



Transylvania

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Why Go?

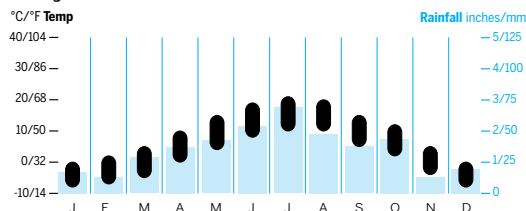
Transylvania's forested valleys and Gothic castles are forever embedded in the popular imagination. Even before arriving, most visitors can picture this land of dark fairy-tales, where fog drapes like cobwebs over the Carpathian Mountains.

Explore these stirring landscapes on hikes through Piatra Craiului National Park, or the Bucegi (and tougher Apuseni) Mountains; or see them frozen over at winter sports centres Poiana Braşov and Predeal. Next, indulge your medieval fantasies among the watchtowers and lanes of Braşov and Sighişoara or venture to Transylvania's castles: world-famous Bran, ornate Peleş, and Hunedoara's Gothic apparition.

Deeper in the countryside, rural Transylvania's tapestry of cultures awaits: vibrant, secretive Roma communities, Székely Land hamlets where only Hungarian is spoken, and Saxon villages with crumbling citadels. And yes, Transylvania will satisfy vampire tourists – and enthral all with its jumble of edgy cities and villages that time forgot.

When to Go

Braşov



May Mild weather and meadows of wildflowers; go hiking in Piatra Craiului and Bucegi Mountains.

Jun–Sep Peak season for hiking, and medieval cities like Braşov and Sighişoara are in full swing.

Dec–Mar Check snow forecasts and head to ski slopes in Poiana Braşov.

History

Though they lived in the 5th century BC, the Dacians still elicit pride among modern Transylvanians. Fascinating traces of their history remain: metalwork, remnants of their fortifications, and even temples, such as at the Sarmizegetusa Regia archaeological site. As the Roman Empire marched across the Balkans, Dacian civilisation fizzled away. When Rome withdrew in AD 271, centuries of skirmishes followed between Huns, Slavs, Visigoths and other tribes.

For 1000 years, up until WWI, Transylvania was associated with Hungary. In the 10th century, at the behest of Stephen I of Hungary, the Székelys (a Magyar, Hungarian, tribe) settled in what they called Erdély ('beyond the forest' – the root 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), Medias (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. After 1867 Transylvania was fully absorbed into Austria-Hungary. In 1918, after Austria-Hungary's defeat in World War I, 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. In ensuing decades, feelings of resentment subsided somewhat and Romania's relations with its western neighbour calmed.

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 for a short hike. But it's easier if you stay a night or two.

Sinaia

POP 11,600

Nestled in a slender fir-clad valley, Sinaia 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 hike for the day, 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 Castle 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 administratively part of Wallachia but is most easily reached from Transylvania.

Sights

Peleş Castle

PALACE

(www.peles.ro; tour adult/senior/child 20/10/5 lei; ☀9am-5pm Tue-Sun) Over 40 years, dozens of builders, artists and wood-carvers brought Peleş Castle into existence. The neo-Renaissance masterpiece was commissioned by Romania's first king, Carol I, and its first stone laid in 1875. Today this former royal summer residence is a wildly popular tourist attraction. Visits are by compulsory 40-minute guided tour; photographing inside costs a steep additional 32 lei. Inside, not a single corner is empty of silk rugs, Murano glass, carved walnut or polished marble.

In the **Honorary Hallway**, note the Swiss and German landscapes, fashioned from inlaid wood, to remind the king of his homeland. Beyond Iraqi carpets and alabaster Biblical scenes, you'll enter an **Arms Room** brimming with armour for men and