

ROMANIA

8 days

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Day 1 Arrive in Bucharest

Arrive in Bucharest, the capital of Romania.

Overnight in Bucharest.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Bucharest - Sinaia: Peles & Bran Castles - Sighisoara

We begin our full day of travel and activities with a morning departure by road toward Sinaia.

Upon arrival we will visit the nearby Peles Castle. 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.

We also visit Sinaia, the "Pearl of the Carpathian Mountains". 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. After a break for lunch in Sinaia we depart for Bran and Bran Castle.

Bran Castle is 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. 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. After our visit we continue to Sighisoara, arriving in time for dinner.

Overnight in Sighisoara.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Sighisoara, Sibiu & Biertan

This morning we have a day trip to Sibiu and Biertan.

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 have 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.

We continue to Biertan, a former Saxon village south of Sighisoara. Here 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. After a break for lunch here, we'll return to Sighisoara for a walking tour and (perhaps) some free time before dinner.

Schassburg in German, or Segesvar in Hungarian, Sighisoara is the only inhabited Middle Ages city in Europe. Mentioned by historians as far

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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.

We will visit to the History Museum located in the former Town Hall. The Clock Tower, dated from the 14th Century, reveals a marvellous view over Sighisoara.

Overnight in Sighisoara.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Sighisoara - Praid Salt Mine - Bistrita - Gura Humorului

Today we visit is one of the biggest salt mines in Europe. Its exploitation has been an important income source for the inhabitants of the area for hundreds of years.

We arrive in the heart of the mountains by bus through a long tunnel (1500 m). 120 m below the surface we find an underground city. The air is ionized and it is believed to have therapeutic qualities for those suffering from respiratory ailments. Treatments are given under the supervision of a medical team that organizes gym programs and breathing exercises. Tourists have everything they need: treatment places, coffee shops, billiards, libraries, entertainment and even a place where people can pray.

After a break for lunch in Praid, we continue via Bistrita, founded in the early 13th century by German settlers and (due to its location on the main trading route with Moldavia) to become one of Transylvania's major Medieval cities. Some visitors are attracted by the fact that the town was mentioned in Bram Stoker's novel, Dracula.

We overnight in Gura Humorului, the perfect base for our explorations of the Painted Monasteries of Bucovina.

Overnight in Gura Humorului.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Bucovina Monasteries

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 Gura Humorului 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.

Overnight in Gura Humorului.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Gura Humorului - Cheile Bicazului - Lacu Rosu - Brasov

This morning we will depart for Brasov via a photo stop at Cheile Bicazului (Bicaz Canyon).

The road that slices through the Bicz 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 Hasm-Bicz 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. We'll break for lunch before continuing to Brasov.

Overnight in Brasov.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Brasov: Town Tour - Bucharest: City Tour

This morning we tour Brasov. 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. In Brasov we will visit the Black Church and Museum of First Romanian School of Schei.

We depart for Bucharest, arriving in time for a break for lunch. We then begin our sightseeing program in the capital, the nation's powerhouse of cultural and economic life founded 500 years ago.* 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, the Triumphal Arch, the Romanian Athenaeum, and University Square. 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.

* Our intention is always to include the Palace of the Parliament; however, the facility is frequently closed to visitors for official purposes/events, often without notice. If we are able to squeeze it in, please note that it may require that we miss something else due to time constraints.

Overnight in Bucharest.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Departure

Departure from Bucharest.

DRUM BUN!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast