



Transylvania

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Why Go?

Transylvania conjures a vivid landscape of mountains, castles, fortified churches and superstitious old crones. The Carpathian Mountains are truly spectacular and outdoor enthusiasts can choose from caving in the Apuseni range, rock climbing at Piatra Craiului National Park, biking atop the flat Bucegi plateau, or hiking the Făgăraş. The skiing scene, particularly in the Bucegi Mountains, is a great draw, while well-beaten paths up to Bran and Peleş Castles are also worth the crowds.

A melange of architecture and chic sidewalk cafes punctuate the towns of Braşov, Sighişoara and Sibiu, while the vibrant student town Cluj-Napoca has the country's most vigorous nightlife. Many of southern Transylvania's Saxon villages are dotted with fortified churches that date back half a millennium. An hour north, in Székely Land, ethnic Hungarian communities are the majority. Throughout you're likely to spot many Roma villagers – look out for black cowboy hats and rich red dresses.

Best Places to Eat

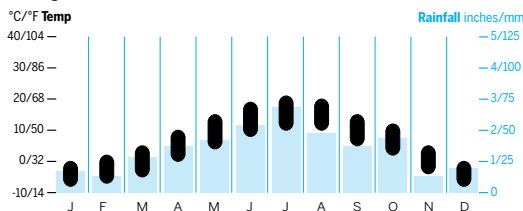
- » Bella Muzica (p88)
- » Crama Veche (p144)
- » Crama Sibiu Vechi (p111)
- » Camino (p137)

Best Places to Stay

- » Casa Wagner (p87)
- » Am Ring (p110)
- » Casa Au Cerb (p99)

When to Go

Braşov



Jun–Sep Summer is a glorious time for hiking and seeing the medieval cities in full swing.

May A pleasant month, with the mountains rich in wildflowers and the weather cool.

Dec–Mar Plenty of snow for skiing, with plummeting temperatures.

History

For 1000 years, until WWI, Transylvania was associated with Hungary. In the 10th century a Magyar (Hungarian) tribe, the Székelys, settled in what they called Erdély ('beyond the forest' – the literal meaning of Transylvania). In the 12th century Saxon merchants arrived to help defend the eastern frontiers of Hungary. The seven towns they founded – Bistrița (Bistritz), Brașov (Kronstadt), Cluj-Napoca (Klausenburg), Mediasș (Mediasch), Sebeș (Mühlbach), Sibiu (Hermannstadt) and Sighișoara (Schässburg) – gave Transylvania its German name, Siebenbürgen.

Medieval Transylvania was autonomously ruled by a prince accountable to the Hungarian crown, while the indigenous Romanians were serfs. After the 1526 Turkish defeat of Hungary the region became semi-independent, recognising Turkish suzerainty. In 1683 Turkish power was broken and Transylvania came under Habsburg rule four years later. The Catholic Habsburg governors sought to control the territory by favouring first the Protestant Hungarians and Saxons and then the Orthodox Romanians. In 1848, when the Hungarians launched a revolution against the Habsburgs, Romania sided with the Austrians. After 1867 Transylvania was fully absorbed into Hungary. In 1918 Romanians gathered at Alba Iulia to demand Transylvania's union with Romania.

This unification has never been fully accepted by Hungary, and from 1940 to 1944 it set about re-annexing much of the region. After the war, Romanian communists moved to quash Hungarian nationalist sentiments. Currently, however, feelings of resentment have subsided somewhat and Romania's relations with its western neighbour are pacific. Still, one feels an extant mistrust between the communities, and the Hungarians publish maps of the region with only Hungarian place names (even street names), as if they were not located in Romania.

PRAHOVA VALLEY

Wallachia funnels into Transylvania in this narrow valley at the foot of the fir-clad Bucegi Mountains. Sinaia, a king's summer retreat a century ago, is the finest town, but the real draw is up, way up, with hiking and biking trails along the flat plateau atop the mountains, and ski trails that carve down the mountainsides. If you're looking for just a taste, it's possible to do a day trip from Brașov

and take a cable-car ride up and take a short hike. But it's easier if you stay a night or two.

Sinaia

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Nestled in a slender fir-clad valley, this pretty town teems with hikers in summer and skiers in winter. Backed by the imposing crags of the Bucegi Mountains, it's a dramatic place for a day's hike or, using the network of cabanas open to walkers, several days.

The town itself is a melange of crayon-coloured wooden houses contrasted with the 'wedding-cake' style of its grander 19th-century buildings. Once home to Romania's first king, Carol I, who created a summer retreat here, Peleş Palace is a dream of hidden passages, fairy-tale turrets, vertiginous galleries and classical statues; it's so beguilingly imaginative, it could raise a swoon from the most hardened cynic.

Sinaia is named after Mount Sinai, and you'll notice there's a cross on the mountain above the town; a bi-product of a nobleman's visit to Israel in 1965. Following his return he founded a monastery with a lustreously gilded interior up the hill.

Sinaia is administratively part of Wallachia but is most easily reached from Transylvania.

Sights

Peleş Castle

CASTLE

(www.visit.peles.ro; tours adult/child 20/5 lei, optional tour adult/child 70/7 lei, photos 3 lei; ☀9am–5pm Tue–Sun; ♿) A 20-minute walk uphill of the town centre, this one has to be the most magical of all the castles you'll marvel at in Transylvania. Fairy-tale turrets rise above green meadows, and grand reception halls fashioned in Moorish, Florentine and French styles collectively overwhelm.

Endless wood-carved ceilings and gilded pieces induce cross-eyed swoons, and even if you're bent on chasing creepy Dracula-type castles, it's hard not to get a thrill visiting this one. The first European castle to have central heating, electricity and vacuuming(!), Peleş was intended to be the summer residence of Romania's longest-serving monarch, King Carol I. Construction on the 3500-sq m-edifice, built in a predominantly German-Renaissance style, began in 1875. Some 39 years, more than 400 weary craftsmen and thousands of labourers later, it was completed, just months before the king died in