



Much Ado About DRACULA!

PROFILE



TEXT AND
PHOTOS BY

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Legend

1. The Parliament Palace, the second largest building in the world.
2. *Sarmale*, traditional Romanian cuisine
3. Palinka souvenirs from Dracula land
4. Sour soup at Restaurant Sergiana, Brasov
5. Spoon Tasting Menu at The Artist, Old Town, Bucharest
6. Traditional Trdelnik bread sold outside the zoo
7. Panoramic view of the Vidaru Dam and Lake
8. View from the Clock Tower in Sibiu
9. Seas of sunflowers en route

Mention Romania, and images of Dracula, world-class gymnastics and the Danube River are conjured, but planning for this trip made me realise that the country has so much more to offer. The most direct route from Singapore to Romania's capital, Bucharest, is by Turkish Airlines via Istanbul. City express buses and the Henri Coanda Express train connect the airport to the main Piața Unirii (Union Square) or the North Railway Station. I strongly recommend staying in the Old Town, which is littered with century-old buildings such as the CEC Palace, the National History Museum, the Military Museum, the University, old churches and others. You get the picture of a city steeped in history.

Like any other metropolitan city, Bucharest has a modern metro network that brings tourists to most of the city sights. However, I must warn that some of the attractions are plain humongous, and it is a considerable walk to the entrances. (Do rent a bicycle if you are short of time.) It took us almost 45 minutes of brisk walking to cross the Constitution Square and Liberation Boulevard along the front facade of the Parliament Palace to get to the side entrance, which is another 10 minutes up a slope. On most days, ticketed guided tours are available at regular intervals.

The Parliament Palace is the second largest building in the world, after the Pentagon, and the one-hour tour showcases just ten per cent of the most elaborately decorated rooms and corridors in the twelve-storey complex of 1,100 rooms! Construction commenced five years before the Revolution in

1989 and continued under debate during democratic rule. Be wowed by chandeliers weighing tonnes, curtains with gold embroidery and tassels, endless marble columns and staircases, and state-of-the-art conferencing facilities. One cannot help but think that one man's crazy idea of building such a palace indeed showcases the country's best and proves that Romania can and will accomplish!

We were spoilt for choice when it came to alfresco dining in the Old Town. Activity builds up in the afternoon till late at night, with street performers entertaining the crowd as they enjoy local or international cuisines. Trip Advisor's recommendation of The Artist was an adventure, I must say. The Spoon



Tasting menu (70 leu = S\$24) scored in presentation, with its classic drink, also called The Artist (Prosecco with black pepper and lemon grass), complementing the food beautifully. I would be surprised if they are not awarded a Michelin star soon!

There was so much to see with the limited time we had, but we were repeatedly reminded by the locals to take time out for Herastrau Park and the adjacent Village Museum, an outdoor setup of village houses from all over Romania with a mind-boggling collection of ancient windmills, costumes and household artefacts. The boat ride on the stunning lake was truly relaxing; I wondered why they had to provide free Wi-Fi!

We were fortunate to experience the Transfagarasan Highway, which is only open from July to October. Crossing the Carpathian Mountains, this road is perfect for exploring the Transylvanian region, and was a big, costly project for strategic military access in the 1970s. The winding road with steep hairpin turns and long S-curves was nothing short of spectacular. Our seasoned driver had to make several stops along the way, as we couldn't get enough pictures of the breathtaking scenery. With every turn, the scenery was just picture-perfect — there were paragliders, avid cyclists, small streams,

melting glaciers, Vidaru Dam with its man-made lake and endless stretches of coniferous trees. We even drove head-on into a flock of sheep and watched them surround us! As Jeremy Clarkson of Top Gear exclaimed aloud as he drove along the highway in his Aston Martin in 2009: "This is the best road in the world"!

Approximately three hours away from Bucharest is Brasov city with its famous 14th century Black Church, so named because it was destroyed by

a big fire in 1689 and later restored, but it still retained its blackish facade. It houses the biggest bell in Romania and an impressive pipe organ. We stayed overnight in a *pensuine* in Brasov and had dinner at Sergiana, an authentic Romanian restaurant in a vault! You haven't been to Romania if you haven't tried the traditional Romanian dish, *sarmale*, minced meat rolls in cabbage leaves, and Transylvanian sour soup served with a huge green chili. We were absolutely stuffed after all that and a traditional





stew with polenta. And take my word for it – the Romanians make the best lemonade on this planet.

We made the “compulsory” visit to Bran Castle, a fortress made famous by Vlad Dracula, more popularly known as “Dracula’s castle”. Despite being a touristy setup that Vlad himself never inhabited, it was still interesting to explore its spiral stairways and quaint furniture (and imagine how short people of that period were). I was more captivated by the beautifully-preserved medieval city of Sighisoara, a designated UNESCO World Heritage Site. Vlad’s birthplace (admission fee 5 leu only) at Citadel Square is now a café selling Dracula souvenirs and (*ahem*) one of the “reddest” wines of the region. A short but challenging climb up 176 steps on School’s Hill leads to the gothic Church on the Hill, the most important architectural monument of Sighisoara, which offers a viewpoint of the historic city of cobbled alleys and numerous turrets.

Our memorable road trip continued onwards to Sibiu, the European Capital of Culture 2007, and Alba Iulia, a city of historical significance even before the Middle Ages. It was here that the largest fortress in Romania, Alba Carolina, was built; the perimeter measures 12 km! After WWI, on 1 December 1918, the proclamation of the union of Transylvania with the Kingdom of Romania was conducted in The Unification Hall. The National Day (also known as Great Union Day) of Romania is still celebrated here every 1 December! We spent hours exploring the well-preserved hall, university, cathedral, Roman ruins and the six gates; good walking shoes are recommended!

An hour’s drive away from Alba Iulia is the Turda Salt Mine of Cluj County. Mining equipment and machinery are displayed in the mine-turned-museum, which dates back to the 13th century. A jacket is recommended, as it gets pretty cold 13 storeys underground. The Terezia mine at the bottommost is the oldest chamber open to visitors and has a salt lake on which you can paddle a boat for a token fee (10 leu). How exciting to paddle in semi-darkness! One can also play kiddie golf, take a ferris wheel ride, play a game of table tennis, or buy salt mine souvenirs such as bath salts and salt bar deodorants and soaps. Or just sit, and admire the spectacular salt stalactites and efflorescence!

I had the privilege of visiting the Tirgu Mures County Hospital where emergency medicine first started in Romania – a truly modern facility with ICU beds, advanced technology for medical oversight of other emergency departments and an impressive helicopter evacuation service. It had the familiar sight of crowded corridors and harassed emergency physicians, same as back home!

After a week of scenic drives, endless sunflower and polenta fields, pine trees and historical buildings, we drove ten hours back to Bucharest along the Transalpina Highway, which in itself was another once-in-a-lifetime experience. Some say it surpasses the Transfagarasan with its beauty! I think my descriptions will not be able to do justice either way. You will just have to make this trip to decide for yourself. ◆