

# Travel

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**'The effect in this Escher-world of plush labyrinthine interiors is slightly hallucinatory'**

Louise Roddon reviews Venice's latest luxury hotel

Biertan church and village, Transylvania



## My big Romanian road trip

Sacred storks, dense forests, atmospheric monasteries and a third of Europe's brown bears. **Janice Turner** is captivated

They couldn't be real, surely? Sitting on supersized nests atop telegraph poles in every village we drove through were storks. Mainly one or a pair, but now and then three or four. They must be fibreglass, I thought, or forgotten carnival decorations. We stopped the car on the busy highway and gazed up at an imperious, 4ft-tall white bird. It moved.

Storks, we learnt, are sacred in Transylvania. A nest on your roof was once thought to protect against fire and anyone who killed a bird was cursed. So when chicks started getting electrocuted on power lines, the Romanians built platforms on lampposts where every year pairs return to renovate the same gigantic nests.

Stork-counting became our favourite car game on our Transylvanian road trip. In the daytime we'd see them striding about fields, delicately grubbing for insects in land tilled with few pesticides or other modern agriculture methods. It was harvest time and farmers were cutting grass with scythes, while women in headscarves forked hay into tall stacks before it was transported to winter barns on the long wooden horse-drawn carts we saw everywhere here, used like family cars.

The landscape painter John Constable would have been perfectly at home in these villages, where each house has a little orchard, a kitchen garden, wood

stacked for winter and maybe goats or a cow. The high meadows thrum with insects and the fields are edged with every colour of wildflower.

Romania is a modern nation of 19 million, a similar size to Britain and an EU member since 2007. Yet it's probably the European country I knew least about. I couldn't even name the currency (leu) or say "thank you" in Romanian (*multumesc*). And it is estimated that about 342,000 of its citizens live in Britain.

We wanted to explore, to stay open to chance and experience everyday life



Castle Hotel Daniel

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► as well as the popular sights. So we bought Wizz Air flights to Cluj-Napoca, Romania's second city and the Transylvanian capital — about three hours from Luton — then picked up a hire car. Although it was August we organised only a little accommodation in advance, planning to find B&Bs or small hotels along the way; and apart from during a national holiday this worked out fine. Our first lesson, while driving towards our tiny hotel near Turda (far nicer than it sounds), was "beware sat-nav in Romania" — it took us five miles on rough tracks through sunflower fields.

Our first full day had a saline theme. The Turda salt mine is marketed as "the world's most spectacular underground formation shaped by people". Every centimetre of the vast 120m shaft was hewn by the people who, since Roman times, excavated the mineral that made this region rich. You descend into a mighty gallery to find, bizarrely, a ferris wheel, a climbing wall and mini golf, then at the very bottom, in semi-darkness, a boating lake, calling to mind the Greek myth of souls being rowed over the Styx.

Back in the sunshine we hiked Turda Gorge, along the Hasdate River, where we first encountered the breezy Romanian approach to safety — you scramble along rocky narrow ledges over a lethal drop with no barriers and barely a rope; Romanian grannies were doing it in flip-flops.

A happy byproduct of this mining are the salt marshes and pools. In Turda we found a small pond full of chatting pensioners easing their arthritis and a stream where people covered themselves in efficacious brown mud, and at sundown we bobbed around in the brine at a lovely old wooden lido.

The next day, on the 90-minute drive to Biertan, we began another car game: spot the most extraordinary Romanian house. Latticed wood, bright painted walls, little gates containing doves, zinc onion domes and, here and there, magnificently gaudy Roma palaces of rococo balconies and triple-stacked gables. Every other cottage looks like something out of a Brothers Grimm fairytale. The land that inspired Bram Stoker's *Dracula* is the wellspring of gothic — church roofs like broad-brimmed witches' hats are still the apogee of spooky; the aesthetic of *The Amityville Horror*, Bates Motel in *Psycho* and every vampire flick.

In Biertan the fortified Saxon church with high walls and gloomy watchtowers looms over the village — designed so that the whole community could hide in the event of an invasion by Turks. There's also a "marital prison", built in the 15th century, where couples who wanted to divorce were locked away with one spoon, one fork, one plate and a narrow single bed; all except one pair, it is claimed, decided to stay together after that.

German Lutherans lived here, until they left en masse after the Second World War, and the houses are broad, handsome and brightly coloured, with a Scandinavian air. Although one of the most beautiful villages in Transylvania, Biertan is gentle and uncrowded. Children play outside until dark; dogs take themselves for walks in the fields. The great joy here is to go up from the village into the hills, passing through more Saxon hamlets, beech woods and scented flower meadows. We walked all morning and didn't see another soul. It feels like the British countryside of 50 years ago, and you can understand why our King, nostalgic for traditional ways, bought houses (which you can stay in) nearby.

Alas, Romanian food also feels like time travel. Perhaps it's the legacy of 40 years of communism, including near starvation under Nicolae Ceausescu. Often the ingredients are good — pork wrapped in

cabbage leaves, trout, a feta-like soft cheese, lots of polenta — but it's all plonked unseasoned on to a plate. There are papanasi pastries and delicious doughnuts filled with curd and jam, but the bread is bland and other baked goods so basic that if a branch of Greggs opened it would blow people's minds — a shame when Romanian produce must be as good and abundant as that of Italy. Maybe home

cooking here is better than the restaurant scene. But no matter, a filling dinner is about £20 a head, the local wine is good and Urso beer is £1 a bottle.

Our next stop was Castle Hotel Daniel, our only luxurious hotel — a 17th-century aristocratic seat restored by new owners, who discovered ancient wall paintings preserved in stately public rooms. The hotel has a decent restaurant and, given

that the alcohol limit for drivers in Romania is zero, there's a big incentive to eat in.

Daniel was our base for a visit to Bran Castle, the supposed inspiration for *Dracula* (although Stoker never visited) and the country's most popular tourist attraction. It looks splendidly spooky, on a rocky outcrop over a town now full of vampire-themed motels and stalls selling Vlad the Impaler mugs. But after you finally get to the front of the two-hour queue, the rooms you shuffle through are nondescript. The house belonged to the last Romanian queen, Marie, forced by the communists into exile in the US and whose heart was returned to be buried in a casket here. There's a display of torture instruments that you can see for an extra fee (we weren't tempted), but largely the royal custodians have kept things tasteful. Seriously, though, don't bother with Bran.

Once again the pleasure of Romania was outdoors, hiking the Varghis Gorge and over its trip-trap suspension bridges that cross and recross the river, sometimes thrillingly, with missing planks and rickety steps up to bat-filled caves.

The next morning we moved on again, into the Hungarian enclave of Tasnad, which became part of Romania in 1920. Victor Orban, the Hungarian prime minister, holidays here every summer, making rallying speeches to ethnic Hungarians and inflaming tensions with the Romanian government.

We found a simple lodge in the wooded valley below the main town, and were just



Bran Castle, Brasov



Agapia nunnery, Neamt County



The Turda salt mine



Janice Turner at Casa Bunicilor





SAVCO/GETTY IMAGES; ALAMY

### Matca, Carpathian Mountains

Opening in November, Matca will become Romania's first spa destination, it claims, with hay baths, hiking and bear-watching on offer, while a nearby monastery will provide toaca music sessions that use planks of wood and wooden mallets to produce trance-inducing beats. Set in the Carpathian mountains near Simon, with just 16 rooms and 10 villas, the hotel's design values are high, while light and airy architecture makes the most of its setting.

**Details** B&B doubles from £220 (matcahotel.com). Fly to Brasov

## The best places to stay in Romania

### The Intercontinental Athénée Palace Bucharest

For a city break in the capital, opt for the Intercontinental Athénée Palace Bucharest, which has just been polished up to five star standard. It looks out over Victory Avenue and the Royal Palace and has a spa with an indoor swimming pool and fitness centre, an Italian restaurant with a terrace, and a spy-themed English bar.

**Details** Room-only doubles from £162 (ihg.com). Fly to Bucharest

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### King Charles's guesthouse, Zalanpatak, Malnas

Before he became monarch, King Charles spent a decade renovating this medieval house in the Malnas area of Transylvania, which he opened as a guesthouse. In a village with just 120 inhabitants, his property is filled with local antiques and craftworks. There are seven bedrooms, all with en suite bathrooms, and a barn with a bread oven, plus hammocks for the summer and fires for the winter.

**Details** B&B doubles from £104 (zalan.transylvaniancastle.com). Fly to Brasov

### Bethlen Estate, Cris

In situ from the 12th century, the newest generation of the aristocratic Bethlen family have turned their estate in northeastern Transylvania into a Newt hotel-like foodie escape. Guests stay in luxuriously appointed cottages and the corner barn is a cosy nest for couples. A restaurant is housed in a barn and there's a cellar full of Transylvanian wines to dive into.

**Details** B&B doubles from £234 (bethlenestates.com). Fly to Targu-Mures

### Villa Hermani, Magura

Staying at the simple but authentic Villa Hermani guesthouse, in the mountain village of Magura, west of Brasov, guests can enjoy winter hiking or snow-shoeing to the spectacular Zarnesti Canyon, within the Piatra Craiului mountains, followed by plenty of local food and homemade plum brandy.

**Details** Seven nights' full-board from £1,299pp (exodus.co.uk). Fly to Bucharest

**Sarah Turner**

about to walk to dinner when our landlady said: "Don't! Bears." Romania has about a third of Europe's brown bear population, and in this part of the country (where Ceausescu came to hunt them) many buildings — including our hotel — are surrounded by electric fences. With about 14 people killed by bears each year, there are warning signs everywhere — don't approach and, if attacked, curl up into a ball on your side. On our many woodland walks we kept spotting tracks then googling frantically — is that huge clawed foot a bear, a wolf (plenty of those here too) or just a large, self-walking dog?

From here we visited the extraordinary Lake Sfanta Ana, a volcanic crater deep in the mountains filled by rain and snow — a silent place with such a delicate eco-system that swimmers caused algae to form so had to be banned.

Then we drove out of Transylvania, through winding mountain passes wiggling along the spectacular Bicz Gorge, into Romanian Moldavia.

Deciduous trees gave way to pines and suddenly there were churches every-

where. Here, for the first time, we found a great place to stay. Casa Bunicilor in Manastirea Humorului has simple wooden huts in farmland, with deer and a trout pond at the edge of dense forest, an avuncular host and decent food. Here, as almost everywhere else, the only tourists we met were Romanians.

This was our base to see the painted monasteries, the country's great historical treasures. Our first stop,

Agapia, is actually a 17th-century nunnery, with meticulous gardens and internal frescos painted by Nicolae Grigorescu, a founder of modern Romanian painting. Sister Nicoletta, a former actress, showed us around, then we bought cordials — pine, dandelion, rose and mint — made by some of the 300 nuns.

The Bucovina region was the medieval front line of Christendom against the aggressively expanding Ottoman Empire. The greatest of all the monasteries here is Voronet (though we visited Humor and Sucevita too), where frescoes on the Church of St George are vivid, violent graphic novels about hell and damna-



### Need to know

Janice Turner travelled independently and was a guest of Castle Hotel Daniel, which has B&B doubles from £95 (danielcastle.ro). Three nights' half-board at Castle Daniel from £1,195pp, including flights, transfers and guided excursions (regent-holidays.co.uk)

tion — warnings to those lured into infidel ways. *The Last Judgement* was painted by Toma din Suceava in the 1550s, yet has mainly survived Romanian winters; in this fresco an angel weighs souls and St Paul escorts believers to heaven, defying a lurking army of devils. In the candlelit, incense-scented interior are other gory images and shrines where Romanian Orthodox Christians come to pay elaborate homage involving deep-bowing, body-crossing and icon-kissing.

Afterwards we hiked through pastures behind the monastery to a hilltop cross, illuminated by solar panels, to eat our picnic and doze off to the jingle of cowbells.

We had swerved Cluj-Napoca at the start of our trip, heading straight for the Transylvanian countryside. But the city was a last-night treat, with a vast tree-shaded park, an old town of craft markets by day and outdoor restaurants by night, plus a beautiful botanical garden. While the villages are mainly full of elderly people, helping to keep alive traditional rural ways that are on the wane, Cluj is a university town with bars full of students.

At the Soviet bar, decorated with communist-era memorabilia, we drank a Stalin's Tear and a Sex on the Tundra among patrons too young to remember Ceausescu. Yet they live in one of the West's least consumerist countries, where there are few billboards and you can still get a toaster fixed; where horse-drawn carts vie with cars and spring is marked by the return of storks.