Tour Code
RO2

ADVENTURESABROAD

ROMANIA & BULGARIA

Castles, Palaces & Monasteries

15 days

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Day 1 Arrive in Bucharest

Welcome to Bucharest, capital of a country that spent centuries at the meeting point of larger empires — Ottoman to the south, Habsburg to the west, Russian to the east — and absorbed a little of each without ever quite becoming any of them. In the 1930s, its grand boulevards earned Bucharest comparisons to Paris; more recently the city has rebuilt itself again as Romania's confident, contemporary capital.

We gather this evening for dinner and to meet fellow travellers before the journey begins.

Overnight in Bucharest.

Included Meal(s): Dinner

Day 2 Bucharest: City Tour - Fly to Suceava - Gura Humorului

This morning belongs to Bucharest itself. We begin at the Arc de Triomphe on Soseaua Kiseleff, a boulevard longer than the Champs-Elysees and built to give a young nation, recently free of Ottoman suzerainty, a European face. From there we tour Cotroceni Palace, still an official presidential residence, and pass the Romanian Athenaeum and University Square, scene of the 1989 revolution.

The Cathedral of National Salvation is Orthodox Christianity announced at cathedral scale. Consecrated only a few years ago beside the Palace of Parliament, it stands as a deliberate counterweight — faith reasserting itself in the shadow of the regime that once tried to erase it. The National History Museum rounds out the morning with the story of everything in between: Roman Dacia, medieval principalities, and a century of juggling larger neighbours.

In the afternoon we visit the Bucharest Village Museum, one of Europe's oldest open-air museums, where wooden churches, watermills, and farmhouses gathered from across the country preserve a rural life that outlasted every regime layered on top of it.

PLEASE NOTE: We always attempt to include the Palace of Parliament, but the building frequently closes to visitors for official functions, often without notice.

An early dinner precedes our flight north to Suceava, gateway to Bucovina.

Overnight in Gura Humorului.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Bucovina: Painted Monasteries & Cacica Salt Mine

We begin at the Museum of Bucovinian Traditions in Gura Humorului, a fitting introduction to a region where Orthodox faith and folk art have always been intertwined. From here we trace the deepest historical layer of this crossroads — not empires competing for Romania, but a Moldavian civilisation confident enough, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, to paint its faith on the outside of its churches for everyone to see.

At Voronet, frescoes in a blue so distinctive it carries the monastery's name cover the exterior walls floor to roofline — a nuns' monastery consecrated to St. George, built once Stephen the Great had centralised the Moldavian state and given it the confidence for this kind of statement. Sucevita, the largest and best-preserved of the painted monasteries, goes further still: an almost complete fresco cycle wraps its fortified enclosure, built in 1586, inside and out — UNESCO-protected, and rightly compared to the mural tradition of Venice's San Marco.

We break from monasteries for the Cacica Salt Mine, worked since the eighteenth century, where a small chapel carved entirely from salt sits deep beneath the surface alongside the old mining galleries.

Leaving the painted monasteries behind, we drive south to Piatra Neamt, a small city framed by the Eastern Carpathians and our base for

tomorrow's mountain crossing.

Overnight in Piatra Neamt.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Piatra Neamt - Bicaz Gorges & Lacu Rosu - Sighisoara

This morning's drive is one of Romania's most dramatic, through the Bicaz Gorges, where the road narrows and climbs for 5 km/3.1 mi beneath limestone walls rising 300 m/985 ft overhead — a stretch so tight in places it's known locally as the 'neck of hell.' Protected within Hasmas-Bicaz Gorges National Park, the gorge marks our crossing from Moldavia into Transylvania.

A few kilometres on, we reach Lacu Rosu, or Red Lake, formed in 1837 when an earthquake-triggered landslide dammed the Bicaz River. We stop here for lunch, the reddish sediment that names the lake visible along its shoreline against a backdrop of alpine peaks.

We continue west into Transylvania proper, arriving by evening in Sighisoara.

Overnight in Sighisoara.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Sighisoara - Viscri - Brasov

Sighisoara is the only inhabited medieval citadel in Europe, and this morning we explore it on foot: cobbled lanes climbing past craft-guild towers — tinsmiths, furriers, butchers — to the fourteenth-century Clock Tower, where the History Museum occupies the former Town Hall and the view stretches across Saxon rooftops unchanged in centuries. This is Transylvania's other layer of empire: German-speaking colonists, invited here by Hungarian kings eight centuries ago to farm and defend the frontier, who built towns strong enough to still be standing.

We continue to Viscri, a Saxon village so well preserved that King Charles III bought a house here decades before his coronation, drawn by the same fortified church and slow rural rhythm that first attracted Saxon settlers. Storks nest on chimney pots above houses painted in the region's traditional ochre and blue.

By late afternoon we reach Brasov, Romania's second city, tucked between two mountains in a bowl the Saxons chose for the same defensible logic as Sighisoara. We tour the Black Church, the largest Gothic structure in southeastern Europe, blackened — as the name suggests — by a seventeenth-century fire it never fully shed.

Overnight in Brasov

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Brasov: Bran Castle & Sinaia

A short drive from Brasov brings us to Bran Castle, perched on its rocky outcrop exactly where the Saxons built it in 1377 to guard the mountain pass into Wallachia. Its association with Dracula is a twentieth-century invention, but the real history needs no embellishment: a customs post and frontier fortress whose rooms and towers, linked by passages cut into the rock, controlled trade between Transylvania and the lands beyond the mountains.

From medieval frontier we jump four centuries forward, to Sinaia and Peles Castle — Romania's answer to the question of what a newly independent nation does with a German prince for a king. Built in the 1870s and 80s for Carol I, first of the Hohenzollern monarchs imported to rule a country freshly out from under Ottoman suzerainty, Peles is German Renaissance fantasy transplanted to the Carpathians: 160 rooms, decorated throughout by Carol's eccentric wife Carmen Sylva. The same confidence that filled Bucharest's boulevards at the start of our journey reaches its fullest expression here — a Western European court built, quite literally, onto a Romanian mountainside.

We also visit Pelisor, the smaller Art Nouveau residence built for Carol's successor, and climb to Sinaia Monastery, the seventeenth-century cluster of churches that gave the resort town its name.

We return to Brasov for a second night, with the evening free to explore the old town at leisure.

Overnight in Brasov

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Brasov - Bucharest

We leave Brasov and Transylvania behind, retracing our path toward Bucharest and the close of a week spent among Saxon fortresses, Orthodox frescoes, and a royal family that was never quite Romanian — three different answers to the same question of how a small country survives at the edge of larger ones.

Optional: time and interest permitting, we stop en route in Targoviste, medieval capital of Wallachia and seat of the Princely Court where Vlad the Impaler took his throne in 1456 — a ruler whose reputation, like Bran Castle's borrowed vampire legend, has grown stranger over time than the facts ever were.

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