

My Hair!

On a minivan ride from Chisinau, Moldova to Tiraspol, the young woman sitting across from me leaned her head back to relax from what appeared to be a demanding day. Instead of relaxing, she got her hair stuck in the small fan which was attempting to cool the twelve riders in the minivan. The fan yanked a large chunk of her blond hair out which shorted out the fan. The girl grabbed her head looked back at the hair that was previously attached to her head and nearly started to cry before collecting herself.

After a few minutes, the driver looked back at the riders. He was a no-nonsense guy with an unbuttoned short dress shirt which was unable to contain his large, round stomach or his numerous tattoos. Although he was nice enough to leave me on the minibus, I had the feeling I wouldn't want him on my bad side. A conversation between the riders and the driver ensued which seemed to be about why it was so hot in the minivan. The riders indicated the young woman got her hair stuck in the fan and the driver made a feeble attempt to rid the fan of her hair. Then, instead of feeling compassion for the young woman, the driver and then the rest of the riders started yelling at her for getting her hair stuck. In Moldova, one needs to be tough.

Chisinau is the capital of this tough country. The best places are Cathedral Park and the Orthodox Church located in the middle of the park. The National Museum of Fine Arts has several religious icons and what they called university art. The National Ethnography and Nature Museum has several skeletons and stuffed animals. It also contains an interesting history of the world mural, which shows the development of human civilization ending with a nuclear holocaust.

There are several strange experiences in Chisinau include a wax museum, which contains wax replicas of all the world's villains: Hitler, Ivan the Terrible, Napoleon and Shrek. I passed a popular café located in the middle of a fenced in area containing old Soviet weaponry. Walking throughout the city, there are many tapped barrels, which supplies a drink. I thought it was beer at first but it's a different, odd-tasting soft drink. There also is a flood of money exchanges. If the grocery store doesn't have enough small change, they will just give candy. There is also a "lake" area which has the same amount of water as a small creek. However, this area is a fairly posh area with a lot of embassies and upscale restaurants.

Moldova is becoming known for her wine and a visit to a winery is worthwhile. Cojusna is a winery that has numerous alleys full of dusty wine and two large halls to rent. One is more modern the other more traditional, which looks like a cave with tree roots growing through it. The wines are for sale to tourists but they do sell to some markets. The bottles are dusty to make them look older than they are. It was started by a Georgian, who got the vines from neighboring Ukraine



I got lost in the peculiar village of Cojusna, which is hard to do. I asked for directions from a man who sang the Beatles "Let it Be" to me, but didn't know any other



words of English. There was a garage door that had the sign for the 1980 Moscow Olympics. At the end of most streets was a well in which people would draw water from so apparently water was limited. I stopped in a small store for water and food and they calculated my tab using an abacus, which was shocking to me. A couple of guys drinking beer at the grocery store, which is why most people go there, understood that I wanted to

visit the winery and gave me a ride.

An even stranger sight is the self-declared republic of Transdniestr, to the east of Moldova. The only people that recognize the republic are from Transdniestr, so if visitors have a problem there, there is no embassy or government agency that can help. Just getting there is a battle, as the first bus driver refused to allow me on the bus to Transdniestr after seeing my American passport. The second driver allowed me on after I showed I had enough money for the necessary bribe at the border to get into the republic. At the border, they charged me ten dollars for a day visa which wasn't exurbanite as the locals had to be three dollars. My visa stipulation was that I could only stay ten hours and I actually only spent five hours in the capital, Tiraspol.

The republic is officially Communist and walking the streets one certainly gets that feel. There is a lot of concrete and a lot of statues. The Presidential Palace is nondescript. Across the street from the palace is the Tiraspol National United Museum which is largely dedicated to Nikolai Zelinskogo, an early Soviet chemist who developed the gasmask. It's all in Russian so it's difficult to get a sense of what he did. Nearby is the Heroes' Cemetery which contains the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and eternal flame dedicated to the 1992 revolt for independence from Moldova.



Moving east down October 25 Street is more Communist propaganda. The House of the Soviets is a large building with a large statue of Lenin in front of the building. To the left and right of the statue are old and current Soviet leaders. Some are dedicated to the '92 revolt. Moving north along Lenin Street is the unkept

Kirov Park which holds another Communist statue in the middle of it.

Tiraspol has little of note to see, it is more important to get the feel of what Soviet Communism was like. There were many people in uniform and it seemed like at least a couple were following me. It's not recommended to take photos, so I brought my camera but not my memory card. I snapped a few photos as the internal memory on the camera allows for about fifteen pictures. However when I took the photos, I made sure know one was watching. Everything seemed to be a struggle, even changing money as Transdniestr has its own currency. Due to the elongated lunch breaks and paperwork for exchanging money it took awhile.

Despite the Communistic feel, I didn't get the complete feel of what Cold War Communism was like. I did see a lot of people in uniform, a lot of concrete, excessive bureaucracy, paranoia, frustration, economic stagnation and I was bribed at the border. However, the reason that it was not complete is because Western culture was prevalent in Tiraspol. Visiting Café 7 Days in Tiraspol, I eat some *blini* (stuffed pancakes) and dumplings while listening to music I would hear in America. Brittany Spears was able to do what the CIA struggled to do for fifty years, infiltrate Communism. Transdniestr is surrounded by countries that are free and thus can



not close people to other ideas as well as the Cold War Soviets were able to do.

The trip to Tiraspol was anticlimactic. The people I talked to in Moldova said I shouldn't go, that it's dangerous, that it's a bad place to be. I was expecting to act like the Cold War James Bond but I was just walking through on broken concrete sidewalks. Moldavians may not have wanted me to spend money with their enemy, Transdniestr, which is slowly becoming more prosperous because of sweetheart gas and electric deals with Russia, and thus discouraged me to visit. I would encourage people to visit Moldova and Tiraspol for its uniqueness.