

ROMANIA & BULGARIA

Castles, Palaces & Monasteries

15 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 Bucharest, Romania - Sofia, Bulgaria

Today we fly to Sofia, the capital city of Bulgaria.*

Sofia itself is largely a city of wide boulevards and squares, pleasant parks, and enormous Socialist Realism-style buildings. In the 5th century BC, Sofia was the Thracian city of Serdika. When the Romans conquered Thrace, they made it the capital. Then the hordes of Attila the Hun set it on fire in the 5th century AD and Justinian rebuilt it.

* THE TIMING of today's flight will determine if we have free time in Bucharest or Sofia.

Overnight in Sofia.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Sofia & Rila Monastery

This morning we depart for the 10th century Rila Monastery, 121 km (75 miles) south of Sofia at the end of a winding road through high rock

walls with formations like giant animals waiting to pounce. This most-revered of all Bulgarian monasteries lies nestled in a soft, green wood. Mountains rise all around it; below it the Rilska River races over a stony bed.

In the 9th century, twenty-year old Ivan Rilski (John of Rila) fled to this peaceful place seeking escape from the sordidness of the world. Finding a cave in the woods above this present monastery site, he took up the hermit life. Here he fed the animals and the birds and prayed in the stillness to God. In time, like-minded men joined him and they built the first monastery here about a 2.4 km (1.5 mile) from the present site, where, today, you will find his tomb, the little Church of St. Luke, and the cave he inhabited. In the past, pilgrims were not deemed sinless enough to enter the monastery.

The Rila Monastery is one of Europe's largest monasteries, located in some of Bulgaria's most beautiful terrain. Sightseeing of the monastery features the unsurpassed frescoes of the Church of the Blessed Virgin. Monks still practice within this five-domed treasure. Also contained within the exquisite fortress-like walls of the monastery is the Historical Museum featuring a collection of objects connected with the monastery's thousand-year history.

After lunch we will return to Sofia, where we will finish our day with a visit to the National Museum of History, a great introduction to what we will experience and see in the days to come.

Overnight in Sofia.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Sofia - Plovdiv

Today we travel to the ancient city of Plovdiv, situated in the Plain of Thrace. Plovdiv was formerly known as Pulpudeva until Philip II of Macedon's weary horse collapsed under him here at the edge of the Thracian plain in AD 342. Since that was surely an omen, he built Philippi on the site in the horse's honour. Later the Romans renamed it Trimontium -- the City on Three Hills. For five centuries, under Turkish rule when it was known as Philibe, it suffered much devastation. Today it is a city of great charm, with legacies of a hectic past.

Plovdiv has a lovely "stariyat grad," or old town, with Turkish influences and a charming character. Our tour includes the Old Quarter, the Ethnographical Museum, and the Roman Amphitheatre. Within Trimontium, the historic heart of Plovdiv, typical 19th century Bulgarian homes line the streets.

Overnight in Plovdiv.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Plovdiv - Valley of the Roses - Veliko Tarnovo

This morning we depart Plovdiv for the world famous Valley of the Roses.

In this valley, 70 percent of the world's "attar", or extract from roses, is produced. Nimble- fingered women and girls do most of the picking, while donkeys are used to carry the petals away.

In the town of Kazanlak we visit the Thracian Tomb (fourth and third centuries BC). The Thracians are regarded as the original Bulgarians, a people closely linked with the ancient Greeks. Before our climb over the Shipka Pass we will visit the Shipka Memorial Church. The golden Domes of this Russian-style church rise out of the hillside. After crossing the spectacular Shipka with its majestic vistas and momentous history we visit the open-air Ethnographical Museum of Etara, a recreation of a typical 19th century village.

After a tour of the museum we continue on to Veliko Tarnovo, once the capital of Bulgaria (1185-1396) and still showing the remains of its past glory -- fortress walls and palaces perched among the steep cliffs of the Yantra Gorge. Clinging to the crags that rise above the River Yantra, this capital of the second Bulgarian Kingdom of the Middle Ages is one of the country's most picturesque sites. It rises on three main hills: fortified Tsarevets; Trapezitsa, where boyars lived; and Sveta Gora, then the centre of a scholarly monastery, now a university site.

Overnight in Veliko Tarnovo.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Veliko Tarnovo: Town Tour

Today we have a tour of this town laced with history. We will admire the breathtaking views of this picturesque region during our tour of the Tsarevets Citadel (Castle of the Czar). This commanding position was first fortified in the 6th century and had become the royal centre of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom by the end of the 12th century. A short drive away is the hilltop village of Arbanassi, first settled by Albanian immigrants in the 15th century. We will have the opportunity to visit several of the houses in the region dating back to the 16th and 17th centuries.

Balance of the day at leisure.

Overnight in Veliko Tarnovo.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Veliko Turnovo - Sofia

Today we travel to Sofia via the beautiful Danube Plain. En-route we will cross over the Troyan Pass and visit the nearby Troyan Monastery, Bulgaria's third largest. After a lunch break we will continue on the well-preserved 'museum-town' of Koprivshitsa. It was here that the revolt against the Ottoman occupation began in 1876. A visit here gives us an insight as to how Bulgarians lived a century ago. Our WALK throughout the enchanting town will bring us to many unique houses with wooden columns, painted facades, richly decorated interiors, and lovely gardens.

Overnight in Sofia.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Sofia: City Sightseeing

Today we have a sightseeing WALKING tour of Sofia.

The motto of the city is "Sofia Grows but Never Ages"; founded over 7,000 years ago, Sofia today is an exciting meeting place of history and the present. Traces of the lives of Thracians and Romans, Proto-Bulgarians and Slavs can be seen here. More than 250 historic, archaeological and architectural monuments have been preserved in Sofia, the center of the country's political and cultural life.

We'll also see some of the most famous landmarks: The magnificent St Alexander Nevsky Cathedral, one of the most spectacular buildings in Sofia. In addition to the splendor of the building itself, the cathedral is also remarkable for its icons and murals, painted by the time's foremost artists. Its crypt contains the most valuable collection of Bulgarian icons.

St Sofia's Church is the second oldest, but most significant building, which gave the city its name. Specialists highly value this remarkable archaeological monument, witness of Serdica's golden age during the 6th century. The large archaeological complex of Roman and medieval ruins, dominated by St George Rotunda is the oldest building in Sofia. Repeatedly destroyed and rebuilt, the St George Rotunda has been restored to its original 5th century appearance when it was used as a Christian church.

The remainder of the afternoon is yours for independent exploration.

Overnight in Sofia.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 15 Departure

Departure from Sofia.

PRIJATNO PATUVANE!!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast