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In the Transylvania region of Romania, the town of Sibiu, like Venice without canals, was picked in 2008 by Forbes magazine as among idyllic places to live in Europe. LARISSA MILNE

The Transfagarasan Highway offers adventurous drivers a scenic connection between Bucharest and Transylvania, with 56 miles of hairpin turns and abysses. MICHAEL MILNE

In the center of Bucharest, the Romanian Athenaeum orchestra hall is among ornate domed buildings that decades of communist dictatorship did not destroy. MICHAEL MILNE

Enchanting secrets of Romania

In sections of Bucharest, once called "Little Paris," grand architecture, culture, artistry have survived communist rule.

By Larissa and Michael Milne
FOR THE INQUIRER

BUCHAREST, Romania — This isn't the first city Americans think of visiting on a European vacation. During the Iron Curtain years, Romania was an elusory country known for turning out Olympic gymnasts and for steering an independent, yet totalitarian, course from the rest of the Soviet Bloc. Tourism was not a priority.

The breach of the Berlin Wall in 1989 set off a chain of relatively peaceful transitions to freedom through most of Eastern Europe. Romania, however, endured violent protests in which more than 1,000 people were killed, leading to the Christmas Day execution of dictator Nicolae Ceausescu and his wife, Elena. Since then, Westerners have flocked to Prague, Budapest, and Berlin — the "it"

See **BUCHAREST** on N4

Transylvania, an ideal destination for a road trip from Bucharest, unfolds with rich tales of history — beyond "Dracula."

By Larissa and Michael Milne
FOR THE INQUIRER

TRANSYLVANIA, Romania — The two-lane road through the Carpathian Mountains twisted under a canopy of pines, but we were no longer climbing. The hairpin turn sloped gently downward, while occasional breaks in the forest offered glimpses of a wide, verdant valley with a castle clinging to a hill in the distance. Welcome to Transylvania.

This plateau, settled by the Saxons in the Middle Ages, was once part of the mighty Austro-Hungarian Empire. The region became part of Romania in the aftermath of World War I, yet retains much of its Teutonic heritage.

Transylvania is an ideal destination for a road trip from Bucharest. Visitors can spend a week exploring the region's villages, so untouched after

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Transylvania

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decades of communist rule that they seem purloined from an illustrated book of children's fairy tales. Through the ages, Transylvania protected itself against invaders, who came up against towns guarded over by castles and shielded by walls and towers, villages clustered around reinforced churches, even a fortified road through the mountains known today as one of the world's greatest drives.

Our first stop was Rasnov Fortress, the hillside castle we had seen through the trees. Built in the 14th century, the partially restored structure conjures up images of every Robin Hood movie ever made. We half expected Errol Flynn to come leaping over one of the ramparts. Perched over the town of the same name, it offers sweeping views of the surrounding valley.

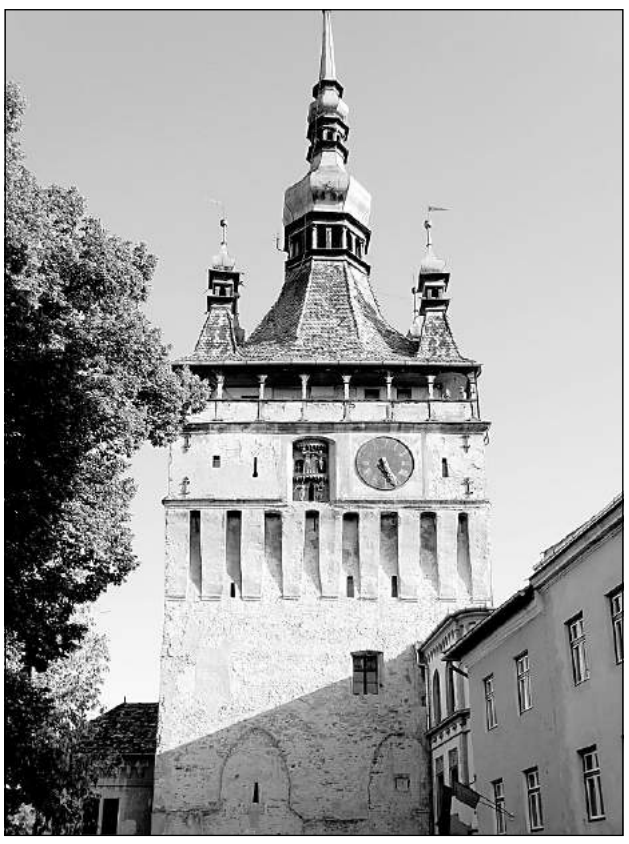
Outside the castle, a group of hungry visitors lined up by a vendor selling fresh Kürtoskalács, or "chimney cakes," made by rolling dough around a wooden cylinder, grilling it over glowing coals, then rolling it in sugar. Once removed from the cylinder, the hollow "chimney" is steamy and yeasty on the inside, crispy-sweet on the outside. Finding this most-Hungarian of treats in the Romanian heartland was a further reminder of Transylvania's amalgamous heritage.

Two hours northwest of Rasnov, the village of Sighisoara takes "fortified" to a new level. No castle guarded it; rather, the entire hill town was walled for protection. Nine 15th-century guild towers, each attributed to a particular trade such as blacksmithing and tailoring, stood at strategic locations around the perimeter. Much like modern-day volunteer firefighters responding to an alarm, if the town was under attack, the guild members headed to their respective towers to fend off the invaders.

The most marvelous is the robust, stone clock tower that occupies pride-of-place at the main entry to the upper village gate. Visitors can climb to the top of the clock tower for a panoramic view over the orange-tile rooftops. Afterward, stroll along the ramparts that connect the remaining guild towers. In the evening, car traffic is prohibited, and carts rolling over the cobblestone alleyways emit the percussive beat of a drum circle, echoing off the surrounding buildings.

Sighisoara is the reputed birthplace of Vlad the Impaler, who inspired the 19th-century novel *Dracula*. Fortunately, the town hardly plays on that kitschy connection at all — a relief because it is a beautiful village in its own right, without need of gimmickry to attract visitors.

A few miles west, tucked down a country lane, is the village of Biertan. It offers an excellent example of a fortified church, where the citizenry sought refuge during attacks. Along with an impressive 15th-century sanctuary, the complex, built atop 35-foot walls, includes the wonderfully named "Matrimonial Prison." In medieval times, divorce was not permitted, so clashing couples were locked into this one-room cottage furnished with one table, one chair, one fork, and one bed until they, well, got along. Reportedly, this method of tough love achieved an almost-perfect success rate.



For a panoramic view of Sighisoara, in Transylvania, visitors can climb to the top of a stone clock tower near the main entry to the upper village gate. MICHAEL MILNE

Our final stop, Sibiu, was among the largest of the Saxon towns. Picked by Forbes magazine in 2008 as one of the most idyllic places to live in Europe, Sibiu features a double set of stone and brick walls from the 14th through 17th centuries that surround about a third of the historic section. The sylvan area between the ramparts provides a chestnut-tree-lined esplanade for strolling or sitting on a park bench to watch the world go by.

The town is like Venice — without the canals. An exploration of ambling paths that seem to go nowhere yields festive plazas full of colorful cafe umbrellas flapping in the gentle breeze. Set on multiple levels, many of Sibiu's buildings are supported by flying buttresses that arc over walkways — a sort of architectural version of a human pyramid deployed by circus acrobats.

From Transylvania, intrepid road-trippers make the journey back to Bucharest via the legendary Transfagarasan Highway, selected by the BBC program *Top Gear* as one of the world's great drives.

Sighisoara, the reputed birthplace of Vlad the Impaler, who inspired the 19th-century novel "Dracula." MICHAEL MILNE

The road was built in the early 1970s by order of former dictator Nicolae Ceausescu, apparently as a monument to himself. Beginning in alpine forests, it reaches a high meadow where the highway looks as if it were laid out by a deranged civil engineer. Although the road is only 56 miles long, it boasts dozens of hairpin turns and switchbacks (we lost count) that resemble a serpentine pathway of giant spaghetti noodles. Drivers soon note a dearth of guardrails as the road climbs to its peak of almost 6,700 feet to reach the pristine glacial waters of Bâlea Lake.

The down stretch toward Bucharest provides one of the highlights of the trip: The road crosses the 540-foot-high Vidraru Dam, one of the largest in Europe. A shiny metal statue of Prometheus wielding a lightning bolt oversees it. Known colloquially as the "Statue of Electricity," it hearkens back to a time of massive industrial projects in the socialist world.

The Transfagarasan can cause a few testy moments between the driver and the passenger, who sits on the outer edge staring down into a few randomly placed abysses. Upon reaching the end of the road, we were pretty pleased that it didn't create so much stress that we had to make use of the Matrimonial Prison back in Biertan.

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Transylvania tips:

▶ For car rental, Emerald Auto offers competitive rates and free pickup and drop-off at the airport. *www.emerald-auto.ro*.

▶ For lodging, Fronius Residence in Sighisoara is old enough to have survived the fire of 1676. This nonsmoking boutique hotel is in the heart of the Old Town. *www.fronius-residence.ro*.

▶ In Sibiu, the Pensiunea La Rezidenta is a nonsmoking hotel tucked away in a quiet residential neighborhood. *www.larezidenta.ro*.

Bucharest

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spots to visit in the former communist countries.

But Romania has been keeping a secret: It provides a true European travel experience at prices reminiscent of the 1960s. Those who once roamed the continent with dog-eared copies of *Europe on $25 a Day* would feel right at home here.

Bucharest, the capital, was known as "Little Paris" during La Belle Époque — "the Beautiful Era" of prosperity, scientific advances, artistic accomplishments — of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The decades of communist dictatorship that followed were marred by attempts to rend Bucharest's architectural fabric and replace it with faceless apartment and office blocks. Yet, in certain sections, the enchanting city of times gone by — with a bit of Middle Eastern influence sprinkled in — still beckons.

Avenues are lined with ornate domed buildings. Cafe tables and wicker chairs sprout from wide sidewalks on sunny days. Bakeries selling Turkish-style breads populate virtually every block. Don't miss the covrigi, sunflower- and poppy-seed-studded pretzels; in keeping with Romania's good tourist value, they sell for only 25 cents.

The best place to get a handle on Romania's history and geographic influences is the National Museum of Old Maps and Books. The collection of former Prime Minister Adrian Nastase and his wife, Daniela, resides in a grand old home at 39 Strada Londra, in a quiet, leafy neighborhood. Its atlases and maps from the 16th through 20th centuries illustrate how Romania has waxed and waned as various kingdoms laid claim to parts of it, influencing its architecture, food, and culture.

Bucharest's orchestra hall, the circa-1880s French-designed Romanian Athenaeum, is an outstanding example of Neoclassical architecture. A giant cherry perched atop the lacy dome would not look out of place on this confection of a building. Despite its "romantic" appearance, the Athenaeum is a tribute to philosophy and culture. Names of great minds are chiseled in stone at the base of its dome, among them Moliere, Beethoven, and Philadelphia's own Benjamin Franklin. The building, in fact, sits along Strada Benjamin Franklin, further testament to the city's enlightenment.

The nighttime dining scene in Bucharest's Old Town, a pedestrian-friendly cobblestone warren of boutiques, restaurants, and bars not yet overrun by tourists. LARISSA MILNE

Romanian Athenaeum's auditorium, in Bucharest, whose Sistine Chapel-like interior is adorned with the "Great Fresco," 25 scenes from Romanian history. LARISSA MILNE

Although tours are available, the best way to view the Athenaeum is during a concert. Experiencing a great structure being used for its intended purpose brings its history to life. Our visit to Bucharest coincided with the George Enescu Festival, a biennial classical-music event (in odd-numbered years) that is named after Romania's best-loved composer. The prestigious festival draws musicians from all over the world. During a chamber orchestra concert, we were able to appreciate the Sistine Chapel-like interior adorned with the "Great Fresco," 25 scenes from Romanian history that ring the circular auditorium.

A few blocks away is Bucharest's Old Town, a pedestrian-friendly, cobblestone warren full of boutiques, restaurants, and bars. Although there are a few small souvenir kiosks, the neighborhood has yet to be discovered by tourist flocks that have turned other cities' historic sections into interchangeable outposts of faux Irish pubs and chain restaurants. The funky Left Bank atmosphere attracts primarily locals. Unlike in similar neighborhoods in Prague or Paris where English and German speakers dominate, Romanian is the language most often heard. As the city sees increased international tourism in the next few years, this vibe may disappear. But for now, it still feels like Old World Europe.

Four decades of communist rule left an indelible mark on Bucharest, yet the city has assimilated that part of its past into the capitalist present. It is impossible to miss the Parliament Building, a brooding marble hulk perched imposingly on a hill at the western-end tip of Bulevardul Unirii, or "Reunification Boulevard."

Ceausescu's massive monument to the glory of the party, and himself, was unfinished at the time of his execution in 1989. With more than one million cubic meters of marble, it claims the distinction of being the "world's heaviest building." And who are we to argue? A group called Interesting Times Bureau offers unique tours of Bucharest, one of which focuses on the communist era. Guide Roxana Bira noted that "razing a good chunk of Bucharest and building the massive structure gobbled up half of Romania's gross domestic product."

Today, Romania's government resides in it, taking up less space than originally intended for Ceausescu's authoritarian regime, then the country's predominant industry. The building also houses the Museum of Contemporary Art and a large convention center, which hosts international business expos.

Venture two blocks from the Athenaeum to Revolution Square, formerly Palace Square, and the site of Ceausescu's downfall. Bucharest's main meeting place for 150 years, it was initially a center of culture due to its proximity to the Royal Palace and Athenaeum. In the 20th century, it was the venue for Communist Party rallies by throngs of cheering "volunteers."

The square is watched over by the former home of the Romanian Communist Party. The building has a feature popular with totalitarian regimes: a grand balcony for making grand proclamations. Ceausescu delivered his final speech from that balcony in December 1989.

Fueled by the fall of the Berlin Wall, rumblings of change were echoing in Romania. During the speech, the crowd turned on the dictator, leading to protests that were met by government gunfire. The resulting revolution was brief but bloody. The fleeing Ceausescu and his wife were executed within days.

Today, rotating art exhibits fill the square, and the pylon of the Memorial of Rebirth honoring the fallen pierces the sky. The adjacent former Royal Palace is now the National Museum of Art of Romania, featuring Romanian artists along with such old masters as Rembrandt, Rubens, Jan Brueghel the Elder, and El Greco.

We sat on a bench in Ateneul Park, a small wooded space sandwiched between the Athenaeum and Revolution Square, and soaked up the atmosphere. It was a perfect spot for an impromptu dessert picnic of a salted caramel éclair from the nearby French Revolution bakery. Like the fresco in the Athenaeum's rotunda, Bucharest has come full circle. "Little Paris," with a few 21st-century twists, awaits.

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The Bucharest-bound need to know:

▶ There are no direct flights from the U.S. to Bucharest. However, there are airline-alliance connections through many European gateway cities.

▶ The unit of currency is the leu (plural lei, pronounced lay). At publication, the exchange rate was about 4 lei to $1.

▶ Most Romanians in Bucharest speak at least some English. Romanian has its roots in Latin; anyone familiar with French, Spanish, or Italian will notice similarities.

▶ "Bucharest in Your Pocket" is a free online guide that offers up-to-date tourist information. Go to www.inyourpocket.com/bucharest.

▶ Interesting Times Bureau is a tour company offering unique walking tours of Bucharest, such as "Communism" and "Street Art." Go to www.interestingtimes.ro.

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