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Europe Trip, Visiting the Balkans (E19A-1)

Romania – Bucharest, Constanta and Transylvania

In 2019, I took a trip to Europe. My focus was on some of the countries in the Balkans, book-ended with stays in London. My primary targets in the Balkans included Romania and Bulgaria, with day trips that took me into Serbia and North Macedonia.

I began this portion of the trip flying into Romania's capital, Bucharest, where my visit would be based. I didn't know a lot about Romania or its history beyond its time under Communist rule and stories that connected historical figure Vlad Tepes a.k.a. Vlad the Impaler to the Dracula/vampire stories.

Being along the route from Africa into Europe, some of the oldest evidence of man in Europe is found here, including the oldest known human remains and the earliest evidence of salt production. The Greeks colonized the Black Sea coast in the 7th century BC. The native Dacians established their own territory in the 1st century BC. After some back and forth, the Romans took control of the area about 150 years later. It is believed that the blending of Dacian and Roman cultures led to the origins of Romania ethnicity and culture.

The Goths, Huns, Bulgars, Slavs, Hungarians and others took their turns occupying parts of present-day Romania. The region was more or less divided by Hungarians, Wallachians and Ottomans after that, with a history of them and others too complex to summarize here.

The principalities of Wallachia, Moldavia and Transylvania more or less covered the territory of present-day Romania. The independent Kingdom of Romania was established in 1881, although it didn't include Transylvania. Transylvania, along with Bessarabia and Bukovina were added in 1918 at the end of World War I, but early in World War II Romania was forced to give parts of its territories to German allies.

The Soviet Union occupied Romania and installed a communist dictatorship that ruled the country until the end of 1989. Romania has since allied with western Europe and has one of Europe's fastest growing economies.

In addition to exploring Bucharest, I took two day trips, the first to the Black Sea town of Constanta and the second to Peles Castle and Transylvania.

Because my tour company had to make a change, I began my visit to Romania with the first of my day trips, this one to Constanta and Mamaia on the Black Sea.

Constanta is the oldest continuously inhabited city in Romania. It was founded in the 7th century BC with the name Tomis. Romans captured the area in 29 BC. It was renamed Constanta sometime before 950 AD in honor of Constantine the Great's sister. It was part of the Bulgarian Empire for more than 500 years. The Ottomans took control in 1419. The Ottomans ceded it to the Kingdom of Romania.



Walkway along the Black Sea in Constanta



The Constanta Casino was one of the first new buildings after Constanta became part of the Kingdom of Bulgaria. Architecturally interesting and fancy in its heyday, it's currently closed with a restoration effort in the proposal stage.



Excavated 3rd and 4th century ruins from Tomis in a park in front of Sts. Apostles Peter and Paul Church



The church itself dates only to the late 1800s



The Great Mahmudiye Mosque a.k.a. King Carol I Mosque is the center of Islam in Romania. It was chartered by King Carol I to serve the country's Moslem population

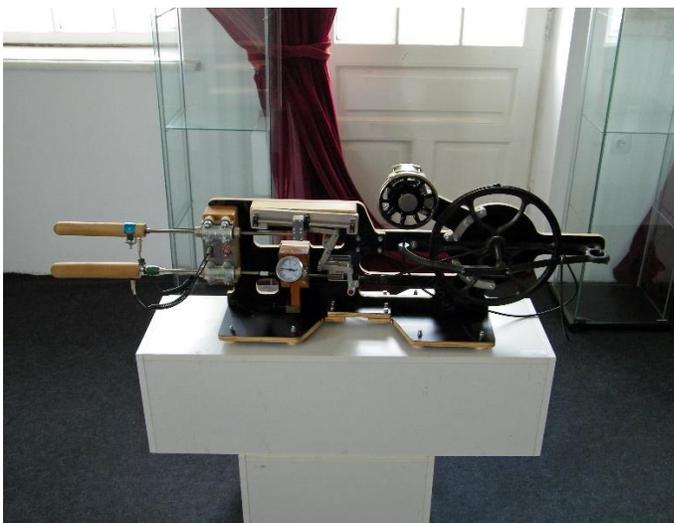


The older section of Constanta centers on Piata Ovidiu – Ovid’s Square. Roman poet Ovid was exiled to Tomis in 8 AD. A statue of Ovid stands in the middle of the square, in front of the National History and Archaeology Museum.



I toured the museum, which has several artifacts on display from the region’s many archaeological excavations, although the presentation was a bit haphazard.

But it was also the only history museum I toured in either Romania or Bulgaria that had much of anything about the periods of Communist rule in those countries.



My guide and I wandered into this room and were immediately puzzled as the displays didn’t seem to have anything at all to do with history or archaeology. Turns out that it was a temporary exhibit on erotica. And this thing? It’s an artist’s conception of a mechanized sex toy.

How does it work? Don’t ask me. But if you know anyone of Romanian heritage, I’m sure they can explain it to you.



Built during the 4th century, a large three-level complex connected Tomis's upper town to the harbor. It would be the city's main commercial center for the next three hundred years. Among other things, it featured vast tile mosaics.



Only about a third of the structure survives, but this includes almost 10,000 square feet of the mosaics, shown here.



We were also supposed to visit a folk museum in Constanta, but that was dropped for some reason – well, so we could spend more time at the beach at Mamaia than the scheduled half-hour photo stop.

Okay, so it's a beach with a sidewalk that reminded me of a tame Venice Beach without the California vibe. As I'm not a beach person, I would have rather kept to the original plan.

Back in Bucharest, my hotel was located in the Lipscani District. Lipscani is essentially Bucharest's Old Town area, although it's not all that old. After all, Bucharest itself only dates back to the 1400s. So, although it does have a few historical sites, it doesn't have the quaint "Old Town" feel of many other historic European city centers. And in fact, the Communist government had proposed flattening the whole district, but it never got around to it.

A citadel (fort) was built here early on. One of its early residents was the famous Wallachian prince Vlad III, a.k.a. Vlad Tepes, Vlad the Impaler and Vlad Dracula. He'd serve as the Wallachian ruler three times.

Vlad III had military successes that helped him gain, and regain, power. But he also developed a reputation for cruelty in the way he punished and executed his enemies, especially by impaling them. His cruelty was documented in books, poems, papal writings, manuscripts and woodcuts.



The Curtea Veche – Old Princely Court – was built in Bucharest during Vlad III's rule – that's a statue of Vlad the Impaler in front of the Curtea Veche ruins. Unfortunately, I had to take this picture over a fence. Curtea Veche was closed for refurbishment, one of three museums I targeted in Bucharest that were closed during my time in Bucharest (a fourth was only partly open).



The Annunciation Church of St. Anthony is a Princely Church built adjacent to the Old Princely Court about a century later in 1559. After all, you didn't expect Dracula to build a church, did you?



The Stavropoleos Monastery Church dates back to the early 1700s



I spent a half hour touring the Romanian Kitsch Museum. It inspired some great ideas for decorating my house.



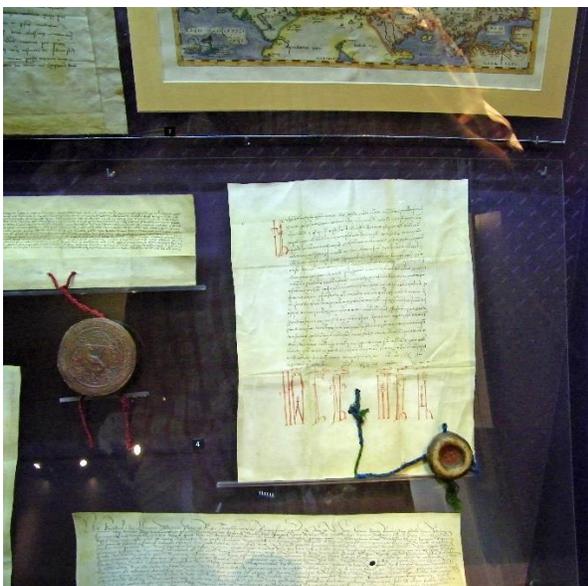
The National Museum of Romanian History was a bit disappointing as its main section focused on history seemed to be pretty limited/temporary, and it skipped the whole Communist period.

In addition to that section, there were exhibits of “treasury” items, German ties to Romania (especially Transylvania), and a reproduction of the pedestal of Trajan’s Column and the friezes that spiral up the column.



I saw Trajan’s Column in Rome several years ago. Roman Emperor Trajan’s ashes were interred in its base. Initially I was puzzled as to why this would be in Bucharest.

But it was Trajan who captured the area after two military campaigns against the Dacians, bringing Dacia (this part of Romania) into the Roman Empire. The friezes depict a number of scenes from those campaigns.



Among the more traditional historical artifacts on display in the museum is this document that granted privileges to the merchants of Transylvania’s Brasov in 1476. Brasov served as a common market town for Transylvania, Moldova and Wallachia.

The grant is signed by Vlad Tepes. In BLOOD!

I’m kidding. It’s just red ink.



Heading north out of the Lipscani District, I passed Sarindar Fountain and a large mural that marked last year's 100th anniversary of Romania's reemergence after the first world war.



Revolution Square and the building that served as headquarters for the Romanian Communist Party Central Committee when the Communists were in power. Communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu had his offices in the building, and delivered his last speech from a balcony here on December 21, 1989 before escaping Bucharest by helicopter with his wife. They were captured the next day, and after trial they were executed by firing squad.

The Memorial of Rebirth sculpture stands in front of the building, commemorating the revolution that overthrew the Communist dictatorship.



A statue of King Carol I stands in front of a library he built.



Across the street, this building served as the Royal Palace of Bucharest from 1937 to 1947. Since 1950 it has been home to the National Museum of Art of Romania.

I hadn't actually planned to tour the art museum, but with so many other museums closed and a rainy Sunday afternoon I decided to check out some of its Romania-focused galleries.



I can't say that I recognized the names of most of the artists, but I did see pieces I liked and painting techniques worth a much closer look.





As with most European art museums, galleries focused on medieval times are dominated by church art. After all, that's where the money was back then. Not necessarily with the churches themselves, but with people looking to curry favor with the churches.

I'd get to see lots and lots (and lots and lots) of church art on this trip. A lot of this art was actually decorations and altar pieces salvaged from old churches that were being torn down, although some of it was certainly impressively crafted.



The Romanian Athenaeum is Bucharest's main concert hall. It is also where in 1919 a conference was held to ratify the unification of the Kingdom of Romania, Transylvania, Bessarabia and Bukovina into Greater Romania.



After a long, roundabout sightseeing walk, I arrived at the highly recommended National Museum of the Romanian Peasant only to find that it was closed for building restoration. Only a few outside exhibits were accessible, as was the museum store with its hand-crafted items. So at least I got my Romanian souvenirs there.

So instead I checked out the National Geology Museum across the street, which interestingly enough had displays on dinosaur finds in Romania.



Memorial in Kisseleff Park to American soldiers who served in Romania in World War II. “They gave their today for our tomorrow.” It was installed sometime after the Communist government was ousted.



My exploration of Bucharest continued in the areas to the east and southeast of Lipscani.

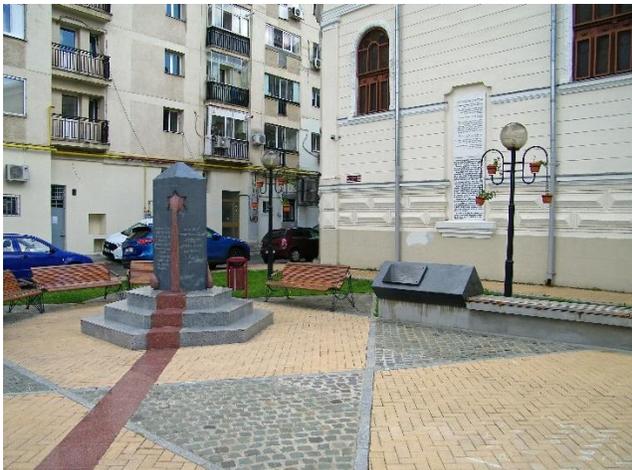
National Theatre of Bucharest with a sculpture and a memorial to the revolution that overthrew the Communists. I came across a number of memorials to the revolution in my explorations of Bucharest.



Decorative paintings above the entrance to the New St. George Church. Most of the Orthodox churches I visited in both Romania and Bulgaria had elaborate paintings at their entrances as well as inside the churches.



The Choral Synagogue is one of Romania's few remaining active synagogues. It was built in the mid-1800s, but has been renovated and restored after WWII vandalism and earthquake damage.



Nearby is the Great Synagogue, which features this memorial to Jewish victims of the Holocaust. The synagogue is also home to a small Holocaust Museum. However, the museum was closed when I was in Bucharest.



Romania had only a very small Jewish population until the mid-1800s. As the population grew, anti-Semitism was legally enforced, although it got much worse in World War II. Between 280,000 and 380,000 Romanian Jews were murdered in the Holocaust. A similar number survived the war, but most left for Israel during the Communist regime. Just 3,300 Jews remain in Romania.

Just west of the Lipscani District is the country's Holocaust Memorial.



The Holy Trinity Church, part of the Radu Voda Monastery complex. The monastery was founded in the 1500s on a small hilltop located to the southeast of the city center.

Archaeologists have found evidence of humans at this site that date back before 10,000 BC. There has been uninterrupted settlement here dating back to the Neolithic, Bronze Age and Iron Age, making this the oldest known settlement site in present-day Romania; Bucharest absorbed it as the city grew.



Some of the Orthodox decorative art at the monastery.



This small church across the street from the monastery is the Bucur The Shepherd Church. It used to serve as a chapel for the monastery. It is named for the shepherd Bucur, who tradition holds was the founder of Bucharest.



The fountain at Piata Unirii, or Unification Square. From here my exploration of Bucharest continued west of the city center



The Palace of the Parliament is where the Parliament of Romania meets. It was started during the Communist era as a grand architectural gesture, but it wasn't completed until 1997. That's because it's big. Massive. It is the second biggest office building in the world (only the Pentagon is bigger), and at about 9 billion pounds it is the heaviest building in the world. It's probably a little too big – after all, about 70% of the building remains empty after all these years.



The Romanian People's Salvation Cathedral, currently still under construction. It is the largest and tallest Eastern Orthodox church in the world, and it will become the patriarchal cathedral for the Romanian Orthodox Church.



If you hop in a Bucharest taxi and tell the driver that you want to see some babes with a nice bust, he'll likely bring you here.

This is the Dr. Victor Babes National Institute of Pathology.



Here's a nice bust of Dr. Babes.



In the middle of this picture you can get a glimpse of Cotroceni Palace, the official residence of the president of Romania. I had hoped to get a better picture through the gate – it is also home to a museum. But a guard shooed me away from the gate, and access to the museum is limited. There's also a fee to take pictures on the grounds.

Not surprisingly, a Google image search turns up countless photos of the palace.



So instead of checking out the presidential palace, I toured the nearby Bucharest Botanical Garden.



My walk back towards the city center took me past the Romanian Military Museum, which features a number of weapons and monuments on display, as well as busts of a number of historical Romanian military leaders. That's Vlad III on the right of this trio.

My second day trip took me north to Sinaia to see Peles Castle, and then into Transylvania to visit historic Brasov and also Bran Castle (a.k.a. Dracula's Castle).



Peles Castle was built for King Carol I in the late 1800s as a summer retreat. Carol had first visited the area in 1866 and fell in love with the mountain scenery (and cooler summer temperatures). Architecturally speaking, it is really more of a palace than a castle, but “castle” has stuck. Its 170 rooms occupy about 34,000 square feet.



Inside Peles Castle



Next door is another palace, Pelisor Castle. King Carol I had it built for his nephew, the future King Ferdinand.



Brasov was established by Transylvania Saxons (Germans who settled in Transylvania) in the 12th century onward. It developed into an important commercial center given its location at the crossroads of Transylvania, Wallachia and Moldavia.

Although today Brasov is one of Romania's biggest cities, it has a colorful Old Town area reminiscent of other historic European city centers I've visited over the years. It was the only such Old Town area I found in my Balkan travels on this trip.

This is the Black Church in historic Brasov. The Gothic style church was built by the local German populace, and dates back to the 14th century. A 1689 fire blackened the inside of the church, leading to its "Black Church" moniker.



Scenes from Brasov's historic center



Our final stop of the day was the village of Bran, home to Bran Castle, in Transylvania. Bran Castle is heavily marketed as Dracula's Castle given its dubious association with Vlad the Impaler. There is no evidence that he ever lived here, and the suggestion that he may have been held here as a prisoner for a time isn't very well supported by the historical evidence. In all likelihood, Vlad never set foot in the place. Let alone impale anyone or suck the blood of anyone here. You will actually see more that really was associated with Vlad the Impaler in Bucharest's Lipscani District.

"Dracula" author Bram Stoker certainly drew inspiration from tales of Vlad the Impaler/Vlad Dracula and the sights of Transylvania for his book, but his description of Dracula's Castle is nothing like Bran Castle. But the "Dracula" association pulls in the tourists.

What visitors find is a small castle that dates back to the late 1300s, and furniture and artwork that once belonged to Queen Marie, King Ferdinand's wife.



Still, knowing that this is "Dracula's Castle", I should animate this picture with ominous lightning flashes.



The rather un-Dracula-like interior of the castle. There are a few displays focused on Vlad the Impaler and the Dracula/vampire mythology, but for the most part the interior rooms suggested that it was a pretty ordinary castle.



The courtyard inside Bran Castle.

Some visitors are posing for a group photo. They're flashing peace signs so when their kids see this picture someday, they'll know that they've got the least cool parents on the planet.

Of course, most kids manage to figure that out about their parents without any photographic evidence at all.



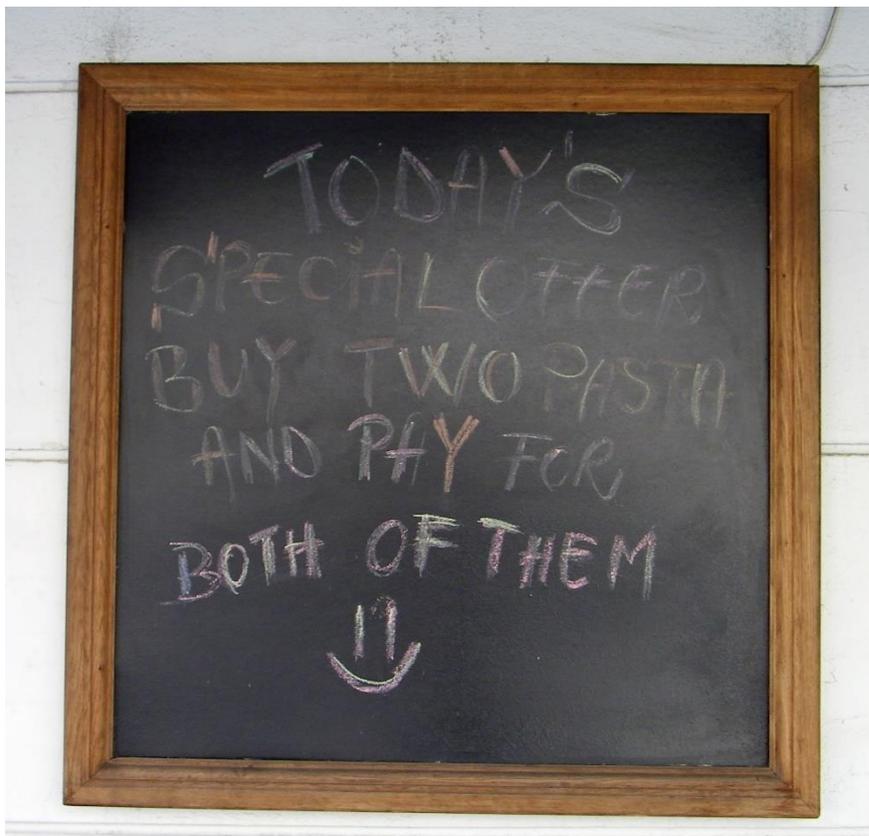
My Romanian is a little rusty, but I'm pretty sure that the guy on the left was asking the proprietor to explain what Dracula has to do with donuts or pancakes.



Our route back to Bucharest passed through the villages and valleys of Transylvania's incredibly scenic Carpathian Mountains. Alas, our only stop on the way back was at a flatlands gas station, so I had to settle for some blurry pictures taken through the bus window.



The Bank of Transylvania. And, no, it's not a blood bank.



I didn't eat at this Lipscani District restaurant. After all, I didn't need two pasta dinners.



While I was in Romania, I was never struck by the thought that Romanian men were unusually tall. But I found a few men's rooms like this one, where if you were even just a little under 6 feet tall you might think you wandered into a U.S. Air Force bathroom.