

Tour of Romania / 7 days

Of Highlands, Fortresses, Old Towns and Contrasting Architecture, with a Substantial Traditional Ad-on.



Bucur's Bleating Say:

Contemporary flying horses obliging and star configuration allowing, commencing the journey up in Iași and ending in Bucharest is like a one way transhumance from highland, rustic and faithful Bukovina across legendary, medieval Transylvania and all the way to Bucur's Wallachia complete with its diverse architecture and mouth-watering pastry. Arguably (over a glass of bragă) the best way to travel while cutting down on infamous asphalt mileage and adding on playwright Ion Luca Caragiale's famous 'I feel enormously; I see monstrously.' approach.

This journey starts way up in Moldavia and proceeds across historic Bukovina, respectively Transylvania before reaching vibrant Bucharest. Three different regions to discover in a mere week, from the green and rustic highlands up North, to the fortified towns, churches and even houses in Central Romania, and eventually all the way down to the captivating life beat complete with the savoury cuisine in the South! To be more precise:

- Iași and the countryside around. High life and urban culture next to bucolic, slow pace countryside complete with its mouth-watering cooking, living crafts and ear-charming music.
- Bukovina. A region of superb highland scenery consisting of extensive woods, dramatic mountains and smooth pastures, hosting a diverse population including, among others, Romanians, Ukrainians (including the Hutsul highlanders), Jews, Rromani and Poles.
- Transylvania. A melting pot (again!) hosting the distinct heritage of the Hungarians, Germans and Romanians, to mentioned but three populations out there. A region seeing no shortage of legends, fortresses and burgs.
- Wallachia. It does not happen every day that Neoclassical, Modernist and Brâncoveanu architecture is found down the same street, everything immersed in Byzantine chants from a nearby church, respectively in the local pastry shop fragrances.



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- And then, the mighty Carpathians with their great arc, with their rugged or smooth crests, extensive woodlands and scenic creeks, but also with the impressive castles built by knights or kings, all with a story to tell.

When all is said and done, in a fast pace world where one next to always finds himself on the run, this tour was so designed to allow for taking in more, and we revert to said playwright Ion Luca Caragiale's words in his excellent 'A Lost Letter' novel:

'Zaccharias: You see how the world goes. In a society without morals or principles, you mustn't be precipitated, all you need is - just a little bit of patience.'

Day-by-day description of the tour

DAY 1

Iași

Today we shall reach Iași, the cultural (and not only) capital of Moldavia. The 1925 Neogothic Palace of Culture set on the site of the old Princely Court is unmistakable while here, but the city hosts many more riches including the fine Trei Ierarhi Church, the National Theatre or a hotel designed by a certain Gustave Eiffel. All those sights will definitely provide a good - and nonetheless relaxed - introduction to the country.

- Arrival at Iași IAS Airport.
- Transfer to the city centre.
- Panoramic city tour including a short walk, taking in Trei Ierarhi Church, the Palace of Culture and the National Theatre (all exterior views).
- Accommodation in Iași, period 4* hotel in or close to the city centre or modern 3 / 4* hotel.

Note: Except for low cost carriers, Iași IAS Airport is served by Austrian Airways and Tarom Airlines. If at all possible, it would be better to fly into Suceava SCV Airport, as that is closer to the Bukovina sights and it would save on the overground mileage, hence being able to add more experiences.

DAY 2

Iași - Voroneț - Marginea - Sucevița - Moldovița - Vatra Dornei

A great Bukovina day will commence with a look at the Monastery of Voroneț (built in 1488 and featuring the most captivating, very well preserved, blue-intensive frescoes among which the evocative Last Judgement is breath-taking), followed by the unglazed, unpainted, black pottery at Marginea, with its blend of religious and floral patterns. It will then be on to the painted monasteries of Sucevița (completed in 1601, with its fortress-like surrounding walls and wonderful setting at the foot of a pasture-covered hill) and Moldovița (set in 1532, appearing jewel-like in its smaller yard). The manner in which the scenes in the Bible were transposed in vivid frescoes so that local people, quite frequently illiterate back then, could understand the holy texts, still captivates, while the quality of the craft has long amazed scholars. In between these visits, we shall have a close look at yet another local tradition, that of egg painting, with explanations of the two techniques employed in the region, the



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melted wax technique and the relief painting technique. And then, a wonderful day up in Bukovina cannot be complete without the great rural and natural background, from the extensive evergreen woods to the mountains all around, from the villages down the valley to the pastures dotted with cattle and summer huts or haystacks on the slopes above.

- Breakfast.
- Visit to the black pottery workshop in Marginea.
- Visit to Sucevița, Moldovița and Voroneț monasteries.
- Visit to an egg painting workshop and explanations (either in Moldovița or Vama).
- Accommodation in Vatra Dornei or in the region, 3* or 4* hotel.

DAY 3 / Not possible on a Monday

Vatra Dornei - Bistrița - Târgu Mureș - Sighișoara

This morning, after crossing the scenic Bârgău Pass (one of the places or maybe **the** place that inspired Bram Stoker with his Borgo Pass in his 'Dracula' novel), we shall go down in Transylvania reaching Bistrița, one of the seven towns based on which the Saxon part of Transylvania (also known as the Siebenbürgen) was run. It will then be on to Târgu Mureș, maybe the most underrated town in Transylvania, with its enchanting Transylvanian Secession style (the local take on Art Nouveau arrived here via Vienna and Budapest with their respective specificity) properties. This old town will welcome us with the extensive Piața Trandafirilor with its line-up of Secession style gems around it. First, there is the Palace of Culture completed in 1908 featuring a great mosaic on the faade, a captivating wall and ceiling painting in the foyer, some stained glass windows in the Mirror Hall and nonetheless the concert hall with its great organ. The next building to it, the former House of the Retired was completed in 1909 and features some fine majolica tileworks. Then, right across the street, the Mureș County Administration Palace was completed in 1907 in a blend of Baroque and Secession styles, while in there next stands the Mureș Chamber of Commerce and Industry completed in 1910 and reminding one of local Székely (an old branch of the Hungarians with very well kept traditions) architecture. After a look at the fine facade of the Statu Quo Ante Synagogue (one of the most picturesque in the country), it will be on to Sighișoara, a fortress town going back to 1191, which would become one of the major craftsman and artisan centres in Transylvania and beyond. The walls surrounding the old town are for the most part well visible and dotted with guild-built bastions, while a walk taking in the narrow streets, the many (164) colourful houses within the walls, the wooden stairway, the Church on the Hill and the massive Clock Tower is definitely rewarding! As for the local brandy tasting, that will add some colour to our image of the local culture.

- Breakfast.
- Walking tour in Târgu Mureș taking in the Palace of Culture, the County Administration Palace and the Chamber of Commerce, as well as the Statu Quo Ante Synagogue.
- Visit to the Palace of Culture.
- Walk across the old town in Sighișoara excluding visits.
- Visit to Teo's Cellar, a local producer of fruit brandy, and brandy tasting.
- Accommodation in Sighișoara, 3* hotel set in one of the old houses in the fortified town or in a 3 or 4* hotel out of it.

DAY 4 / Not possible on Mondays

Sighișoara - Biertan - Jidvei Vineyards - Sibiu

The late Gothic style fortified church in Biertan will show yet another manner in which these buildings were all different. The hilltop location in the middle of the village, the long stairway leading there and



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the hall-like church are all equally impressive, while the little details and curiosities add to the local charm while nonetheless providing a comprehensive image of the period lifestyle and atmosphere: do not miss the intricate lock or the one table, one chair, one bed room where those intending to divorce were locked so that they might reconsider their decision. Leaving Biertan, we shall see that Transylvania has some other facets apart from fortresses (even though local fortresses did mark the regional history). With a history of wine making in the Târnave area documented back to the 13th century (the Saxons called the region Weinland for good reason), the vineyards spread over 2500 Hectares nowadays and the imposing Bethlen-Haller (also known as Jidvei) Castle commands fine views over the property. Wine tasting and visit? They come without saying. It will then be straight to Sibiu. The town was mentioned for the first time in 1191 and saw a constant growth of its importance to the point where it was the most important cultural and administrative town of the Transylvanian Saxons for a considerable part of the Middle Ages. Its economy traditionally relied heavily on trade and crafts, and as early as the 14th century saw 19 guilds active in Sibiu. At the same time, from the early 15th century it played a central role in learning, hosting the Universitas Saxonum, an association of pedagogues, council men, ministers, officials and generally intellectuals. The very well preserved old town we shall see today gravitates around the three - and all different - central squares (the Great, Small and Huet) squares overlooked by the gilded City Hall, Council Tower and the Evangelical Church respectively. The charm of the old town is further completed by several curiosities that add colour to the experience here, such as Liars' Bridge and the Sibiu Eyes.

- Breakfast.
- Visit to the fortified church in Biertan.
- Wine tasting and visit to the vineyards in Jidvei.
- Lunch on Jidvei Estate (2 course meal, mineral water and coffee / tea included).
- Walking tour of the three squares within the old town in Sibiu.
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- Accommodation in Sibiu, 3 or 4* hotel set out of the old town centre.

DAY 5 / Not possible on Mondays

Sibiu - Făgăraș - Cobor Farm - Bran Castle - Vulcan - Brașov

After taking in the 14th century, square Făgăraș Fortress located some 2000 m. below Romania's highest peak in Făgăraș Mountains (the Moldoveanu, 2545 m.a.s.l.), this morning we shall head straight into bucolic countryside and its riches, well out of trodden trails and speedroads. Out there, in Cobor, we shall visit the ecological farm; run by Carpathia, a trust also running an extensive nature reserve up Făgăraș Mountains, the farm has been created based on a minimal environment impact principle while nonetheless remaining faithful to the local traditional farming approach. Then, if one wonders why Hungarian King Géza II invited the Saxons to settle in parts of Transylvania in the 12th century, there were two main reasons, namely a need to protect the kingdom borders against invaders and to develop the then very weak local economy. One such measure of protecting the borders and of controlling the trade coming and going included the construction of Bran Castle, perched on a cliff overlooking the road linking Transylvania and Wallachia; it was built by the Saxons in 1377 on the site of a former wooden fortification set by the Teutonic Knights in 1212. Its appearance, the various local legends involving it, a certain quite famous novel, as well as a rather combative visitor (namely Vlad the Impaler), all led to its being nicknamed Dracula's Castle. Back to them, apart from strategically located fortifications, the Saxons built churches and later fortified them, planned their houses like small fortresses and organized the region based on the said 7 major burgs or fortified



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towns, of which we shall next explore Braşov, known to them as Kronstadt, complete with its scenic location at the foot of Tâmpa Hill and home to a massive Gothic church.

- Breakfast.
- Break at Făgăraş Fortress.
- Visit to the local farm in Cobor.
- Visit to Bran Castle.
- Visit and organ concert at the fortified church in Vulcan.
- Accommodation in a 3* or 4* hotel in Braşov.

DAY 6 / Not recommended on a Sunday; not possible on a Monday or Tuesday

Braşov - Buşteni - Sinaia - Bucharest

The morning will commence with a walking tour of Braşov, taking in the pedestrian Republicii Street, the airy Council Square and the imposing Black Church. Then, after hopping over the mountains in Predeal Pass, we shall head downstream and reach Buşteni, home to a castle completed in 1911 in the local, Brâncoveanu architectural style and affording a wonderful view over the dramatic Bucegi Mountains. We shall then carry on to Sinaia, a mountain resort developed close to the royal castle completed in 1914 and the historic monastery going back to 1690. Here we shall visit the royal family-built Peleş Castle completed in 1914, with its extraordinarily rich interiors and innovations for the time of its construction. In the afternoon we shall reach Bucharest, a city that will captivate us with its contrasts, whether they are about the architecture, cuisine, buzzing and peaceful quarters. Mentioned for the first time in 1459 by Vlad the Impaler and with the capital of Wallachia settled here after slowly making its way South of the mountains, Bucharest developed as a trading and craftsman post. A walk across the old town will reveal cobblestone streets bearing the names of the guilds that once flourished here or of the towns merchants with their ware came from (such as Gabroveni from Gabrovo or Lipscai from Lipsca, i.e. Leipzig), while at the same time revealing some of the still standing inns around which the town developed and the old churches with their fine architecture and evocative mural painting. With a diminishing Ottoman influence in the 19th century, the city started looking for light Westwards and the grand edifice we shall see while having a drive down or around the popular Calea Victoriei testify that. The Communist regime that followed WW2 complete with its great number of casualties would see major heritage across Romania torn down and replaced with insipid, ugly and dysfunctional residential or administrative projects. All that to a point where it amazes one to see that the same city can host at the same time thousands upon thousands of matchbox style apartment buildings, jewel-like churches and monasteries, outstanding museums of which some excellent artists' houses, serene, leafy turn-of-the-20th-century residential districts and impressive Neoclassical or Modernist architecture. Therefore, with as little time as one might have for it, Bucharest will definitely catch one's eye with all its contrasts and colour.

- Breakfast.
- Walk across the old town of Braşov including exterior views of the Council Tower and the Black Church.
- Visit to the Cantacuzino Castle in Buşteni (interior and gardens).
- Visit to the Peleş Castle in Sinaia.
- Drive down Calea Victoriei and / or other historical central avenues (note: especially during the week-end in summer, the Calea Victoriei might be closed to traffic and pedestrianized, case when we shall change the route); break and presentation in Revoluţiei Square, with views of the Royal Palace, the Central University Library and the Athenaeum.



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- Walk across the old town with its merchant and craftsmen streets, with views of the old churches (Stavropoleos, the Old Court) and inns (the Manuc, Gabroveni and Tei) there.
- Accommodation in a 3 or 4* hotel hosted in the city centre in Bucharest.

DAY 7

Bucharest

The city could have us extensively wander to discover its sometimes easy to reach, other times well concealed riches, whether this is about its fine architecture residential districts, great array of museums some of which hosted in memorable houses, captivating market places revealing fresh farming produce and good crafts, omnipresent pastry or bagel shops finely blending in the East and West or, well, its odd Văcărești Urban Delta, where nature took over the typical derelict, pointless Communist era prospect. But, if time is not on our side now, it may very well be in the future. Until then, we shall say farewell with the late Maria Tănase's lyrics and strong, great character in mind:

*'I love the place where my two feet got me, oh dear,
And them people I have just met here, oh dear!*

*This small glass of wine, oh dear,
I don't know, oh God, for whom to toast it, oh dear.*

*Well, when I see beautiful people, oh dear,
I would gladly toast for them, dear.'*

Optional: in case of an afternoon or evening flight out, we recommend further exploration of the city including a visit to the open air Village Museum founded in 1936 by Sociologist Dimitrie Gusti and consisting of genuine, traditional houses from different parts of Romania brought to Bucharest and set village-like in the city's largest park, the Herăstrău, conveniently located in the Northern part of the city, en route to Bucharest OTP Airport (allow around 30 minutes for the drive to the museum, 1 hour 30 minutes to 2 hours for the visit and one hour for the drive on to Bucharest OTP Airport).

- Breakfast.
- Optional (based on an afternoon or evening flight out no earlier than 03:00 PM): visit to the Village Museum (additional admission charges apply; not included).
- End of services.



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