

# Hideaway Report<sup>®</sup>

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*Traveling the world in search of truly enchanting places*



Bran Castle near Braşov, popularly known as "Dracula's Castle"

## EXPLORING UNSPOILED TRANSYLVANIA

*Charming guesthouses, exquisite landscapes, distinctive wine and cuisine*

Today the remarkable scenic beauty of Transylvania, a vast province in the heart of Romania, remains as miraculously unblemished as when I first glimpsed it nearly 30 years ago. What has changed, however, is that this undiscovered corner of Europe now has a number of atmospheric guesthouses, along with some very good restaurants, which make it a pleasant and comfortable region in which to travel.

Transylvania is a place to spend time amid some of the last preindustrial land-

scapes in Europe, as well as to discover Romanian culture, history, food and crafts. There are few areas like it left, which is doubtless why it has won over such discerning travelers as Britain's Prince Charles, who loves the region so much he now owns several properties there, including one you can rent.

The prince, who claims distant kinship with Vlad the Impaler, the 15th-century Wallachian ruler on whom the Irish novelist Bram Stoker based his 1897 novel, "Dracula," first visited Transylvania in

1998. Having been "totally overwhelmed by its unique beauty and its extraordinarily rich heritage," he has since become deeply involved in initiatives to preserve the region's traditional way of life, one based on small-scale agriculture.

I first laid eyes on Transylvania through the windows of the *Orient Express*, aboard one of the first trains to run from Istanbul to Venice after the fall of the Iron Curtain. On that journey, we spent a night at a hotel in Bucharest. Reboarding the following morning, we headed north.

**Hideaway Report editors travel anonymously and pay full rate for all lodging, meals and related expenses.**

Since the launch of the Hideaway Report in 1979, featured hotels and restaurants have been selected on a completely independent basis.

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Looking up from my book and glancing out the window half an hour later, I was astonished by the beauty of the countryside. Shadowy forests gave way to neatly tilled fields, meadows dotted with grazing cows, orchards bright with red apples and wildflower pastures that reminded me of the intricate prettiness of medieval embroidery. Perched on hilltops were villages of pastel-painted houses and fortified white-walled churches. I knew little about Romania in those days, but having read recent newspaper accounts of the blood-soaked demise of the dictator Nicolae Ceauşescu, I hadn't been expecting such beguiling panoramas, landscapes every bit as enchanting as those of Tuscany or Provence. Studying a map, I discovered that we were traveling through Transylvania and immediately vowed to return.

It is an 11-hour flight from New York to Bucharest, via London or Frankfurt. On my recent return visit, I headed straight to Braşov, the gateway to Transylvania, a city located a three-and-a-half-hour drive north of Romania's capital. Despite commercial and industrial zones on its outskirts, Braşov has a beautiful medieval center. Wanting to be within walking distance of the principal sites — the Piaţa Sfatului, or Council Square, which has been the heart of the city for more than 500 years, and the huge 14th-century Biserica Neagră (Black Church) — I stayed at the

three-room **Vila Katharina**, an intimate property in a restored 18th-century house in the center of town.

There, the multilingual staff were welcoming and helpful. My sunny Onyx Room, with its parquet floors and art deco-inspired wallpaper, was spacious, comfortable and furnished with an antique wooden bed, a chest of drawers and a small sofa. The bath came with a deep tub and a white-marble washstand with brass fittings. In the morning, an excellent breakfast was served on heirloom porcelain in a small, elegant dining room. The Vila Katharina is an atmospheric little place that is more than adequate for an overnight stay.

Braşov is also a good base from which to visit the dramatic 14th-century Bran Castle, 18 miles to the southwest, which is popularly but inaccurately billed as Dracula's Castle. (Most historians agree that Vlad the Impaler never set foot there, and there is no evidence that Stoker knew anything about it.)

Having driven for 45 minutes to the outskirts of Micoşoara just as the cows were coming home for the night, creating a bovine traffic jam that was announced by the metallic clang of their bells. Wearing straw hats and vests, the farmers leading the cattle shrugged and grinned to excuse the wait they were imposing on me and the

drivers of several horse-drawn wagons of freshly mowed hay.

Eventually, I arrived at **Count Kálnoky's Transylvanian Guesthouses**, an inn with 10 accommodations distributed among several whitewashed houses and farm buildings. I was greeted in an antiques-furnished salon by the manager and offered hazelnut cookies and a shot







of pastel-painted houses with fish-scale terra-cotta tile roofs, Viscri was originally inhabited by Saxons, but most of them chose to move back to Germany in 1990, having been offered citizenship by the country's then foreign minister, Hans-Dietrich Genscher.

Many of the properties they left behind were occupied by gypsies or fell into ruin. Today more than 180 have been restored by the nonprofit Mihai Eminescu Trust using traditional brick, tile, lumber and ironwork. In addition, the village's fortified 12th-century church is now open to the public and affords wonderful views over the village and surrounding countryside from its tower. A unique feature of the church is the Lard Tower, where every village family once stored a side of bacon branded with its house number in preparation for a siege.

From Viscri, it's another 45-minute drive to the old town of Sighișoara, formerly known as Schässburg in German, and one of the *Siebenbürgen*, or seven fortified towns founded by the Saxons. Built on a hilltop, this is one of the best-preserved medieval towns in Europe. Recently, it has become one of the most popular tourist destinations in Transylvania, so the ideal time to arrive is late afternoon just as the crowds are leaving.

The first time I stayed in Sighișoara, I enjoyed Casa Wagner, but the hotel has become overpriced and a bit worn, so on this occasion I spent a night at the nine-room **Fronius Residence**, a 17th-century house that is located at the foot of the Scholars' Stairs, a covered 175-step stairway that leads up to the landmark Church on the Hill.

Every room at this well-run and very comfortable guesthouse is furnished differently, but the one I recommend is Antonia, which is bright, quiet and appointed with blond-wood antique furniture. Though the Fronius is not a conventional luxury hotel, it offers excellent-quality beds, room service, air-conditioning, cable TV and Wi-Fi. Charming and perfectly located, it's a good choice for a night.

The following day, I left the main road from Sighișoara to Mediaș to visit

Mălâncrav, which has the largest remaining population of Saxons in Transylvania. Despite being isolated, this quiet and tidy commune of well-maintained pastel-painted houses has a prosperous air. This is mostly due to the restoration efforts of the Mihai Eminescu Trust, which has renovated many houses, replanted the local apple orchards and opened a fruit-processing plant, which produces high-quality organic apple juice. Of particular note in Mălâncrav are the 14th-century Gothic mural paintings in the church, which are considered the finest in Romania.

From Mălâncrav, it was a pleasant 35-minute drive along meandering backcountry roads to Biertan, which has become the most visited Saxon village after its 16th-century fortified church was enrolled as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1993. The church is reached via a covered stairway, and its interior is notable for a magnificent folding altar with a carved crucifixion scene surrounded by painted panels.

A lane leads from Biertan to the pretty village of Copșa Mare, a few miles to the southeast. It was the charm of this hidden-away place that seduced Italians Paolo and Giovanna Bassetti when they visited from their home in Bucharest during a



corporate posting there. Enchanted, they bought a house to restore as a vacation home, but then decided to convert it to an inn. Today the **Copsamare Guesthouses** has 10 rooms distributed among three houses, each within an easy walk of the main one, the Yellow House.

On arrival, I was greeted by Simona, the friendly, English-speaking receptionist and cook, who offered tea with freshly baked cookies and then directed me to my room. The Yellow Main Suite had a wood-framed sofa, armchairs and a tiled woodburning furnace, while the bedroom came with a second furnace, a locally made wood-framed double bed, a writing desk and colorful hand-loomed carpets on the oak floors. The bath was equipped with a stall shower and a single sink in a wooden counter. Here, too, there was no television or telephone, but the suite did have Wi-Fi.

The next two days I spent hiking in the countryside and visiting nearby villages, returning each evening to enjoy more of Simona's delicious cooking. Dinner always began with a soup, followed by dishes such as stuffed cabbage with *mămăligă*, the Romanian version of polenta, and hen braised in cabbage with roasted new potatoes. Tired after the day's exercise, I found myself going to bed as early as the local farmers.

My last stop was Sibiu, 50 miles to the southwest, which was known as Hermannstadt when it was populated by Saxons. Most of them left long ago for Germany, Austria and the United States, but the Germanic imprint on this charming and well-groomed city is obvious. The profile of Sibiu was raised by the election of Klaus Iohannis, a man of Saxon descent and its former mayor, as president of Romania in 2014. Previously, Iohannis had been instrumental in making Sibiu a European Capital of Culture in 2007.

It's possible to visit Sibiu as a day trip from Copșa Mare, but since the city would be my last stop before a four-hour drive to Bucharest and my flight home, I decided to spend the night. As is true of many Romanian cities, the hotel options vary between modern properties catering to business travelers and small, often quirky boutique hotels in the historic center. Taking a tip from friends in Bucharest, I booked at the eight-room **Maison Elysée**, which occupies a Belle Epoque mansion on the edge of the Upper Town within a five-minute walk of Sibiu's Great Square.

My suite on the second floor had a pistachio-green color scheme and a rather operatic décor, but it was spacious, quiet and comfortable, with a large sitting room appointed with a sofa, armchairs and a

built-in wall unit filled with books, plus a bedroom with a sloping ceiling and a well-lit bath with a shower and a single sink. The staff were charming, and the breakfast was excellent. For a single night, the property was entirely adequate.

Sibiu does not warrant a two-night stay. Aside from its churches, squares and medieval half-timbered houses, the highlight of my visit was the Brukenthal National Museum, housed in the baroque palace of an aristocratic family. Baron Samuel von Brukenthal, the Habsburg governor of the Grand Principality of Transylvania between 1774 and 1787, acquired a small but remarkable art collection, which includes Jan van Eyck's stunningly beautiful "Man in a Blue Turban." In addition, the Emil Sigerus Museum of Ethnography and Saxon Folk Art offers some fascinating insights into Saxon culture, while a few miles outside Sibiu, the Astra Museum of Traditional Folk Civilization is also worthwhile.

Culturally rich, peaceful and hospitable, Transylvania deserves to join the ranks of major European destinations. And for now, it is unspoiled and with its traditional character blessedly intact. **HR**

Our room and bath, and happy-hour seating overlooking the town, Copsamare Guesthouses, Copșa Mare







Stuffed cabbage and sour mushroom soup at La Ceaun, Braşov



## ROMANIAN FOOD AND WINE

In some ways, Romanian food is as regionally distinctive as that found in France or Italy, with kitchens in different parts of the country reflecting the tastes of the various ethnic populations. Though Romania is a Latin country in the heart of Europe — it was part of the Roman Empire and Romanian is a Latin language — the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires both had major impacts on its cuisine.

In Transylvania, Saxon cooking makes frequent use of dairy products and bacon, sausage and charcuterie. The Ottoman imprint is found in the local love of *ciorbă*, or soup (the Turkish word for soup is “*çorba*”), as well as a taste for pickles and sweet desserts. Paprika was brought by the Hungarians, and spices like cinnamon are said to have arrived with the gypsies.

Wine has been made in Romania since the time of the Romans. Truly excellent examples include the Crama Cepari 2016 private collection white and the outstanding Davino Flamboyant Cabernet Sauvignon-Merlotc-Feteasca Neagra.

**TAVERNA SARBULUI** — This Serbian grill perched on a hillside overlooking the resort town of Sinaia, site of the famous Peleş Castle, is a good choice for lunch when traveling between Bucharest and Transylvania. Look for delicious salads and grilled Serbian sausage patties wrapped in caul fat. **CALEA CODRULUI 39C, SINAIA. TEL. (40) 726-353-353.**

**UNGLERUS RESTAURANT** — Located next to the staircase that leads to Biertan’s famous fortified church, this restaurant is perfect for lunch. The menu runs to hearty Saxon-style sausages and grilled meats. **STRADA DECEMBRIE NO. 1, SIBIU. TEL. (40) 742-024-065.**

**LA CEAUN** — Both addresses of this popular restaurant serve superb homestyle Romanian dishes, including an excellent sour mushroom soup, Hungarian beef stew, and stuffed cabbage. Finish up with the apple strudel, or plum dumplings. **PIATA SFATULUI NO. 11-12 AND STRADA MICHAEL WEISS NO. 27, BRAŞOV.**

**CASA GEORGIUS KRAUSS** — A variety of salads and vegetarian dishes leads off the menu at this very good restaurant that also offers a number of sturdy specialties, such as Transylvanian stew (pork neck seasoned with cumin and tarragon and baked in pastry with onions and tomato paste), pork tenderloin wrapped in prosciutto and served with beetroot purée and horseradish sauce, and mutton pastrami with polenta. All the dishes are appetizing and generously served. **STRADA BASTIONULUI NO. 11, SIGHIŞOARA. TEL. (40) 365-730-840.**

**HERMANIA** — With a dining room reminiscent of a Bavarian beer hall, this popular restaurant serves a variety of Saxon dishes, including spätzle in cheese sauce, and hearty platters of pork with cabbage slaw and potatoes. For anyone weary of meat-heavy Transylvanian fare, the menu also offers brook trout. The house wines are excellent, and there’s a great selection of beers. **STRADA FILARMONICII NO. 2, SIBIU. TEL. (40) 755-055-999.**

## HOTELS AT A GLANCE

### VILA KATHARINA 87

**LIKE** Obliging staff; beautiful antiques; excellent breakfast; convenient location. **DISLIKE** Baths lack separate tubs and showers. **GOOD TO KNOW** Ask the hotel for detailed information on parking before you arrive. **EDITOR’S CHOICE: ONYX ROOM, \$140. STRADA POARTA SCHEI NO. 20, BRAŞOV. TEL. (40) 368-001-484.**

### COUNT KÁLNOKY’S TRANSYLVANIAN GUESTHOUSES 90

**LIKE** Warm hospitality; tranquil setting; delicious food and wine; fascinating excursions. **DISLIKE** The lack of a bar in the main manor-house. **GOOD TO KNOW** Count Kálnoky also offers riding holidays using his own horses, including Shagya-Arabian, Lipizzaner and Gidran breeds. **EDITOR’S CHOICE: MICLOŞOARA ROOM, \$270 (ALL MEALS, HOUSE WINES, SCHEDULED ACTIVITIES AND GROUND TRANSFERS INCLUDED). STRADA PRINCIPALA 186, COVASNA, MICLOŞOARA. TEL. (40) 742-202-586.**

### FRONIUS RESIDENCE 87

**LIKE** Immaculate and well-furnished rooms; the atmospheric bar. **DISLIKE** The lack of a restaurant. **GOOD TO KNOW** Contact the hotel in advance for instructions about accessing the property. **EDITOR’S CHOICE: CAMERA ANTONIA, \$140. STRADA SCOLII NO. 13, SIGHIŞOARA. TEL. (40) 265-779-173.**

### COPSAMARE GUESTHOUSES 90

**LIKE** The homey comfort of my suite; delicious home cooking. **DISLIKE** The lack of a tub in the bath. **GOOD TO KNOW** There is nowhere else to eat in the village, so meals should be booked when you make your reservation. **LOWEST RATE: WHITE LOFT, \$120; EDITOR’S CHOICE: YELLOW MAIN SUITE, \$145. STRADA PRINCIPALA 146, COPŞA MARE. TEL. (40) 746-046-200.**

### MAISON ELYSÉE 85

**LIKE** Solid comfort; convenient location; excellent breakfast. **DISLIKE** The lack of an elevator. **GOOD TO KNOW** The hotel is located on a narrow street, so you will need to ask for directions to local parking garages from reception. **LOWEST RATE: SUPERIOR ROOM, \$200; EDITOR’S CHOICE: SUPERIOR SUITE, \$260. STRADA BÂRBIERILOR NO. 1, SIBIU. TEL. (40) 751-707-958.**

### HOTEL EPOQUE 89

**LIKE** Quiet and convenient location in the heart of the city; comfortable rooms with a strong sense of place. **DISLIKE** The vaunted restaurant with a French chef was a major disappointment. **GOOD TO KNOW** Many cab drivers don’t know this property, so take an address card from the front desk when you go out. Overall, Uber is the easiest way to get around, since it assures an honest fare and precludes any language problems. There’s a parking garage on the premises, which is a big help in central Bucharest. **LOWEST RATE: JUNIOR SUITE, \$315; EDITOR’S CHOICE: LUXURY SUITE, \$400. INTRAREA AURORA 17C, BUCHAREST. TEL. (40) 213-123-232.**

Loft bedroom at Copsamare Guesthouses, Copşa Mare

