

HUNGARY & ROMANIA

'Eastern European Adventurer'

16 days

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Day 1 Arrive in Budapest

Today we arrive in Budapest, 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.

Overnight in Budapest.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Budapest: City Tour

Heroes' Square provides our dramatic starting point, where we learn about Hungary's complex thousand-year history at the imposing Vajdahunyad Castle. This eclectic structure showcases different periods of Hungarian architecture, from Romanesque to Gothic to Renaissance styles.

We then cross Margaret Bridge to Buda's hilly side, where the Citadel offers panoramic views of the entire city spread along both banks of the Danube. The vista reveals Budapest's unique geographic setting, where rolling hills meet the great plain, and architectural treasures from every era create one of Europe's most beautiful urban landscapes.

Castle Hill becomes our main focus, where we spend the remainder of the day exploring St. Matthias Church with its distinctive diamond-patterned roof and the fairytale Fisherman's Bastion with its seven towers representing the seven Magyar tribes that settled in the Carpathian Basin. These neo-Gothic and neo-Romanesque structures, though relatively recent, perfectly capture the romantic spirit of Hungarian history.

After lunch, we visit the Royal Palace, home to the National Gallery dedicated exclusively to Hungarian art. Here we trace the development of Hungarian artistic expression from medieval times through the present, gaining insight into how this unique culture preserved its identity through centuries of foreign domination.

Overnight in Budapest

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Budapest: Walking Tour

This morning we embark on a leisurely WALKING tour of city's urban heart. This is an 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 1,000 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.

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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. The balance of the day at leisure.

Overnight in Budapest.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Budapest - Szentendre - Hollóko - Eger

The romantic Danube Bend leads us to Szentendre, a riverside town celebrated for its museums, galleries and artists. Once called Ulcisia Castra (Wolf Castle) by the Romans, today Szentendre charms visitors with its south European atmosphere, baroque architecture, churches of various faiths, narrow side streets, and cobblestone roads. Our walking tour reveals why this picturesque town has attracted artists for generations.

We then visit the UNESCO-protected village of Hollóko, where approximately 650 people maintain one of Europe's best-preserved traditional settlements. The 'Old Village' contains 50 houses listed as historic monuments, their white-painted walls and red-tile roofs creating a harmonious ensemble unchanged for centuries. Throughout time, Hollóko has preserved its unique ethnographic and folk art values, while atop the nearby hill, the remains of a 13th-century castle remind us of medieval Hungary's turbulent frontier history.

Our journey continues to Eger, nestled in the valley between the Bükk and Matra Hills. This historic city gained fame for three things: Egri Bikavér (Bull's Blood) wine, its magnificent medieval library, and possessing Europe's northernmost minaret – a reminder of 150 years of Turkish occupation. The narrow streets, arcaded buildings, wrought-iron gates, and baroque towers create perfect walking opportunities, while the peaks of Hungary's highest mountains provide a dramatic natural backdrop.

Overnight in Eger

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Eger: Town Tour

Eger's story stretches back to the Stone Age, but the town achieved its greatest glory during the 1552 Siege of Eger, when Hungarian forces successfully defended against overwhelming Ottoman odds. During the early Middle Ages, German, Avar and Slavonic tribes inhabited the area before Hungarian settlement in the 10th century brought prosperity that peaked during the 14th-16th centuries, when winegrowing became the economic foundation for which Eger remains famous today.

Our walking tour includes the impressive Eger Castle with its museum and underground casemates, where we learn about the legendary defence that inspired generations of Hungarians. The fortress walls and towers tell stories of courage and determination that echo through Hungarian national consciousness.

We also visit the Archbishop's Palace, a baroque masterpiece that reflects the Counter-Reformation's influence in Hungary, and the Franciscan Church, whose elegant interior showcases religious art from several centuries. The Turkish Minaret, a 40-metre cylindrical tower, stands as one of Hungary's most unusual monuments – the northernmost minaret in Europe and one of the few surviving architectural reminders of Ottoman rule in Central Europe.

Overnight in Eger

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Eger - Paks - Siklos - Pécs

Southern Transdanubia welcomes us with its landscape of undulating hills, forest-clad ridges and rural ambience as we depart Eger for Hungary's southwestern region. Our route leads us past Budapest and south along the Danube River, through countryside where small villages and agricultural lands create a pastoral symphony of green fields and traditional farmsteads.

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After passing Paks, situated on the banks of the Danube River, we continue toward Pecs, a city selected as European Capital of Culture in 2010, sharing the title with Essen and Istanbul. This distinction reflects Pecs' role as a major art centre and university town, where intellectual and cultural life has flourished for over a thousand years.

Our walking tour of the Old Town reveals layers of history: the historic cathedral with its distinctive four towers, the synagogue representing the once-thriving Jewish community, ancient mosques from the Ottoman period, and the fourth-century Christian necropolis – a UNESCO World Heritage Site featuring burial chambers decorated with remarkable early Christian murals that represent some of Europe's finest examples of late Roman and early Christian art.

Overnight in Pecs

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Pecs - Villany - Pecs

The historic town of Siklos and its remarkably well-preserved medieval castle anchor our morning exploration near Hungary's southern border. Wine production began here when Romans settled at a place they called Seres, and archaeological finds prove that viticulture has thrived in this region for over two millennia.

After exploring Siklos Castle's towers, walls, and courtyards, we embark on an afternoon journey along the famous Villany-Siklos Wine Road, a 30-kilometre route covering eight villages where vineyards cascade down south-facing slopes in perfect conditions for winemaking. The Romans first recognised this area's potential, and finds uncovered at the base of the hills confirm over 2,000 years of continuous grape cultivation.

Today the Villany-Siklos wine region encompasses approximately 2,000 hectares, where Mediterranean-style red wines thrive in a climate warmer than most of Hungary. Local winemakers specialise in full-bodied reds that have gained international recognition, particularly Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and the indigenous Kadarka variety. We sample these distinctive wines while learning about traditional and modern winemaking techniques from local vintners.

Overnight in Pecs

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Pecs - Lake Balaton Region - Budapest

Lake Balaton, affectionately called the "Hungarian Sea," spreads before us as we journey north to Central Europe's largest lake. This massive freshwater lake, stretching 77 kilometres in length, has served as Hungary's premier holiday destination for generations of families seeking respite from urban life.

Our exploration focuses on the Tihany Peninsula, declared a national park in 1952 and renowned for its historical monuments, beautiful panoramas, and Mediterranean-like climate created by the lake's moderating influence. We cross the lake by ferry from Szantod to Tihany, enjoying views across the water toward distant hills where vineyards and resort towns dot the shoreline.

At Tihany, we visit the Benedictine Abbey Church, built in 1754 on the site of King Andrew I's original 11th-century church. This twin-spired, ochre-coloured baroque masterpiece dominates the peninsula's skyline. Inside, we admire the fantastic altars, pulpits and screens carved between 1753 and 1779 by Austrian lay brother Sebastian Stuhlhof – each a baroque-rococo masterpiece. King Andrew I's remains rest in a limestone sarcophagus in the atmospheric Romanesque crypt.

We also visit Balatonfüred, a charming town on the lake's northern shore that played an important role in 18th-century social life. Here the first Balaton steamship began its journeys, and the first yachtsmen's association established its headquarters. For three centuries, patients have been treated with mineral water springs beneficial for diabetes and digestive ailments.

Overnight in Budapest

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Budapest, Hungary - Bucharest, Romania

Romanian legend tells us that Bucharest was founded on the banks of the Dambovită River by a shepherd named Bucur, whose name literally means "joy." His enchanting flute playing reportedly dazzled the people, while his hearty wine from nearby vineyards endeared him to local traders, who gave his name to their settlement.

This morning we fly to Romania's largest city and capital, once known for its wide, tree-lined boulevards, glorious Belle Époque buildings and reputation for high living that earned it the nickname "Little Paris" in the early 1900s. Today Bucharest pulses as a bustling metropolis where medieval streets meet communist-era boulevards and modern European districts.

After settling into our accommodations, we embark on an informal walking orientation of the city centre, where layers of history create a fascinating urban palimpsest. Romanian, Ottoman, Austrian, French, and Soviet influences blend in architecture, cuisine, and cultural traditions, while the vibrant energy of contemporary Romania emerges in cafes, galleries, and public spaces throughout the historic centre.

Overnight in Bucharest

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Bucharest - Sinaia: Peles & Bran Castles - Sighisoara

The Carpathian Mountains rise dramatically as we journey toward Sinaia to visit Peles Castle, considered by many connoisseurs one of Europe's most beautiful castles. This masterpiece of German new-Renaissance architecture was built in the final quarter of the 19th century for Romania's "imported ruler" King Carol I. Designed primarily in German Renaissance style, this summer residence received lavish decoration throughout its 160 rooms from Carol's eccentric wife, Carmen Sylva, creating an extraordinary showcase of royal taste and craftsmanship.

We also visit Sinaia itself, known as the "Pearl of the Carpathian Mountains," where we take a leisurely stroll to the 17th-century Sinaia Monastery. This interesting cluster of churches and courtyards takes its name from the ancient Egyptian monastery on Mount Sinai, reflecting the Orthodox Christian traditions that shaped Romanian spiritual life.

After lunch, we proceed to Bran Castle, dramatically perched atop a rocky outcrop. This strategically located fortress, built in 1377 to protect nearby Braşov from invaders, is erroneously claimed by some to be Count Dracula's castle – though its real history proves far more fascinating than any vampire legend. The castle's rooms and towers surround an inner courtyard, with some chambers connected through underground passages. Bran houses a rich collection of Romanian and foreign furniture and art items from the 14th-19th centuries.

We arrive in Sighisoara as evening settles over this perfectly-preserved medieval city.

Overnight in Sighisoara

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Sighisoara, Sibiu & Biertan

Sibiu, called Hermannstadt in German, was the most important of the 12th-century Saxon settlements in Transylvania. Industrious emigrants, primarily from the Rhineland, the Moselle Valley, Flanders and Saxony, erected protective walls around their prosperous settlement. Though invaders destroyed the first wall, remains of the 15th-century brick fortifications still stand. Because of the blood shed at its walls during Turkish sieges, the unsuccessful Ottoman attackers called Sibiu the "Red City."

Our sightseeing tour reveals Sibiu as one of the oldest towns on the Transylvanian Plateau, where we wander through the old quarter lined with houses featuring immense roofs built within medieval fortifications. This creates Sibiu's powerful medieval atmosphere, enhanced by the massive Evangelical Church that occupies the site where Tartars destroyed the town's first citadel in the 13th century. The church required 200 years to complete during the 14th and 15th centuries.

We continue to Biertan, a former Saxon village south of Sighisoara, where we discover a fortified church from the 15th century, listed as UNESCO World Heritage as representative of Transylvania's unique phenomenon of rural fortified churches. Surrounded by three lines of defence walls reaching 12 metres high and protective towers, this church was never breached by invaders despite numerous sieges.

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We return to Sighisoara for a walking tour of this remarkable city. Known as Schassburg in German or Segesvar in Hungarian, Sighisoara stands as the only inhabited Middle Ages city in Europe. The History Museum occupies the former Town Hall, while the 14th-century Clock Tower reveals marvellous views over the entire medieval settlement.

Overnight in Sighisoara

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Sighisoara - Bistrita - Gura Humorului

We venture deep underground to visit one of Europe's biggest salt mines,* where exploitation has provided an important income source for local inhabitants for hundreds of years. We arrive in the heart of the mountains through a long tunnel (1,500 metres), descending 120 metres below the surface to discover an underground city.

The ionised air possesses therapeutic qualities for those suffering from respiratory ailments, and medical teams organise gym programs and breathing exercises for visitors seeking treatment. This subterranean world contains everything needed for extended stays: treatment facilities, coffee shops, billiards tables, libraries, entertainment areas, and even a chapel where people can pray in this unique underground environment.

After lunch, we continue via Bistrita, founded in the early 13th century by German settlers. Due to its strategic location on the main trading route with Moldavia, Bistrita became one of Transylvania's major medieval cities. Some visitors find additional intrigue in the fact that Bram Stoker mentioned this town in his novel Dracula, though the historical reality proves far more interesting than any fictional vampire tale.

We arrive in Gura Humorului, our perfect base for exploring the Painted Monasteries of Bucovina, where Byzantine-influenced art reached extraordinary heights during the 15th and 16th centuries.

* The mines tend to be susceptible to flooding and may not be available at the time of our visit. If a visit is not possible, we'll substitute the Mining Museum

Overnight in Gura Humorului

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Bucovina Monasteries

The painted monasteries of Bucovina represent triumphs of Byzantine-influenced art, reflecting a remarkable flowering of Moldavian civilisation in the 15th and 16th centuries. These "Painted" Monasteries constitute a major Moldavian destination because of their vivid and animated frescoes covering exterior church walls. UNESCO has declared the Bucovina monasteries as protected cultural sites, with art historians comparing their artistic value to the mural paintings of Venice's San Marco church.

We visit Voronet, a nun monastery consecrated to St. George, within walking distance of Gura Humorului. Voronet probably represents the most accomplished example of artistic achievement in Moldavian architecture and painting, built during a peaceful period when Stephen the Great had centralised the state and given new impetus to its economy and culture. The secrets of Moldavian painters who prepared the colours and techniques that made these paintings incredibly resistant to weather remain mysteries today.

We also explore Humor Monastery, founded in 1530, where exterior frescoes tell biblical stories in vivid detail that common people could understand even if they couldn't read. After visiting the famous Marginea black ceramics centre, where artisans continue traditional pottery techniques passed down through generations, we proceed to Sucevita Monastery, the largest and arguably the finest of the Bukovina monasteries. The church inside the fortified monastic enclosure (1586) displays almost complete fresco coverage inside and out, creating an overwhelming visual experience of medieval religious art.

Overnight in Gura Humorului

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Gura Humorului - Cheile Bicazului - Lacu Rosu - Brasov

The spectacular Bicaz Gorges provide our morning's dramatic backdrop as we traverse one of Romania's most breathtaking mountain routes. The road slices through the gorge, twisting and turning steeply uphill for 5 kilometres while cutting through sheer, 300-metre high limestone rocks. At one point, the narrow mountain road runs beneath overhanging rocks in a section known as the "neck of hell," where the gorge becomes so narrow that the cliffs seem to touch overhead.

This remarkable stretch of road enjoys protection as part of the Hasmas-Bicaz Gorges National Park, preserving one of the Carpathians' most spectacular natural formations. A few kilometres west, we cross into Transylvania's Harghita County and immediately encounter the resort area of Lacu Rosu (Red Lake), an alpine destination that developed in the 1970s and continues attracting hikers from both Transylvania and Moldavia.

The lake itself formed in 1837 when an earthquake triggered a massive landslide that dammed the Bicaz River, creating this scenic mountain lake surrounded by dramatic peaks. The area's name derives from the reddish sediment that gives the water its distinctive colour, particularly striking during certain light conditions. We break for lunch in this pristine mountain setting before continuing our journey to Brasov.

Overnight in Brasov

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 15 Brasov: Town Tour - Bucharest: City Tour

Brasov, known as Kronstadt in German and Brasso in Hungarian, ranks as Romania's second-largest city after Bucharest. The Old Town nestles between two mountains, surrounded like a protective embrace by the Carpathians. Here we visit the Black Church, Gothic architecture's largest achievement in southeastern Europe.

We then depart for Bucharest, arriving in time for lunch before beginning our comprehensive sightseeing program in Romania's capital. Founded 500 years ago, Bucharest serves as the nation's powerhouse of cultural and economic life. During the 1930s, its tree-lined boulevards and fin de siècle architecture earned it the nickname "The Little Paris of the East," a comparison emphasised by its own Arc de Triomphe on the handsome Soseaua Kiseleff – itself longer than the Champs Élysées and alive with blossoms in spring.

Despite massive reconstructions during the 1980s, Bucharest remains a "Garden City," leafy and pleasant, with numerous sidewalk cafes creating a distinctly European atmosphere. Our tour includes the Cotroceni Palace and Museum, the Triumphal Arch, the Romanian Athenaeum with its magnificent dome, and University Square. We conclude with a visit to the Bucharest Village Museum, situated in a picturesque lakeshore environment as one of Europe's largest and oldest outdoor museums. Its exhibits – including houses, churches, water mills and windmills – possess great historic and artistic value, representing rural Romanian life across the centuries.

* NOTE: We always attempt to include the Palace of the Parliament; however, the facility frequently closes to visitors for official purposes/events, often without notice.

Overnight in Bucharest

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 16 Departure

Departure from Bucharest.

DRUM BUN!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast