TOUR CODE

SL3

ADVENTURESABROAD

SLOVAK REPUBLIC, HUNGARY & ROMANIA

21 days

Updated 01/11/2013

Day 1 *Arrive in Bratislava*

Arrive in Bratislava, capital of the Slovak Republic.

Overnight in Bratislava. Meal plan: Dinner, if required.

Day 2 *Bratislava - Trencin: Castle Tour*

Our morning city tour takes us to the main sights of Bratislava, including the historic Old Town, the Gothic Cathedral of St Martin, and the 14th century Tower of St Michael in the ancient city walls.

After lunch in Bratislava we travel to Trencin in western Slovakia. Upon arrival we enjoy a walking tour of Trencin, including Trencin Castle. Together with Nitra and Bratislava, Trencin is one of the oldest of Slovak cities, chronicled as early as in the 11th century. Its strategic location near three Carpathian Mountain passes on the crossroads of commercial routes, has always determined the character of the city as a significant landmark. As early as in the ancient times, the famous Jasper Road used by the Etruscan, Greek, and later Roman merchants to transport precious jasper from the Baltic region, was crossing Trencin.

The city is dominated by Trencin Castle, which is the third-largest castle in Slovakia. Trencin Castle, with extensive fortifications, has several palace buildings that surround the central medieval tower. Today this remains the highest point of the city. Below the castle, on the hillside, is a small square that is reached by a historic covered stairs as well as by winding side streets. The old town also has a large main square, with a large baroque church and a variety of shops.

Overnight in Trencin. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 3 *Trencin - Bojnice - Ruzomberok - Horny Smokovec*

Today's journey takes us via Bojnice, a small town in the center of the country at the upper Nitra River. This is one of the oldest spa towns in Slovakia and home to the famous Bojnice Castle, which we will visit during our stop here. We will take a short walk through the town itself is situated just below the castle. We will also stop today in the town of Ruzomberok situated in the Vah River Valley. Established by German colonists in 1223, Ruzomberok became renowned for its guilds, industrial production, tinkers and craftsmen.

Horny Smokovec is the gateway to the High Tatras National Park, founded in 1948 and forming the northernmost section of the Carpathian Mountains. This geographic region is home to numerous glacial lakes and has a distinctly alpine character.

Overnight in Horny Smokovec. Hotel Bellevue or similar. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 4 *Pieniny National Park*

Our sightseeing for today takes us first to the Pieniny National Park, crown jewel of the most impressive areas of natural beauty in central Europe. Our visit to the park region will include a tour of the medieval Cerveny Klastor, at one time a Carthusian monastery. Adjacent to the monastery runs the Dunajec River, a natural border dividing Slovakia and Poland. From here we will continue on to the open-air museum of folk architecture in Stara Lubovna. This visit gives us the opportunity to walk amongst a collection of precious wooden houses dating from the late 19th century to the early 20th century.

After lunch we continue on to the town of Kezmarok where part of our tour includes a visit to the famous German built wooden Lutheran Church, a unique work of great carpentry and artistry. From here we return to Horny Smokovec.

Overnight in Horny Smokovec. Hotel Bellevue or similar. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 5 *Horny Smokovec - Bratislava*

Today we journey back to Bratislava, a scenic route through the mountain ranges of the High Tatras to the Low Tatras -- mountain peaks and hiking trails, still green forests, bubbling streams, and haystacks like miniature, peak-roofed houses. We arrive in the mid-afternoon.

Overnight in Bratislava. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 6 *Bratislava, Slovak Republic - Budapest, Hungary*

This morning we travel by train from Bratislava to Budapest, the capital of Hungary. Hungary is a land of beautiful monuments and romantic music. Buda and Pest, two of the city's three regions, both face the mighty Danube, which forms the physical and spiritual centre of the Hungarian capital. It is its centrepiece, its heart, and its pulse. Its relationship with the city is even more intimate than that of the Seine with Paris or the Arno with Florence.

On arrival we will embark on a walking tour of city's urban heart. This area is full of stately old buildings, grand avenues, and innumerable tiny streets. We will take local transport to the huge neo-Gothic Parliament (Orszaghaz), the most visible building of Budapest's left bank. Built by 1000 workers between 1885 and 1902, this building has now become the symbol of the capital with its slender towers, spacious arcades, high windows and vast central dome. Nearby one can see the magnificent building housing the Museum of Ethnography. Walking southeast we come to the stately and sprawling Liberty Square (Szabadsag ter). In the square's center remains a gold hammer and sickle atop a white stone obelisk, one of the few monuments to the Russian 'liberation' of Budapest in 1945. Passing by Roosevelt Square we soon come to the famous Chain Bridge, the oldest and most beautiful of the seven road bridges that span the Danube in Budapest. Before it was built, the river could be crossed only by ferry or by a pontoon bridge that had to be moved when ice blocks began floating downstream in the winter.

We continue along the pedestrian 'Promenade' with great views of Gellert Hill and Castle Hill on the opposite bank. We will stroll past the Concert Hall (Vigado), which is a curious mix of Byzantine, Moorish, Romanesque and Hungarian motifs. From here we walk to one of the liveliest places in Budapest, Vorosmarty Ter, a large square that the north end of Budapest's best known shopping street--Vaci Utca. This is a fantastic pedestrian-only area of the city that has undergone a full transformation over the last 10 years.

Eventually we will arrive at the famous 19th century Central Market Hall. This cavernous three-story market teems with people browsing stalls packed with everything from salamis and red-paprika chains to folk embroideries and souvenirs.

We finish our day back at our hotel with a break before dinner.

Overnight in Budapest. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 7 *Budapest: City Tour*

This morning we depart our hotel by private bus for Heroes Square where we will disembark and learn of the history of Hungary as it pertains to the monument. We then WALK over to Vajdahunyad Castle before continuing to St. Stephen's Basilica for a quick look inside. We will pass by the Parliament buildings continuing toward Margaret Bridge over which we cross to Buda. We drive along the water and continue up to the castle area. Our next stop is the Citadel -- good for panoramic views. Our bus leaves us for the day, allowing us to continue on foot to the Fisherman's Bastion.

After a lunch break we reconvene in front of the Plague Monument from where we proceed to St Matthias Church. After visiting the church we will walk down Tarnok Utca to the Royal Palace. At the Royal Palace we visit the National Gallery, devoted exclusively to Hungarian Art.

At this point you are free to continue independent exploration, or return to the hotel. One of the highlights of our Eastern European tours is using the local transport in each city -- most travellers truly enjoy the experience. Your Tour Leader can help plan the rest of your day.

Overnight in Budapest. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 8 *Budapest: At Leisure*

The day is yours to explore on your own. You may choose to return to the promenade, explore a museum, or enjoy a coffee and cake in one of the many coffeehouses. The coffeehouse has a long tradition in Budapest; at the turn of the 20th century there were more than 400 coffeehouses in the city, many of them patronized by struggling writers. The coffeehouse was a cornerstone of Budapest literary life.

Overnight in Budapest. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 9 *Budapest - Szentendre - Holloko - Eger*

This morning we travel by private coach to the riverside town of Szentendre, along the 'Danube Bend'. Szentendre is known for its museums, galleries and artists. Populated for well over a millennium, under the Romans it was called Ulcisia Castra, meaning Wolf Castle. Today its south European atmosphere with baroque architecture, churches of various faiths, narrow side streets, and cobblestone roads characterizes this town. You tour leader will take you on a walking tour through this gorgeous little town.

From Szentendre we continue on towards Eger. We will make a stop in the UNESCO protected village of Holloko, a small town of approximately 650 people. What sets this village apart from others is the 'Old Village' where 50 houses have been listed and declared historic monuments. Throughout time Holloko has managed to preserve its unique ethnographic and folk art values. The village itself is picturesque, with its cobbled streets and little white houses. Atop the nearby hill we can view what remains of a 13th century castle that was blown up by the Hapsburgs.

From here we continue on to Eger, situated in the Eger Valley between the Bukk and Matra Hills. Eger is famous for Red Bull's Blood (Egri Bikaver) wine, its medieval library, and for having the northernmost minaret in Europe. There are still many accessible sites and much charm to the narrow streets, arcaded buildings, wrought-iron gates, and

Baroque towers and domes of the Old Town. This is the perfect walking city with something interesting at every turn. The nearby peaks of some of Hungary's highest mountains provide a natural backdrop for this city's historic monuments.

Overnight in Eger. Hotel Korona or similar. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 10 *Eger: Town Tour*

Eger has been inhabited since the Stone Age. During the early Middle Ages the area was inhabited by German, Avar and Slavonic tribes. Taken over by the Hungarians in the 10th century, Eger reached an age of prosperity during the 14th-16th centuries. Winegrowing, for which the town is still famous, began to be important at that time. During the Turkish occupation of Central Hungary, Eger became an important border fortress, successfully defended by Hungarian forces in the 1552 Siege of Eger, in the face of overwhelming odds.

Our walking tour today will include a visit to the famous castle of Eger with its museum and underground casements. We will also see the Archbishop's Palace, Franciscan Church, and Turkish Minaret.

Overnight in Eger. Hotel Korona or similar. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 11 *Eger - Paks - Siklos - Pecs*

Today we depart early for our journey from Eger to the region of Southern Transdanubia, a region of undulating hills, forest clad ridges and rural ambience.

After passing Budapest we start our route south, traveling parallel to the Danube River for much of our journey. After passing by Paks, a town in central Hungary on the banks of the Danube River, we will continue to the city of Pecs. Pecs has been selected to be the European Capital of Culture in 2010, sharing the title together with Essen and Istanbul. This is a city not to be missed; as it is a major art center and university town. Here we will take a walking tour of the Old Town, and will see the historic cathedral, synagogue, mosques and fourth-century Christian necropolis, a UNESCO World Heritage Site with burial chambers decorated in murals.

Overnight in Pecs. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 12 *Pecs - Villany - Pecs*

This morning we will venture towards the southern border to visit the historic town of Siklos and its well-preserved medieval castle. Wine has been produced in this region since the Romans settled here at a place they called Seres. After our visit to the castle we will continue on to Villany for lunch and an afternoon of sightseeing. The famous Villany -- Siklos Wine Road is 30 km long and covers 8 villages. The Romans finds uncovered at the base of the hills prove that people have been growing grapes and making wine here for over 2,000 years. Today the Villany -- Siklos wine region covers an area of about 2,000 hectares. In Villany, the village after which wine region is named, we will visit the Wine Museum, situated amongst the historic wine cellars. We will take a walk here, on the mild slopes of the southernmost wine region of Hungary. We will visit some of the local cellars and sample some of the locally produced wines. We then return to Pecs for our overnight.

Overnight in Pecs. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 13 *Pecs - Lake Balaton Region - Budapest*

Today we proceed north to the Lake Balaton Region. Lake Balaton is the largest lake in Central Europe and is often affectionately called the "Hungarian Sea".

Our day will be spent exploring this region. We will cross the lake by ferry from Szantod to Tihany. The Tihany Peninsula was declared a national park in 1952, and the peninsula is well known for its historical monuments, beautiful panorama and its Mediterranean climate. Balatonfured is a small town on the northern shore of the lake and is part of a region that was important to social life in the 18th century, even before bathing and swimming took off as a mass pastime 100 years later. This is the place where the first Balaton steamship started its trips, and the first yachtsmen's association began here. Here were built the villas of 19th-century celebrities, and the town is still the center of festivities. Patients have been treated here for three hundred years with the help of the mineral water sources, as the water is good for diabetes and digestive malfunctions.

Veszprem is a quaint and quiet town away from the lakeshore region, and here we will take a walk in the Castle Quarter.

At the end of our day we travel back to Budapest for our last night in Hungary.

Overnight in Budapest. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 14 *Budapest, Hungary - Train to Bucharest, Romania*

This morning is a free in Budapest.

Later we take the overnight sleeper train to Bucharest.

NOTE: Single compartments are not available on overnight train. Single supplement rates reflect sharing for this one night.

Overnight train. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 15 *Arrival in Bucharest & City Tour - Suceava*

This morning we arrive in Bucharest and, after a bit of a break and a chance to meet up with group participants joining at this point, we embark on a tour of Bucharest.

Bucharest, the capital of Romania and the nation's powerhouse of cultural and economic life, was founded 500 years ago and it is a natural starting point for our visit to the country. During the 1930's its tree-lined boulevards and fin de siecle architecture earned it the nickname "The Little Paris of the East". There is even an Arc de Triomphe on the handsome Soseaua Kiseleff, itself longer than the Champs Elysees and alive with blossoms in the spring.

Despite the massive reconstructions of the 1980's, Bucharest remains a ‘Garden City', leafy and pleasant, with many sidewalk cafes. Our tour today will include the Cotroceni Palace and Museum where we see the 6,000 room Parliament Palace. We will also see the Triumphal Arch, the Romanian Athenaeum, and University Square.

After lunch we will drive out to visit the Bucharest Village Museum. Situated in a picturesque environment on a lakeshore, this is one of the largest and oldest outdoors museums in Europe. Its exhibits, including houses, churches, water and windmills are of great historic and artistic value.

We will have an early dinner in Bucharest today before heading to the airport for our evening flight to Suceava* in the northeastern province of Romania. This is the heart of an area renowned for its ‘painted' monasteries.

* Occasionally, due to irregular flight schedules, we may have to fly to a town called Iasi and transfer by road (150 km) to Suceava.

Overnight in Suceava. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 16 *Suceava - Bucovina Monasteries - Piatra Neamt*

Today is spent visiting some of the most impressive Bucovina monasteries. These triumphs of Byzantine-influenced art reflect a flowering of Moldavian civilization in the 15th and 16th centuries. The "Painted" Monasteries are a major Moldavian destination, because of the vivid and animated frescoes on their church walls. In acknowledgement of their value, the monasteries in Becoming have been declared as UNESCO protected cultural sites. The art historians compare their artistic value with the mural paintings of the San Marco church of Venice. The secrets of the Moldavian painters who prepared the colors and the techniques that made the paintings incredibly resistant are still a mystery.

We will visit Voronet, a nun monastery consecrated to St George, within walking distance from Guar Humorous town. Voronet is probably the most accomplished sample of artistic achievement in Moldavian architecture and painting. The monastery was built at a time of peace with the Turks, when Stephen had centralized the state, giving a new impetus to its economy and culture. We will also visit Humor Monastery, founded in 1530.

After a visit to the famous Marginea black ceramics centre, we visit the Sucevita Monastery, the largest and arguably the finest of the Bukovina monasteries. The church inside the fortified monastic enclosure (1586) is almost completely covered in frescoes inside and out.

After spending the balance of our day exploring this region we depart for Piatra Neamt, the capital city of Neamt County, in the historical region of Moldavia. Because of its location in the Eastern Carpathian Mountains, it is considered one of the most picturesque cities in Romania.

Overnight in Piatra Neamt. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 17 *Piatra Neamt - Bicaz Gorges - Sighisoara*

Today we depart for Sighisoara via the Bicaz Gorges. The road that slices through the Bicaz Gorges is among Romania's most spectacular. The gorge twists and turns steeply uphill for 5km, cutting through sheer, 300-meter high limestone rocks. At one point, the narrow mountain road runs beneath the overhanging rocks in a section known as the 'neck of hell'. This stretch of road is protected as part of the Hasmas-Bicaz Gorges National Park.

A few kilometers west we will cross into Transylvania's Harghita County and immediately come to the resort area of Lacu Rosu or Red Lake. The alpine resort in this region sprang up in the 1970's and is still a magnet for hikers from both Transylvania and Moldavia. From the lake region, the main road continues via further mountain passed and beautiful scenery.

We will stop for lunch today in Praid, and will also visit the spectacular Praid Salt Mine. Praid is the natural centre of he Salt Region, and one of the most important salt mines of Transylvania can be found here. The underground salt mountain once supplied the whole Seckler and Saxon lands with this indispensable mineral. The history of the village is inked to the salt. The salt mine and salt baths of Praid are well known all over the country. Our tour into the mine is by

bus and is not strenuous. We travel about 1500 m into the salt dome, dropping about 25 m. Inside we visit the underground mining museum, which shows salt minerals, mining tools, and folk art objects.

Our journey will end today with our arrival in Sighisoara. Sighisoara -- Schassburg in German, or Segesvar in Hungarian, the only inhabited Middle Ages city in Europe. Mentioned by historians as far back as 1191, Sighisoara has a long tradition in craftsmanship and trade and its fortifications and defense towers still witness for guilds as those of tinsmiths, butchers, hatters, and blacksmiths. Narrow winding streets, houses with thick walls and huge portals painted in vivid colours, towers, and churches, all old and very old (13th-16th centuries) enhance the charm of the place.

Overnight in Sighisoara. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 18 *Sighisoara - Biertan - Sibiu*

This morning we will start with a walking tour of Sighisoara. We will visit to the History Museum located in the former Town Hall. The Clock Tower, dated from the 14th Century, reveals a marvelous view over Sighisoara. We will also see the house where Vlad Tepes once lived.

We continue on to Biertan, a former Saxon village south of Sighisoara. Here in Biertan we find a fortified church from 15th century, listed as a UNESCO World Heritage, representative of the unique Transylvanian phenomenon of building rural fortified churches. Surrounded by three lines of defense walls of 12m high and towers, the church was never breached by invaders.

The next visit on our journey today brings us to Sibiu. Called Hermannstadt in German, Sibiu was the most important of the 12th century Saxon settlements in Transylvania and its industrious emigres, primarily from the Rhineland, the Moselle Valley, Flanders and Saxony, erected walls around it for protection. The first wall destroyed by invaders not long after its construction, but remains of a 15th century brick wall still stand. Because of the blood shed at its walls, the Turks, after an unsuccessful onslaught, called Sibiu the "Red City." Built into the walls are defense towers that were assigned to particular guilds and medieval houses.

Upon arrival we will enjoy a sightseeing tour of Sibiu, one of the oldest towns on the Transylvanian Plateau. We will wander its old quarter, where houses with immense roofs have been built within the fortifications, giving Sibiu its powerful medieval aspect. The Tartans destroyed the town's first Citadel in the 13th century and the massive Evangelical Church now occupies the site. It took 200 years to build the church in the 14th and 15th centuries.

Overnight in Sibiu. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 19 *Sibiu - Brasov - Bran Castle - Sinaia*

This morning we will depart for Brasov, stopping en-route in Fagaras town for a short visit.

Upon arrival in Brasov we will enjoy a sightseeing tour. Kronstadt in German, Brasso in Hungarian, Brasov ranks second in size after Bucharest. The Old Town lies between two mountains, surrounded like a halo by the Carpathians, and the city of Brasov benefits from the influence of an ancient history.

We will then continue on towards Bran for a visit to Bran Castle, erroneously claimed by some to be that of Count Dracula, the world's most famous vampire. Perched atop a rocky outcrop, this strategically located castle was built in 1377 to protect nearby Brasov from invaders. It also served as a customs station. The castle's rooms and towers surround an inner courtyard. Some rooms are connected through underground passages to the inner court. Bran is home to a rich collection of Romanian and foreign furniture and art items from the 14th-19th centuries.

We also visit Sinaia, the "Pearl of the Carpathian Mountains". We visit the former royal summer residence built by Carol I Hohenzolern Sigmaringen of Romania (1881-1914). We will take a leisurely STROLL up to the 17th century Sinaia Monastery, an interesting cluster of churches and courtyards which take their name from the ancient Egyptian monastery on Mount Sinai.

Overnight in Sinaia. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 20 *Sinaia - Peles & Pelisor Castles - Bucharest*

This morning we will visit the nearby Peles and Pelisor Castles. Considered by many one of the most beautiful castles in all Europe, Peles Castle is a masterpiece of German new-Renaissance architecture. This castle was built in the final quarter of the last century for Romania's 'imported ruler' King Carol. Designed mainly in German Renaissance style, this summer residence was decorated throughout by Carol's eccentric wife Carmen Sylvan. Many valuable objects are contained within the castles 160 rooms.

Almost adjacent to Peles Castle is Pelisor ("Little Peles"). King Ferdinand, who succeeded Carol I, intended to use Peles Castle as a summer residence. Pelisor's 70 rooms feature a unique collection of turn-of-the century Viennese furniture and Tiffany and Lalique glassware, and were mostly decorated in the Art-Nouveau style by Queen Maria.

We then continue on to Bucharest. Our journey south takes us via Targoviste where we visit the Princely Court and Sunset Tower. The Princely Court in Targoviste was the capital of Wallachia, where Vlad the Impaler (Dracula) ruled. Vlad took the throne at the Princely Court in 1456. To repay boyars for taking he and his brother hostages, it was here that Vlad impaled a great many of his enemies after inviting them to a feast on Easter Sunday.

Overnight in Bucharest. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 21 *Departure*

Departure from Bucharest.

DRUM BUN! Meal plan: Breakfast.