed text, p59, for details of how you can minimise your impact while camping and hiking.

Places offering recommended outdoor trips include **Iulian Cozma** (www.mountainguide.ro) and **Outdoor Holidays** (www.outdoorholiday.com). **Antrec** (www.antrec.ro) runs a good rural tourism scheme.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

Few Romanian writers have ever been translated into English, making it difficult for non-Romanian speakers to use literature as a window into the culture. Nevertheless, there are a handful of good books out there by Romanian and non-Romanian writers that convey some of the country's complex history and culture.

In literary nonfiction, the most absorbing story remains Helena Drysdale's hard-to-find *Looking for George* (1996). Drysdale travelled to Romania in the 1980s as a student and briefly spent time with George, a young monk. After the 1989 revolution, Drysdale returned to Romania with the hope of renewing their friendship, only to discover a personal tragedy that illustrates the horrors of life in Ceaușescu's Romania better than any history book ever could.

Olivia Manning's *Balkan Trilogy* (1987, reprinted 1998) is a colourful portrait of Bucharest at the outbreak of WWII that has long been considered the classic work on Romania. Serialised on British TV as *The Fortunes of War*, it has reached a large audience with its details about life in the capital in the late 1930s.

Petru Popescu, a popular Romanian writer in the 1960s and '70s, defected to the US in the 1970s to pursue a writing career in Hollywood. In the 1990s, he revisited Romania and recounted that journey in his highly readable *The Return* (2001), which interweaves his fascinating personal history under the Ceaușescu regime with tales from his family and extended family.

Ion Mihai Pacepa's *Red Horizons* (1987), though written pre-revolution, profiles in stunning detail the abuses and excesses of the Ceaușescu regime and helps to explain the popular rage that eventually fuelled the revolution. Pacepa, a former member of Romania's secret police, defected to the US in the 1970s.

Norman Manea's *The Hooligan's Return: A Memoir* (2003) details this accomplished author's return to his homeland in the late 1990s, unleashing not only a search for identity and a flood of memories (of having lived in a Transdnestrian transit camp), but also many memorable observations on contemporary life in Romania.

For a foreigner's view of modern Romania, particularly life in the ratty Bucharest of the 1990s and early 2000s, try Philip Ó Ceallaigh's *Notes From a Turkish Whorehouse* (2006). The author has a finely tuned appreciation for the grimy underbelly of Romania's capital city – something you'll be well acquainted with after a few days of walking around.

Dennis Deletant's *Ceaușescu and the Securitate* (1996) remains a scholarly classic on the outsized role of the secret police in Ceaușescu's Romania.

More of a history book, Lucian Boia's *Romania* (2001), published in the UK, is the rare Romanian-written overview, with a rather philosophical perspective

HOW MUCH?

Bottle of Mufatlar table wine 7-10 lei

Museum admission (adult) 4-15 lei

One-hour internet access 2-3 lei

Phonecards 10-100 lei

Local map 5-15 lei though, increasingly, they're free!

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

'Western-style' shops sell just about anything you need, but things can be more expensive than back home. Camping supplies aren't always readily available but outdoors equipment shops generally have pretty good stock on offer. Remember these few things:

- extra tissues or toilet paper
- first-aid kit
- Swiss army knife
- three-prong European adaptor
- torch (flashlight)
- universal sink plug
- sunblock lotion
- insect repellent
- ear plugs
- extra memory cards
- contact-lens solution
- souvenir flag pins or postcards of your home country (to give as gifts!)
- check the latest visa regulations (p325)

on its complex history. Boia, now living in France, nobly tries to show all sides to continually debated questions like nationalism and Romania's Slavic/Roman background – while adding an unexpected Bucharest 'walking tour'.

Isabel Fonseca's *Bury Me Standing – the Gypsies and their Journey* (1996) offers one of the best insights you'll find into the Roma and their culture. The author spent several months travelling with the Roma in Eastern Europe between 1991 and 1995. The chapter covering Romania looks at racial attacks against Roma in Transylvania.

It would be impossible to write about Romania's contribution to world literature without devoting a few words to *Dracula*. Irish writer Bram Stoker never actually set foot in Transylvania, yet he famously placed part of his epic 19th-century vampire novel in a castle not far from the city of Bistrița (and the Romanian tourism industry hasn't been the same since). While the novel has nothing to do with Romania as it really is (or ever was), it's a fun read and worth tossing in the backpack if you've never had the pleasure before.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Bucharest Life (www.bucharestlife.net) A blog that casts a critical eye (to put it lightly) on the capital, by the producer of *Bucharest In Your Pocket*.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) Go to the Thorn Tree to talk with travellers in or just back from Romania. Lots of news items and features too.

Romania & Moldova Travel Guide (www.romaniaandmoldova.com) A comprehensive, constantly updated travel guide, maintained by Lonely Planet author Leif Pettersen.

Romania National Tourism Office (www.romaniatourism.com) A detailed site listing special events and overviews of regions.

Rural Tourism (www.ruraltourism.ro) Lists rural B&Bs across Romania; see also the boxed text, p316, for more sites dedicated to accommodation.

Sapte Seri (www.sapteseri.ro) Lists up-to-date restaurants, clubs and events (films, concerts) around Romania.

Vivid magazine (www.vivid.ro) News magazine written by Romanian and non-Romanian contributors.

TOP PICKS



TOP FESTIVALS

Festivals dot Romania all year long, running the gamut from film festivals and DJ contests to shepherd shindigs welcoming the sheep home. Here are our favourites:

- Rooster Shooting, April, Apata (p138)
- Snow Festival, April, Păltiniș (p167)
- Juni Pageant, May, Brașov (p134)
- Sibiu Jazz Festival, May, Sibiu (p163)
- Transylvania International Film Festival, June, Cluj-Napoca (p196)
- Hora de la Prislop, August, Maramureș (boxed text, p239)
- National Theatre Festival, December, Bucharest (p79)
- Winter Festival, December, Maramureș (boxed text, p239)

TOP COMMUNIST SITES

No, really. Some of Romania's communist achievements may be grisly or ugly or just dreadful seas of concrete, but at least a couple are pretty awe-inspiring. Either way, these sites are such that when you see one it's impossible not to keep looking.

- Palace of Parliament & B-dul Unirii, Bucharest (p69)
- Transfăgărășan Road (boxed text, p157)
- Iron Gates hydroelectric power station (p112)
- Gherla Prison (p206)
- Danube Canal (p309)
- Former Communist party Black Sea resorts, Neptun-Olimp (p302)
- Blackened factory shells at Copșa Mică (boxed text, p154)

MOVIES

International films are finding Romania the perfect backdrop and the local film industry has recently shot from obscurity into the spotlight. Here are several to whet the appetite: the first four are Romanian standouts, the rest are foreign films shot on location in Romania and one is a wacky movie about a guy who hates mirrors.

- *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (Cristian Mungiu, 2007)
- *California Dreamin'* (Cristian Nemescu, 2007)
- *Filantropica* (Nae Caranfil, 2005)
- *The Death of Mr Lazarescu* (Cristi Puiu, 2005)
- *Cold Mountain* (Anthony Minghella, 2003)
- *Vlad* (Michael Sellers, 2004)
- *Elvira's Haunted Hills* (Sam Irvin, 2002)
- *Pulse* (Jim Sonzero, 2006)
- *Beowulf* (Graham Baker, 1999)
- *Wild Dogs* (Thom Fitzgerald, 2003)
- *Bloodrayne* (Uwe Boll, 2006)
- *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1992)

Events Calendar

Romania has festivals going on all year round in all regions of the country. It's worth confirming dates before you show up, as they sometimes shift. See the boxed text, opposite, for a list of our favourites.

JANUARY

WINTER SPORTS FESTIVAL last Sun of Jan
Held in Moldavia's Câmpulung Moldovenesc; while sports are indeed held, it's mainly an excuse for revelry.

FEBRUARY

ENCHANTED WATER SPRINGS MUSIC FESTIVAL 3rd Sun in Feb
Târgu Jiu's folk-music festival, very ambitiously held in the dead of winter.

APRIL

ROOSTER SHOOTING 3rd Sun in Apr
Villagers denounce a (fake) rooster then shoot it. Held in Apata, near Braşov.

ST GEORGE DAYS FESTIVAL last weekend in Apr
Held in Sfântu Gheorghe (Transylvania), this three-day festival honouring the church's patron saint is all folk music, street food and nightly concerts.

TÂNJAUA DE PE MARA late Apr/early May
Maramureş' peasant festival of fertility, with river dunkings of young and old.

DAYS OF BRAŞOV & JUNI PAGEANT late Apr/early May
Braşov's biggest festival begins in the first week after Easter.

MAY

MAYFEST 1 May
Sibiu's remaining 5500 German-speaking Saxons flock to Dumbrava forest for pagan frolicking and beer bingeing.

SIBIU JAZZ FESTIVAL 2nd week in May
In 2005 Sibiu resurrected its weeklong jazz festival (www.sibiu jazz festival.com), which had died, along with its first founder, back in the early 1990s.

CONSTANŢA DAYS around 21 May
Concerts and general merry-making take over Constanţa.

INTERNATIONAL THEATRE FESTIVAL late May
Weeklong event in Piatra Neamţ, attracting theatre companies from all over Europe.

FESTIVAL OF SÂMBRA OILOR May/Jun
Celebrating the hill-bound exodus of sheep from Ţara Oaşului, Maramureş.

BUCHAREST CARNIVAL late May/early Jun
Weeklong carnival with street dancers, street theatre, folk dancers and live bands performing in Bucharest's historic heart.

GAYFEST late May/early Jun
Romania's only gay festival. Six days of events, films and disco nights around Bucharest.

TRANSYLVANIA INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL late May/early Jun
In Cluj-Napoca, a rapidly expanding and wildly popular event, currently running for 10 days and hosting hundreds of films from dozens of countries.

JUNE

FÊTE DE LA MUSIQUE 21 Jun
Annual French music festival organised by the French Institute.

SUCEAVA DAYS late Jun
Street fair, with music, beer and some religion thrown in, held in Suceava (Moldavia).

DRAGAICA last week of Jun
Held since the Middle Ages (originally to facilitate the exchange of grain and livestock), this is a pagan pre-harvest celebration, held in Târgovişte, Wallachia.

TÂRGU MUREŞ DAYS last weekend in Jun
This is literally the 'Carnival' of Székely Land, held in the regional capital Târgu Mureş.

JULY

MARAMUZICAL FESTIVAL mid-Jul
Vadu Izei, together with the neighbouring villages of Botiza and Ieud, host this four-day international folk-music festival.

INTERNATIONAL FOLK MUSIC & DANCE FESTIVAL

3rd week in Jul
Tulcea, the gateway to the Danube Delta, gets folkier-than-thou with costumes, dancing and general merriment.

FELSZIGET FESTIVAL

late Jul
In Târgu Mureş, this is the tenacious little brother to the annual Sziget DJ/rock festival in Budapest.

MEDIEVAL FESTIVAL OF THE ARTS

late Jul
Held in Sighișoara, it's more of a wild drinking party than anything cultural, but the colourful costumes are pretty to look at.

BEER FESTIVAL

late Jul
Timișoara's sudsy sprawl with live bands and public inebriation.

AUGUST**NATIONAL ROMANIAN FOLK FESTIVAL**

early Aug
This is one of the biggest music festivals in the country, during the Black Sea Coast's busiest time of year. Held in Constanța.

HOUSE PARADE

10 Aug
A multicity DJ festival that climaxes on the beach in Vama Veche.

HORA DE LA PRISLOP

2nd Sun in Aug
A folk-music festival held in Maramureș celebrating the sheep returning from the mountains. A second festival is held in Bucharest in early August.

CEAHLĂU FOLK FESTIVAL

2nd Sun in Aug
Shepherds don traditional outfits and head to Durău in Moldavia.

CRAFTSMAN'S FAIR

15 Aug
Bucharest's Village Museum's big day with guest craftsmen from around the country.

INTERNATIONAL FOLK, DANCE & TRADITIONS FESTIVAL

mid-Aug
Bistrița breaks out the costumes and invites dance and music troupes to join in the fun.

ȘFÂNTU GHEORGHE FILM FESTIVAL

mid-Aug
Possibly the most remote annual film festival (www.festival-anonimul.ro) in Europe; bring the mosquito repellent to one of the Danube Delta's most distant outposts.

MOUNTAIN FESTIVAL FUNDATA

last Sun in Aug
Fundata, the highest village in Romania, holds this feast of the shepherds from the mountain area,

initially an event to celebrate the solar god and for shepherds to meet their future wives. Attractions include folk music and craftsmen selling hand-made items.

SEPTEMBER**GEORGE ENESCU MUSIC FESTIVAL**

Sep
A month-long series of concerts and events in Bucharest, including competitions for piano, violin and composition.

NATIONAL POP MUSIC FESTIVAL

early Sep
National bands descend on Mamaia to be judged on vocal skills, performance and composition.

MIORIȚA

mid Sep
One of Romania's many colourful folk-singer contests, in Târgoviște.

SÂMBRA OILOR

late Sep/early Oct
A lavish, three-day welcoming-home of the sheep, held in and around Bran.

OCTOBER**IAȘI DAYS**

mid-Oct
Weeklong religious event – and street party – in Iași.

INTERNATIONAL ASTRA FILM FESTIVAL

mid to late Oct
Sibiu's film festival (www.astrafil.ro) includes competitions, workshops, debates, concerts and of course lots of films from Romania and abroad.

NOVEMBER**NATIONAL THEATRE FESTIVAL**

1st week in Nov
A weeklong event in Bucharest, showcasing the best of the previous year in Romanian theatre, as well as new efforts from playwrights and directors.

DECEMBER**DE LA COLIND LA STEA**

Dec
Four days of music and Christmas-related events in Brașov, with all the drinking you'd expect at an outdoor winter festival.

WINTER CARNIVAL

Dec
Winter customs of the Delta villages, including copious amounts of mulled wine, are enjoyed in Tulcea.

WINTER FESTIVAL

27 Dec
Sighetu Marmăției's undisputed highpoint of the year, featuring food, music, masks, a parade of colourful peasant costumes and oxen carrying baked cakes between their horns!

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTE

CASTLES, MOUNTAINS & FANGS

10 Days / Bucharest to Sibiu

The classic route for travellers wanting a taste of Transylvania starts outside it at **Bucharest** (p62), where most flights come in. With only 10 days, don't linger. Hire a car from the Bucharest airport (p88) or hop in a train north toward the hills, stopping in **Sinaia** (p120) for a couple of nights and checking out Peleş Castle. From there, cable-car up into the **Bucegi Mountains** (p124) for hiking or biking. Drive or bus north for a couple of nights in **Braşov** (p129), a surprisingly unjaded hub with a cobbled centre. Take day trips to the infamous 'Dracula Castle' at **Bran** (p140) and the better one at **Râşnov** (p140), with the options of skiing and hiking at **Poiana Braşov** (p138).

If you have a car, spend a night in the timeless Saxon town **Viscri** (p154), before continuing on for a night in **Sighişoara** (p146), where the cute citadel offers B&Bs, espresso and Dracula's birthplace. Head southwest for a night or two in **Sibiu** (p158), Transylvania's most culturally rich town.

If you have a car (and it's summer), drive south along the winding, stunning **Transfăgărăşan Road** (boxed text, p157), which tackles the biggest of the Carpathians. South of the pass, stop in the 'real Dracula castle' at Poienari outside **Curtea de Argeş** (p105) before returning to Bucharest.

This 800km route takes in the 'big three' of Transylvania's Saxon country: Braşov, Sighişoara and Sibiu. On the way are many opportunities to see rural life and get up into the mighty Carpathian mountains.



No castles, no fangs, no blood-red steaks served with a wink. This roughly 2000km trip ventures through some of the region's most diverse and stunning territory.

Those going by train and maxitaxi may need to allow more time for transfers.

ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

DRACULA? SCHMACULA!

21-28 Days / Bucharest to Timișoara

This whirlwind month-long trip around Romania skips the heart of Transylvania. Start with a couple of days in **Bucharest** (p62), before heading east to hit the beach at **Mamaia** (p299) and visit the mud baths at **Eforie Nord** (p301). Go north to **Tulcea** (p310), the springboard for bird-rich boat trips through the **Danube Delta** (p307).

Bus or drive northwest to **Suceava** (p275) for a couple of days of touring the nearby cartoonlike, colour-coded **Bucovina Monasteries** (p280). Cross into Transylvania's Székely Land via the stunning **Bicaz Gorges** (p274), taking in a hike if time allows. Stop in at Székely Land's biggest town, Habsburg-influenced **Târgu Mureș** (p177), then head to **Cluj-Napoca** (p190), home to a lively student community, clubs, quirky museums and a Hungarian/Romanian population. Head west for hiking and caving in the **Apuseni Mountains** (p204); otherwise head southwest to another great, underappreciated city, **Timișoara** (p212), where the 1989 revolution started and now a popular alternative air hub for Romania.



BLACK

SEA

TAILORED TRIPS

THE COUNTRY LIFE

'Peasant' is a proud word in these parts, and no visitor really can get a sense of Romania without spending some time in the sticks – where family-run *pensiunes* (pensions) open their doors as one-stop, kick-back bases. In Transylvania, and within half an hour of Braşov, you can wake to the sound of chickens in **Râşnov** (p140); a bit more rugged is **Vama Buzăului** (p146), in the lesser-visited mountains northeast.

Down from the Bărgău Valley, home to Dracula in Bram Stoker's novel, is remote **Lunca Ilvei** (p209), with horse-riding options.

Outside Sibiu, just a couple of kilometres off the highway, are traditional villages that feel worlds away, such as **Sibieli** (p168), with its glass-icon museum and its hill-bound paths. For a more Hungarian flavour, get to villages outside Cluj-Napoca, including **Rimetea** (p202), and **Sâncraiu** (p203) or **Gârda de Sus** (p227), both on the foothills of the Apuseni Mountains.

The epitome of rural life is Maramureş, where you can stay in thatched-hut villages. Good options abound in the Izei Valley, such as **Botiza** (p246) or **Săpânţa** (p244), home to a 'merry cemetery' of pop art-styled headstones.

In Moldavia, a good base to see the cartoonlike murals of the Bucovina Monasteries is the High Class Hostel in **Suceava** (p278).



TAKE THE KIDS ALONG

So much of Romania evokes past worlds and eerie myths that it's sure to capture the imagination of any child – or adult. The Dracula thing may be overblown, but the castles are not. Tourists squeeze through the narrow passageways of the so-called 'Dracula castle' – 15th-century **Bran Castle** (p141) – but **Poienari** (p107) is home to the 'real' Dracula's castle and Hunedoara's **Corvin Castle** (p186) looks more the part, with a drawbridge and walkways over deep dungeonlike corridors.

The country route can offer horse-cart rides, walks to meet herds of sheep in the hills, or tours of local craftsfolk at work. You can sleep in a fun, drawer-style 'Saxon bed' in traditional homes in **Viscri** (p154).

Underground worlds are great for kids, particularly the **Apuseni Mountain caves** (p204) and the swing sets and sculptures in the bizarre **Praid salt mine** (p176).

For all its noise, **Bucharest** (p79) teems with child-friendly fun, like the Dracula Show and puppet theatre or the many well-groomed parks.

Half a million birds, including pelicans, flap some wing in the **Danube Delta** (p307), which can only be seen by ferry or hiring a fishing boat. Just south of the beach resorts are the **Eforie Nord mud baths** (p301), where you can encourage kids to get slimy. If that's not enough mud, Moldavia is home to **muddy volcanoes** (boxed text, p266) that spookily burp and gurgle. Cool.



The Authors



LEIF PETERSEN

Coordinating Author, Transylvania & Moldavia

In 2003, after nine years of feigning interest in electronic payments for the US Federal Reserve System, Leif Pettersen, from Minneapolis, Minnesota, was 'Kramered' into being a homeless freelance travel writer by an unbalanced friend. Leif's weakness for pretty girls brought him to Romania in 2004, where he's subsequently lived and travelled for nearly two cumulative years. He's visited every notable patch of grass in the country and made priceless friends, except for Romania's neo-Nazi party, which publicly denounced him in 2008, calling him a 'slimeball' and 'human piece of garbage' (true story). Leif writes an almost-award-winning, 'slightly caustic' blog, *KillingBatteries.com*, where he dishes on travel writing, Romania, Italian internet and his remarkable-gift-for-hyphenation.



MARK BAKER

**Bucharest, Crişana & Banat, Maramureş,
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Mark first visited Romania in the 1980s as a college student residing in Luxembourg, on spring break with three friends in a beat-up Ford Escort. Those were Ceauşescu's salad days, only the country's cupboard was bare and Mark's strongest memory is surviving a week on pickles and imported Russian sekt. He's a frequent visitor to the country and an occasional glutton for punishment, once arriving in Bucharest, in June 1990, the very same weekend that thousands of miners were rampaging through the city in a bloody protest. Mark works in Prague as a freelance writer and is co-author of *Lonely Planet's Prague*. Tweet him at [markbakerprague](https://twitter.com/markbakerprague).

LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

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