

## Vampire Stories

My favorite 1989 “Velvet Revolution” is the one that occurred in Romania. Romanian dictator Nicolai Ceausescu saw that the other Communist leaders in Eastern Europe had been overthrown and called a rally to show he was still in charge. He called on only the most loyal communists to attend the rally. After a few minutes, the crowd started to jeer Ceausescu. Stunned, he looked down on them from his balcony and told them he could destroy all of them. The crowd looked up at him, pointed at him and then laughed at him. After a hasty escape, he was captured put on ‘trial’ and shot through the head. It’s a great story of what people can accomplish when they stick together. It also illustrates the Romanian tradition of vampires, as Romania is home to the historical Dracula. Some Romanians thought Ceausescu was drinking blood from young people and that is why he stayed alive so long. His dead body with blood trickling from his head was shown on national television just to illustrate that he was dead and would not rise again.

The capital of Bucharest is surprisingly dull and shows many of the remnants of Ceausescu’s rule. The city contains the Palace of Parliament, which is the world’s second largest building after the U.S. Pentagon. A lot of the complex is not being used and some parts aren’t done yet including some of the handrails. The guide said that the Great Hall was used for cocktail parties, but there hadn’t been one in awhile. Someone asked if the hall could be used for other events like ballroom dancing; she said no, only for cocktail parties. Another hall was used for music which also seemed underutilized. From this room one can see the boulevard B-dul Uniri which has 41 fountains, for the 41 provinces of Romania. Apparently, some provinces are more important than others as some fountains have water gushing out of them while others have none. Ceausescu made this boulevard six meters longer than the Champs-Élysées in Paris, just to prove he could.

Another important area is the Piata Revolutiei where Ceausescu gave his last speech before being murdered. The Central Committee of the Communist Party, which still remains, is where Ceausescu briefly escaped via helicopter. Piata Universitatii is



where student protestors started the '89 revolution and some bullet holes remain. There are several art museums in the area as well as the Cismigiu Gardens which has several walkways and benches to relax but the park grounds have only patchy grass. There are numerous stray dogs and numerous stray wires from electrical poles throughout Bucharest.

One of the highlights of my stay in Bucharest was the hostel I stayed at owned by a German man and his Romanian wife. This was a German style hostel with a proper breakfast of eggs, coffee, Nutella and Musselix. The owner said the Romanian police would often ask for bribes. He has the only licensed hostel in Bucharest, which costs \$200 but the problem is when the next government official asks for a license renewal, he/she might ask for \$500 or whatever number they make up.

More appealing and more exotic is a venture into Transylvania to chase Dracula's spirit. Many use Brasov as a base. The Black Church holds regular classical organ concerts and St. Nicolai Cathedral is also attractive. Near the cathedral is the first primary school in Romania, started in 1761. The city also boasts the world's narrowest street, a charming park and garden and a Hollywood-type sign on the hill overlooking the city. The Brasov History Museum concentrates on the Middle Ages.

From Brasov one can visit Bran, home of Dracula's castle. The real-life Dracula, Vlad Tepes, supposedly stayed here for a period of time. The castle is located on top of a

hill but is a fairly average castle with white and reddish-brown tiles. There is a headstone, apparently for Vlad's wife, who committed suicide when the Turks tricked her into believing Vlad had died in battle. There is a small pool at the base of the castle and an old replica village near the entrance. The Dracula theme can be found throughout the city including Dracula parking and vampire camping. For sale was vampire beer and Dracula wine which was more cloudy and more fruity than regular wine.



Returning from Bran to Brasov is the city of Rasnov. The city also has a



'Hollywood'-style sign overlooking the city. The Rasnov Fortress is the castle that "Lord of the Rings" is based off of. It's a more difficult hike to the castle in comparison to Bran but a more eye-catching castle. The complex has many buildings and an area to try some archery.

Another Transylvanian city is Sinaia located in the Bucegi Mountains. Due to the mountains, many hikes into the hills. The atmosphere is similar to the Bavarian Alps with many

Germanic houses, restaurants, geraniums, accentuated with a man playing Christmas songs on his flute at the top of the hill. Until fairly recently about one-third of the population was of German descent. There is a cable car down as well as a minibus or one could walk, but I choose a minibus as my legs were starting to twitch.

The city itself is worth a look and has two castles about a mile from the city center. Nearly the whole mile consists of souvenirs many with the Dracula theme

although these castles have nothing to do with Vlad Tepes or Dracula. Peles Castle has Arabic, Indian and Italian styled rooms, and a sculpture garden. Nearby is the Pelisor Palace which is not as exquisite.

The area to the northeast of Transylvania is known as Bucovina with the most important city being Suceava. There is a new monastery being built in the city. An old inn dating from the late 1500's serves as the Ethnographic Museum and has a collection of folk costumes and old crafts. Crossing Cetatu Creek is a series of attractions. The Stephen the Great statue is dedicated to an early Moldavian leader. Moving through a forested area is a folk museum. Finally, there is a fifteenth century citadel that helped the Romanians withstand Ottoman attack.

Many visit the Bucovina area to see the several monasteries in the area. The most accessible is the Humor Monastery, which dates to the sixteenth century. In addition to viewing the monastery, one can see traditional rural life as the monastery is four miles from the city. The clapping of horse hoofs and the sounds of their bells as they trotted is a vivid memory. The horses were transporting milk that milkmen distributed in ten gallon barrels, which hasn't been commonly seen in the US for over fifty years.

Returning to the city, one can take a long walk to the Voronet Monastery. The walk is pleasant as there are cute small houses with immaculately kept gardens. The outside of the monastery is more attractive than the inside. The depictions on the wall include the stories of *Genesis* and the *Resurrection*.

I stayed on a farmhouse just outside of Suceava, which was a welcome change. There were no cars to wake me in the morning. No drunks to keep me up at night. I was able to see life in the country which was obviously quite a contrast from life in Bucharest or even Brasov. One can see farmers returning from the field with seven-foot cycles. The farmhouse was also close to the train station so there was easy access to the city of Suceava.

While at the train station, I saw a strange sight. There was a photograph of a dead person, obviously shot dead, in a hay field hanging next to the arrival and departure schedules. I assume this was a criminal shot dead by the police. Instead of hanging up a top ten list of fugitives the Romanians hung up pictures of bloody, dead fugitives. This might relate back to Ceausescu's death.

One of the major topics of discussion in Romania is that of the Roma, or Gypsies. I was surprised by how many people would overtly say "I hate Romas." But considering the candid way of Romanians, it may not be a surprise. The Roma could be found largely in bus and train stations, which fits in with their traditional vagabond lifestyle. There are attempts to change this lifestyle to be more stable, but it is a slow process.



Although visiting Dracula sites can be interesting there is more to Romania than just Dracula. Transylvania is naturally beautiful. The small monasteries and tradition life in the north are worth a visit. Despite Ceausescu's attempts to suck the life out of Romania, the country continues to live.