

The Complete Guide To: Transylvania

There's much more to Dracula's homeland than creepy castles and blood-soaked myths. Lucy Mallows uncovers a region so charming that even Prince Charles has a house there

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Transylvania: a real place?

Some people assume Transylvania is an invention of Bram Stoker, ripened by bloodthirsty Hollywood directors. However the "land beyond the forest" – as the Latin name translates – is genuine enough. This region, three times the size of Wales, is located right in the heart of one of the EU's newest members. While the Romans called it Trans-Sylvania, the name is Ardeal in Romanian, Erdely in Hungarian and Siebenburgen in German. The latter translates as "seven fortress towns", and hints at the significance of Saxons shipped in during the 12th century from Flanders and the Moselle Valley to defend the sparsely populated region from repeated invasions.

Those seven towns (Bistrita, Brasov, Cluj-Napoca, Medias, Sebes, Sibiu and Sighisoara) are great survivors. They emerged relatively unscathed following the brutal years of Ceausescu's communist tyranny from 1965 to 1989 and have since been restored to their former imposing elegance. Any of the seven makes a good base for exploring Transylvania, though Sibiu, Brasov and Cluj-Napoca offer the chance to dine like nobility and sleep in regal surroundings for bargain prices.

Film fans might imagine that Transylvania is a dark, foreboding region filled with mountains, creepy castles on crags, pale-faced nobles with sharp teeth, and a menacing menagerie of wolves, bears and flapping bats. The real Transylvania is more of a daylight fantasy: flower-filled meadows, lost-in-time villages, sun-drenched plains dotted with Saxon churches and castle ruins, and family-friendly ski slopes. This complex and exciting region makes a superb holiday destination.

So no vampires?

Transylvania still pushes the Dracula link, as the tourism bosses seek to get their teeth into the European market. Bran Castle, close to the city of Brasov, is always advertised as "Dracula's Castle", though Vlad the Impaler, the man behind the myth, stayed here only for a few nights. Bran Castle museum (00 40 268 238333; brancastlemuseum.com) opens 9am-4pm daily except Monday in winter, and 9am-6pm daily (Mondays from noon) in summer; admission 12 lei (£3). The castle is ringed with stalls offering Dracula mugs, T-shirts and tea cloths.

There are plenty of other creepy castles where you might imagine the old count flapping his cape and laughing in sinister fashion. The Saxon fortress town of Sighisoara is an essential stop on any tour of Transylvania, Dracula-hunting or otherwise. Sighisoara has a Dracula café, Casa Dracula (00 40 265 771596; Str Cositorarilor 5) within the citadel walls. This has a much-photographed plaque referring to the father of Vlad the Impaler, which reads enticingly "Vlad Dracul". Endless shops proffer vampire tat. For a full-blooded experience, stay at the Dracula Country Club (00 40 265 772211; dracul.ro) located just out of town on the road to Medias. A double will cost you 130 lei (£32), including breakfast.

Another entertaining hotel, the Dracula Castle (00 40 264 316850; huntercastle.ro), is found in the fragrantly named town of Turda. It has bathrooms created from stone grottoes and an over-the-top medieval banqueting hall with gory murals, skeletons and skulls. Doubles cost 204 lei (£51), including breakfast. The castle makes an ideal base for visiting the beautiful Turda gorge and the excellent salt mine (00 40 264 311690) open 9am-3.30pm daily; admission 8 lei (£2).

Favourite fortresses?

Transylvania's beautiful, unspoilt landscape is dotted with imposing medieval castles, elegant palaces, Saxon fortress-churches and crumbling ruins. Visit the magnificent Corvin Castle at Hunedoara (00 40 254 711423) to see an icon of Transylvania. Patrick Leigh Fermor, who travelled through the region on his long walk from France to Turkey, called the castle "fantastic and theatrical". It is next to a communist-era steel factory, but transcends the dour location. It opens 9am-3pm (until 6pm in summer) daily except Monday, admission 6 lei (£1.50).

The chunky Fagaras fortress recalls the 17th-century battles of Transylvanian prince Gabor Bethlen, though in the 1950s the Communists turned it into a prison for dissidents. The restored castle (00 40 268 211862) is now used as a museum and library, opening 8am-4pm daily except Monday from October to April, to 6pm in summer.

In the Prahova Valley, renowned for both wine and skiing (though not at the same time), the sumptuous Peles and Pelisor Palaces were homes to the English-born Queen Marie (1865-1938), who preferred their elegant rooms to the draughty Bran Castle.

Peles Palace (00 40 244 310918; peles.ro) has 170 rooms. It was the first castle in Europe to feature electric lighting, an electric lift and central heating. Peles opens 9am-5pm daily except Monday (Tuesday from 11am), admission 9 lei (£2.25).

And outdoors?

Nature lovers will feel they have stepped into an unspoilt medieval landscape of rolling hills, lush meadows, oak forests and fence-free fields dotted with haystacks. Traditional, wildlife-friendly agriculture makes Transylvania one of the best places for fauna in Europe.

The region has four national parks, two biosphere reserves and three of Romania's five natural parks. Retezat National Park (retezat.ro) protects more than 300 species of flora and 50 species of mammal including brown bear, wolves, lynx, foxes, deer and chamois. The rare monk eagle has been spotted.

Dan Marin, an award-winning guide, leads tours around the gorgeous Piatra Craiului National Park. "There is a very healthy population of red and roe deer and wild boar," he says. "The variety of habitats – flood plains, river margins, hay meadows, forest hills and high mountains – is home to an impressive number of butterflies, birds, mammals, reptiles and amphibians." Dan and his wife, Luminita, created

a lovely guesthouse, the Transylvanian Wolf House (00 40 744 319708; transylvanianwolf.ro), in the village of Zarnesti. A double room costs €45 per person per night with all meals included, €25 for B&B accommodation. The day walks cost €70 per group, with transport paid separately at a rate of €0.30 per kilometre.

Dan takes visitors bear-tracking, birdwatching and on visits to the local Roma community, while Luminita prepares Romanian and Roma dishes. Some two million Roma (the official name for Gypsies) live in Romania, though the similarity in the names is coincidental. Many Roma communities are based in Transylvania on the outskirts of larger towns.

Transylvania is watered by many rivers, and large lakes provide the venues for sports, fishing and relaxing holidays. The spooky St Anna Lake is the only intact volcanic lake in Europe; nearby are rare peat bogs and sulphur caves. In summer, a tent city grows at the waterside as locals come to swim, go boating and have barbecues on old-fashioned family breaks.

Wintry temptations?

Mountains surround Transylvania. The borders of the region are defined by the swooping crescent-shaped loop of the Carpathians enclosing all but a small stretch in the northwest. Transylvanians love winter sports, and with the arrival of the first snowfall they head for Poiana Brasov, the best-equipped resort in Romania. The slopes suit beginners and intermediates and there are excellent nursery slopes.

Iglu Ski (020-8542 6658; igluski.com) offers seven-night, all-inclusive packages departing London or Manchester from £465. The gigantic Hotel Pietra Mare (00 40 268 262064; pietramare.ro) has every luxury under the sun, while the Vila Zorile (00 40 268 262286; vilazorile.ro) provided a comfortable base for Nicole Kidman and Jude Law when they were filming *Cold Mountain* nearby.

South of Brasov, en route to Bucharest, the Prahova Valley holds a clutch of ski resorts. Sinaia, the "Pearl of the Carpathians", boasts a collection of cable cars that sway up to the towering peaks at 2,000m. Busteni is a health resort and gateway to the dramatic Bucegi (bucegipark.ro) mountains and Natural Park, and is filled with houses that wouldn't look out of place in *The Addams Family*. Meanwhile, Predeal (predeal.ro) is the highest town in Romania, at an elevation of 1,033m.

Some living history?

Head for Saxon villages such as Biertan and Viscri to see a way of life that hasn't changed in centuries. Many Saxons left for Germany in the 1980s under a "cash for countrymen" deal paid for by the Federal Republic. Some, though, such as the Fernolend family, remain in Viscri. Caroline Fernolend now works as director for the Mihai Eminescu Trust (mihaieminescutrust.org.uk) arranging accommodation for visitors in traditional houses in villages such as Viscri, Biertan, Crit and Malancrav. In Malancrav, remaining Saxons hold a "Kronenfest" every July with suitable bacchanalia.

Other places to stay?

How about an heir's house? Prince Charles liked Transylvania so much he bought a property in Viscri, and he is a frequent visitor. The house was sensitively restored by another noble, Count Tibor Kalnoky, and you can book HRH's property through the count's company (00 40 742 202586; transylvaniancastle.com).

At his family seat of Miclosoara, Count Tibor Kalnoky has created a wonderful holiday complex of rooms restored in the tradition of Szekely (Transylvanian Hungarians). Guests spend the day birdwatching or visiting caves, waterfalls, fortress churches and historic cities, then taste delicious Hungarian cuisine under an arbour in the garden. In winter, the 17th-century wine cellar is at guests' disposal by a roaring fire.

For yet more noble nights, aim for Zabola. Countess Mikes returned here after decades in exile. Her sons Gregor and Alexander work on rebuilding the estate and its many buildings. Gregor's wife, Zsolna, converted the interior of the Machine House into an elegant boutique hotel (00 40 267 375547; zabola.com) in traditional surroundings.

Brasov, Targu-Mures, Cluj-Napoca and Sibiu offer urban comforts and sophisticated hotels. But to get a taste of Transylvania it is better to stay in a village and watch the evening cow parade or the regular traffic of oxen-pulled carts, wandering wild horses and trailers piled high with hay.

At Rosia Montana, in Transylvania's gold-mining country, a Belgian woman named Françoise Heidebroek has restored a farmhouse, Ursita Inn (00 40 723 230790; ursita.ro), where visitors can bathe in mountain streams and mingle with the ethnic Moti shepherds in the village.

Transylvania survival kit

Getting there

The only direct flights from the UK to Transylvania are on Wizz Air (00 48 22 351 9499; wizzair.com), between Luton and Cluj-Napoca. Otherwise, the best route is to Bucharest's Otopeni airport from Heathrow on British Airways (0844 493 0787; ba.com) or Tarom (020-7224 3693; tarom.ro). Budapest is another possible gateway, with a fine train ride into the heart of Transylvania.

Getting around

Rail services are the cheapest in Europe, and reasonably efficient if not exactly express; see infofer.ro for times and fares. Buses and minibuses ("maxi-taxis") cover the region; schedules are patchy.

A hire car is a tempting option, though road surfaces and local driving skills are erratic. A home-grown Dacia Logan (sometimes advertised as a "Renault Logan") understands the potholed roads like a local horse. Cars4Rent (00 40 72 334 7192; cars4rent.ro) delivers to the airports and all over Transylvania.

Eating

Transylvanian cuisine is hearty peasant fare, ideal after a day's hike. Pork is king. Sarmale are cabbage or vine leaves stuffed with spiced meat; mici are grilled meatballs. The substantial national dish, mamaliga, is cornmeal mixed with tangy sheep's cheese. For vegetarians there is zacusca (a ratatouille spread on home-made bread) and salata de vinete, a fabulous aubergine paste.

Drinking

The beefy red wines from the Prahova Valley complement the hearty dishes. The best beer comes from Miercurea-Ciuc and is known in Hungarian as a Csiki sor (pronounced 'cheeky sure').

More information?

The Romanian Tourist Office in London (020-7224 3692; visitromania.com) is a good source of information for potential visitors, as is Lucy Mallows' Transylvania: the Bradt Guide (£14.99)

Sink your teeth into the real Dracula

The Irish author Bram Stoker never actually set foot in Transylvania, and he claimed that Dracula, published in 1897 was "born of a nightmare following a supper of dressed crab". However, the man he used for inspiration, Vlad III Tepes (pictured left), was a real 15th-century villain whose deeds were even more dastardly than those of the vampire count.

Vlad III Tepes was born in Sighisoara, the Transylvanian town, but spent much of his life in the region of Wallachia to the south, where he was a voivode (prince). Tepes helped to keep the Ottoman army at bay but he was ruthless with his own people. He earned the nickname Tepes ("Impaler") through his preferred method of dispatching his enemies. He liked to bind victims spread-eagled then hammer a stake through the poor soul's rectum as far as the shoulder.

The prince was killed in 1476 in battle against the Ottomans near Bucharest. Legend tells how his decapitated head was preserved in honey and taken to Constantinople as proof of death for the sultan. Vlad's headless body was reportedly buried at a monastery on Snagov Island, in the middle of a lake 36km north of Bucharest, although many doubt he lies there.

ATTILA'S DESCENDANTS

Separated from their mother country by vast swathes of deserted countryside, the 700,000 Hungarian-speaking Szekely people live mostly in Transylvania's eastern counties: Covasna, Harghita and Mures. They claim to be descended from Attila's Huns. In Stoker's Dracula, the Count is a Szekely and tells Jonathan Harker "Our ways are not your ways, and there shall be to you many strange things".

Szekely villages can often be identified by the beautiful carved gates guarding each yard and occasionally on the road leading into a village. The picturesque road between Odorheiu Secuiesc (Szekelyudvarhely in Hungarian) and Miercurea-Ciuc (Csikszereda) has some good examples. A slight detour to the pottery-crazy village of Corund will satisfy all ceramic cravings.

The Kalotaszeg region near Cluj-Napoca comprises 40 villages inhabited almost exclusively by Hungarians. Old people wear traditional costumes on Sundays and travel by horse and cart as life continues barely touched by the trappings of the 20th century.

The Hungarian composers Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály drew inspiration from the rich tradition of folk melodies found here. In Sanraiu (Kalotaszentkiraly), visitors can stay in the guesthouse (00 40 264 257580; davincze.ro) belonging to local Istvan Vincze-Kecskes.

Many people nominate Rimetea (Torocko) as the most beautiful Hungarian village in all Romania. The collection of white houses set in rows nestles in the shadow of the mystical Szekely Stone, a looming 1,129m-high outcrop.