

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

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 Brasov 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 3 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.

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.

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Overnight in Sighisoara

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 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 5 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 6 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.

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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 Hasma-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 7 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 8 Departure

Departure from Bucharest.

DRUM BUN!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast