

ROMANIA & BULGARIA

Castles, Palaces & Monasteries

15 days

Created on: 19 Aug, 2025

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.

Overnight in Sighisoara

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Sighisoara - Praid Salt Mine - 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.

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 Bucovina 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. 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 Harghita-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, and the Museum of the First Romanian School of Schei, which preserves the history of Romanian education and culture during centuries of foreign rule.

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 Bucharest, Romania - Fly to Sofia, Bulgaria

Sofia, Bulgaria's capital, largely presents itself as 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, and when Romans conquered Thrace, they made it their capital. Attila the Hun's hordes set it ablaze in the 5th century AD, after which Justinian rebuilt it as an important Byzantine stronghold.

NOTE: The timing of today's flight will determine whether we have free time in Bucharest or Sofia.

Upon arrival in Sofia, we settle into our accommodations and begin our introduction to this ancient city where Thracian, Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman, and modern Bulgarian influences create a fascinating cultural mosaic. The wide boulevards reflect 19th-century urban planning, while archaeological sites scattered throughout the city centre reveal layers of two millennia of continuous habitation.

Overnight in Sofia.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Sofia & Rila Monastery

We journey 121 kilometres south of Sofia through high rock walls with formations like giant animals waiting to pounce, arriving at the 10th-century Rila Monastery nestled in soft, green woods. Mountains rise all around this most-revered of Bulgarian monasteries, while below, the Rilska River races over a stony bed through pristine wilderness.

In the 9th century, twenty-year-old Ivan Rilski (John of Rila) fled to this peaceful place seeking escape from worldly corruption. Finding a cave in the woods above the present monastery site, he embraced the hermit life, feeding animals and birds while praying in the stillness. Like-minded men eventually joined him, building the first monastery about 2.4 kilometres from the present site, where today you can visit his tomb, the little Church of St. Luke, and the cave he inhabited.

Rila Monastery ranks among Europe's largest monasteries, located in some of Bulgaria's most beautiful terrain. Our exploration features the unsurpassed frescoes of the Church of the Blessed Virgin, where monks still practice within this five-domed treasure. The exquisite fortress-like walls also contain the Historical Museum, featuring objects connected with the monastery's thousand-year history, including precious manuscripts, woodcarvings, and ecclesiastical treasures.

After lunch, we return to Sofia for a visit to the National Museum of History, providing an excellent introduction to Bulgarian culture, from ancient Thracian gold treasures to medieval manuscripts to folk traditions that survive today.

Overnight in Sofia.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Sofia - Plovdiv

We travel to ancient Plovdiv, situated in the Plain of Thrace, where history unfolds in layers across three dramatic hills. Plovdiv was formerly known as Pulpudeva until Philip II of Macedon's weary horse collapsed beneath him at the edge of the Thracian plain in 342 BC. Taking this as an omen, he built Philippolis on the site in his horse's honour. Later Romans renamed it Trimontium – the City on Three Hills – while five centuries of Turkish rule (when it was known as Philibe) brought significant changes to its character.

Today Plovdiv charms visitors with its lovely "stariyat grad" (old town), displaying Turkish influences alongside a distinctive Bulgarian character. Our tour explores the Old Quarter, the Ethnographical Museum housed in a beautifully preserved 19th-century mansion, and the remarkably well-preserved Roman Amphitheatre, still used for performances during summer festivals.

Within Trimontium, the historic heart of Plovdiv, typical 19th-century Bulgarian homes line cobblestoned streets, their overhanging upper floors and painted facades creating one of the Balkans' most photogenic neighbourhoods. The revival-period architecture reflects the prosperity of 19th-century Bulgarian merchants who traded throughout the Ottoman Empire while maintaining their cultural identity.

Overnight in Plovdiv

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Plovdiv - Valley of the Roses - Veliko Tarnovo

The world-famous Valley of the Roses unfolds before us, where 70 percent of the world's "attar" (rose extract) is produced in fields that transform into a pink carpet during May and June harvest season. Nimble-fingered women and girls do most of the picking in the early morning hours, while donkeys carry the precious petals to distilleries where the ancient art of rose oil production continues unchanged for centuries.

In Kazanlak, we visit the Thracian Tomb (4th-3rd centuries BC), a UNESCO World Heritage site representing the original Bulgarians' sophisticated burial customs. The Thracians, closely linked with ancient Greeks, created this underground chamber decorated with remarkable frescoes that survive as masterpieces of ancient art.

Before crossing the spectacular Shipka Pass with its majestic vistas and momentous history, we visit the Shipka Memorial Church, where golden domes rise from the hillside in Russian style, commemorating Bulgarian and Russian soldiers who died fighting for Bulgarian independence. The open-air Ethnographical Museum of Etura recreates a typical 19th-century village, where traditional crafts and rural life

continue in authentic workshops and homes.

We arrive in Veliko Tarnovo, once Bulgaria's capital (1185-1396) and still displaying remains of its past glory through fortress walls and palaces perched among steep cliffs of the Yantra Gorge. This capital of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom rises on three main hills: fortified Tsarevets; Trapezitsa, where boyars lived; and Sveta Gora, once a scholarly monastery centre, now a university site.

Overnight in Veliko Tarnovo

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Veliko Tarnovo: Town Tour

We explore this town laced with history through our tour of the commanding Tsarevets Citadel (Castle of the Czar), first fortified in the 6th century and evolved into the royal centre of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom by the 12th century's end. The breathtaking views from this picturesque region reveal why medieval Bulgarian rulers chose this dramatic setting for their capital.

A short drive brings us to the hilltop village of Arbanassi, first settled by Albanian immigrants in the 15th century. Here we visit several houses dating from the 16th and 17th centuries, their thick stone walls and hidden courtyards reflecting the uncertain times when wealthy merchants needed to protect their families and fortunes from bandits and tax collectors.

These remarkable houses demonstrate how Bulgarian Christians maintained their prosperity and culture during Ottoman rule, creating architectural gems that blend Bulgarian, Byzantine, and Ottoman influences. The Church of the Nativity contains some of Bulgaria's finest religious frescoes, painted when the village served as a summer retreat for wealthy Bulgarians.

The afternoon offers leisure time to absorb the medieval atmosphere of Veliko Tarnovo, perhaps exploring artisan shops or enjoying coffee while watching the Yantra River wind through the dramatic gorge below the ancient fortress.

Overnight in Veliko Tarnovo

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Veliko Turnovo - Sofia

The beautiful Danube Plain provides our scenic route back to Sofia as we cross the Troyan Pass and visit the nearby Troyan Monastery, Bulgaria's third largest. This spiritual centre, founded in the 17th century, houses remarkable frescoes and wood carvings that represent the pinnacle of Bulgarian religious art during the National Revival period.

After lunch, we continue to the well-preserved "museum-town" of Koprivshtitsa, where the revolt against Ottoman occupation began in 1876. This historic town preserves an invaluable collection of 19th-century Bulgarian architecture, when wealthy merchants built elaborate houses that celebrated Bulgarian identity through distinctive design and decoration.

Our walk through this enchanting town reveals unique houses with wooden columns, painted facades, richly decorated interiors, and lovely gardens that create a living museum of Bulgarian Renaissance culture. Each house tells stories of the families who lived here during Bulgaria's struggle for independence, when education, culture, and commerce flourished despite political oppression.

The architectural ensemble of Koprivshtitsa demonstrates how Bulgarians expressed their national awakening through art, literature, and architecture, creating a distinctive style that blended traditional Bulgarian elements with cosmopolitan influences from across Europe.

Overnight in Sofia

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Sofia: City Sightseeing

Sofia's motto proclaims "Sofia Grows but Never Ages," reflecting a city founded over 7,000 years ago that today serves as an exciting meeting place of history and modernity. Traces of Thracian and Roman lives, Proto-Bulgarian and Slavic cultures create layers visible throughout the contemporary city, while more than 250 historic, archaeological and architectural monuments preserve Sofia's role as the centre of Bulgarian political and cultural life.

Our walking tour reveals Sofia's most famous landmarks, beginning with the magnificent St. Alexander Nevsky Cathedral, one of the city's most spectacular buildings. Beyond the splendour of the building itself, the cathedral houses remarkable icons and murals painted by the era's foremost artists, while its crypt contains Bulgaria's most valuable collection of medieval icons spanning centuries of religious art.

St. Sofia's Church, the second oldest but most significant building in the city, gave Sofia its name and stands as a remarkable archaeological monument witnessing Serdica's golden age during the 6th century. The large archaeological complex of Roman and medieval ruins, dominated by St. George Rotunda, preserves Sofia's oldest building. Repeatedly destroyed and rebuilt, the 5th-century St. George Rotunda has been restored to its original appearance as a Christian church, its circular walls containing frescoes from multiple historical periods.

The remainder of the afternoon invites independent exploration of this fascinating capital, where ancient ruins neighbour contemporary galleries, traditional restaurants serve dishes perfected over centuries, and modern Sofia continues its eternal dance between past and future.

Overnight in Sofia

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 15 Departure

Departure from Sofia.

As we bid farewell to our fellow travellers and this land of endless discoveries, we carry with us memories of spectacular landscapes, architectural treasures, and the warm hospitality of peoples whose cultures have endured and flourished despite centuries of challenge and change.

PRIJATNO PATUVANE!! (Pleasant Journey in Bulgarian!)

Included Meal(s): Breakfast