



**Bulgaria & Romania:
Frescoes & Fortresses
2020**



Credit: David Allen

Bulgaria & Romania: Frescoes & Fortresses

Through the Valley of the Roses to the Painted Monasteries

Two departures in 2020 – Premier Series – 16 Days

June 2-17 (includes Rose Festival) •

August 25-September 9 (hosted by Patricia Schultz)

Explore the complex history and fascinating culture of Bulgaria and Romania, two Balkan countries whose rugged terrain and consequent isolation have helped preserve their heritage. Begin in Sofia, the ancient and lovely capital of Bulgaria. Travel through the Valley of the Roses, explore the venerable towns of Plovdiv and Veliko Tarnovo and visit monasteries, monuments and Roman ruins along the way. In Romania, fly north from the animated capital, Bucharest, to admire the exquisite painted monasteries of Bucovina. Drive through the verdant Carpathians to the villages of Transylvania, where the Dracula story began, and discover some of the fortified Saxon churches on the way back to Bucharest. Visit six different UNESCO World Heritage Sites in these two countries, and explore a cave monastery, an ancient Thracian tomb, gorgeous castles, and massive citadels.



Daily Itinerary

Day 1, Tuesday	Arrive Sofia
Day 2, Wednesday	Sofia
Day 3, Thursday	Sofia • Rila • Plovdiv
Day 4, Friday	Plovdiv
Day 5, Saturday	Plovdiv • Kazanluk • Veliko Tarnovo
Day 6, Sunday	Veliko Tarnovo • day trip to Arbanasi Village
Day 7, Monday	Veliko Tarnovo • Ruse • Bucharest
Day 8, Tuesday	Bucharest • fly to Suceava • Gura Humorului
Day 9, Wednesday	Gura Humorului • Painted Monasteries
Day 10, Thursday	Gura Humorului • Sighisoara
Day 11, Friday	Sighisoara • Brateiu • Biertan • Sibiu
Day 12, Saturday	Sibiu • day trip to Hunedoara & Alba Iulia
Day 13, Sunday	Sibiu • Brasov
Day 14, Monday	Brasov • day trip to Rasnov & Bran
Day 15, Tuesday	Brasov • Sinaia • Azuga • Bucharest
Day 16, Wednesday	Depart Bucharest



MIR Signature Experiences

- Explore the treasures of Bulgaria – medieval fortifications and charming villages set amidst mountainous landscapes.
- Admire the colorful Rila Monastery, a stronghold of Bulgarian culture.
- Sample the fruit of the vine with a wine-tasting at Todoroff Wine Cellar.
- Motor through the scenic Pirin and Rhodope Mountains in southern Bulgaria.
- Stroll the cobbled streets of Plovdiv's Old Town.
- Celebrate the heady scent of roses at Bulgaria's Rose Festival (June departure)
- Appreciate the exquisite beauty of the painted monasteries of Bucovina, visiting all four of the main monasteries.
- Discover the origins of the Dracula story in the medieval towns of Sighisoara and Bran.
- Savor a 300-year-old family tradition at a brandy tasting in Sighisoara.

Tour Highlights

Sofia	Serdica settlement ruins and old walls, St. George Rotunda, Alexander Nevsky Cathedral, St. Sofia Church, Royal Palace, city gardens, Bulgarian Parliament building, Archaeological Museum
Rila	Rila Monastery (UNESCO World Heritage Site)
Plovdiv	Hindlian Museum House, Djumaya ("Friday") Mosque, Roman amphitheater, visit to a pottery studio, wine-tasting at Todoroff Wine Cellar
Kazanluk	Thracian Tomb (UNESCO World Heritage Site), Shipka Church of the Nativity, Shipka Pass, Shipka Monument, Rose Festival (June departure)
Veliko Tarnovo	Royal Fortress
Arbanasi Village	Konstantsaliev House, Christ's Nativity Church, Peter and Paul Monastery
Ruse	Ivanovo Cave Monastery (UNESCO World Heritage Site)
Bucharest	Palace of the Parliament (former House of the People), St. Nicholas Russian Church, Palace of the Patriarchate, Arc de Triomphe, Revolution Square
Bucovina Region	Gura Humorului, painted monasteries of Bucovina, including Moldovita, Sucevita, Voronet and Humor (UNESCO World Heritage Sites), lunch at an artist's farmhouse, Agapia Monastery, Bicz Canyon, Red Lake, mask-making or weaving workshop
Sighisoara	Historic Centre/Citadel area (UNESCO World Heritage Site), clock tower, House of Dracula's father, visit to brandy-making family
Biertan	Fortified churches (UNESCO World Heritage Sites), tile workshop in Apos
Sibiu	City center, Piata Mare
Hunedoara	Hunedoara Castle
Alba Iulia	Citadel
Brasov	Black Church, medieval town, Council Square
Bran	Bran Castle ("Dracula's Castle")
Sinaia	Peles Castle
Azuga	Wine tasting at Rhein Cellars



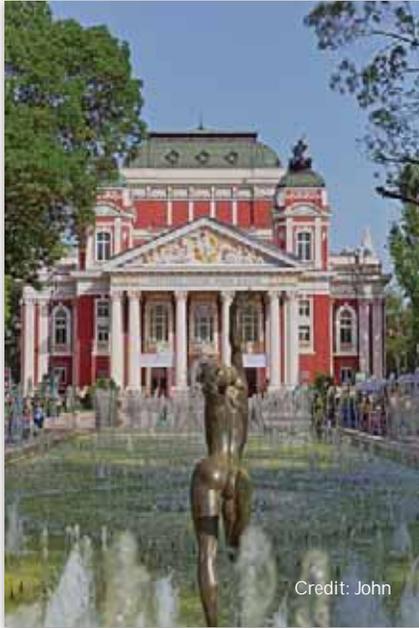
Daily Itinerary

Day One, Tuesday

Arrive Sofia

Arriving in Sofia, Bulgaria, transfer to the hotel. The remainder of the afternoon is free to relax or explore the area around the hotel. This evening, meet with fellow travelers and enjoy a **welcome dinner** at a local restaurant.

Meals: D – *Grand Hotel Sofia or similar*



Credit: John

Day Two, Wednesday

Sofia

This morning, begin a walking exploration of Sofia. Founded more than 7,000 years ago, Sofia is home to more than 250 historic landmarks and architectural monuments that harmonize with the city's modern skyline. The remains of Sofia's protective fortress walls have been incorporated into an underground pedestrian passage where the remnants of the **original second century Serdica settlement** still lie. Despite its Byzantine ruins and ancient mosques, some say that Sofia's most exciting architecture was built after Bulgaria's liberation from the Ottoman Empire in 1878.

Major landmarks include the fourth century **St. George Rotunda**; the oldest building in Sofia, layered with medieval frescoes; the sixth century **St. Sofia Church** which inspired the city's coat of arms; and the 19th century **Alexander Nevsky Cathedral**, whose magnificent icons and frescoes are world famous. Built from 1882 to 1912, the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral was founded to remember the 200,000 Russian soldiers who died helping to free Bulgaria from the Ottoman Empire in 1878. It is the seat of the Bulgarian Eastern Orthodox

Patriarch. The museum below the church displays Bulgarian Orthodox icons from the eighth century on.

Next to Alexander Nevsky Cathedral is the red-brick, surprisingly modern-looking **St. Sofia's Church**, the second oldest church in Sofia. Built by Byzantine Emperor Justinian in the fifth century, the church gave its name to the city in the 14th century. During the reign of the Ottomans, its frescoes were destroyed. It was flanked by two minarets, but one of these fell during an earthquake and the other was torn down in the 19th century.

This afternoon's touring also includes the **Archaeological Museum**. Artifacts and furnishings from Thracian, Greek and Roman settlements are displayed here, divided into four sections – Prehistory, Antiquity, Middle Ages, and Coins. The museum is in the oldest preserved building in Sofia, from the 15th century.

This evening, enjoy dinner at a traditional Bulgarian restaurant.

Meals: B, L, D – *Grand Hotel Sofia or similar*



Day Three, Thursday
Sofia • Rila • Plovdiv

Today, set off after breakfast for the museum town of Plovdiv, with a stop en route at Rila to visit one of Bulgaria's oldest and most historically significant monasteries. Founded in 927 by Ivan Rilski, the **UNESCO-listed Rila Monastery** was originally home to a colony of hermits and ascetics. Over time, the monastery grew in size and turned its attention to the wider world, and by the 14th century, it had become a strong feudal power with several villages as part of its holdings. Although it suffered significantly under Ottoman rule, it managed to survive and protect Bulgarian culture and traditions. Situated in the dramatic Rila Mountains, the vividly colored monastery is one of the highlights of Bulgaria.



Enjoy lunch near the monastery and continue on to Plovdiv. Upon evening arrival, transfer to the hotel for check-in. Dinner is at the hotel.
Meals: B, L, D – Trimontium Ramada or similar

Day Four, Friday
Plovdiv

Plovdiv is the second largest Bulgarian city and the second oldest in Europe. Founded in the 12th century BC, Plovdiv began its existence on a site protected by three hills. Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius built a 3,000-seat

amphitheater here, which is still in use today. Situated in the center of the East Balkans, on the trade road from western Europe to Asia, Plovdiv has survived for millennia. Despite barbarian attacks, destruction, lootings and bloodshed, this city has always risen from the ashes.



Plovdiv is famous for its Old Town with its distinctive Revival architecture, popular among 19th century merchants. The **Hindlian Museum House** is a perfect example of this style, with a painted facade and overhanging upper balcony.

Spend the day exploring Plovdiv and the surrounding area. Among Plovdiv's many attractions are the **Djumaya ("Friday") Mosque**, dating back to the 14th-15th centuries, and the **Roman Amphitheater**. Take the opportunity to **visit a local pottery workshop** and learn about the glazing style unique to Bulgaria.



Credit: David Allen

This afternoon, visit the **Todoroff Wine Cellar** for a tour and tasting in the village of Brestovitsa, about 10 miles from Plovdiv. A prime grape-growing region, the area has produced wine since Roman times. Originally founded in 1945 and renovated in 2001, the Todoroff National Revival-style winery complex includes cellars for wine tasting.

Return to Plovdiv, where dinner and the remainder of the evening are independent. If schedules permit, there may be a chance to take in a show at the Opera House or simply wander Plovdiv's many quiet streets.

Meals: B, L – *Trimontium Ramada* or similar

Day Five, Saturday

Plovdiv • Kazanluk • Veliko Tarnovo

Following breakfast, depart for Veliko Tarnovo, stopping en route to appreciate the region's long history at a **UNESCO-listed Thracian tomb site** in Kazanluk. The fourth century beehive-shaped Thracian tomb was discovered here during the excavation of a bomb shelter during WWII. Its delicate frescoes are protected, but a high-quality, full-sized replica is available for touring. Continuing on, travel through the **Valley of Roses**, which was once the source of 70% of the world's supply of rose oil.

Travelers joining the **June** departure of this



program will get an earlier start today and spend a longer time in Kazanluk to attend the **annual Rose Festival**. This city is the center of Bulgaria's rose oil industry, and the festival celebrates the famous local product with traditional costumes and dances. The special, oil-rich rose grown in the valley, affectionately called "**Kazanlashka Roza**," has been raised here for 300 years. Take some time to sample products made with the petals of this fragrant flower, including rose honey, rose liqueur and more. Enjoy seeing the roses in the field, and learn about the picking and distillation processes.

(Please note: This is a very busy time in Kazanluk, as the Rose Festival is a huge draw for travelers from across Europe. Expect big crowds and possible delays, and please keep in mind that in order to maximize the time spent at the festival, later touring today may have to be compressed or omitted.)



The **September** departure will visit **Kazanluk's Rose Museum** or visit a nearby rose exposition, but will not attend the festival.

Continuing towards Veliko Tarnovo, the route becomes steep approaching the 3,904-foot **Shipka Pass**. The Stara Planina Mountain Range (Balkan Mountains) was the battleground among Bulgarian volunteers, Russian troops and the Turks in the 1877-78 Russo-Turkish War. Not far from Kazanluk, stop to admire the **Shipka Church of the Nativity**. The church was constructed as a memorial to the Russian troops who died winning Bulgaria back from the Turks in 1877. The battles at Shipka Pass, 20 miles farther up the road, were decisive in the victory. The Orthodox church is beautiful, with its golden cupolas and spire. At the top of the pass, the **Shipka Monument** commemorates the victory, and from its roof a sweeping panorama of the Balkan Mountains can be enjoyed.

Late afternoon arrival in Veliko Tarnovo for check-in at the centrally located hotel, with time tonight for an independent dinner.

Meals: B, L – *Hotel Gurko, M. Bolyarski Hotel, Grand Hotel Yantra or similar*

Day Six, Sunday

Veliko Tarnovo • day trip to Arbanasi Village

Built along the cliffs of the Yantra River, **Veliko Tarnovo** has been inhabited since the Paleolithic Age. Thracians and Romans settled here before the second century AD, and the city became the capital of the Second Bulgarian Empire just after its founding in 1186. The **remains of the Royal Fortress** still stand at the top of Tsarevets Hill. The town was conquered and razed by the Turks in 1393, but remained a center of Bulgarian national struggle. The houses of Veliko Tarnovo seem to grow out of each other's roofs. Today, explore the remains of this kingdom with a tour of the Royal Fortress.





Credit: David Allen

After morning touring, depart for **Arbanasi**, a medieval village seated on a plateau overlooking Veliko Tarnovo. The village has preserved five churches and two monasteries, built and decorated with murals and icons at the end of the 16th and beginning of the 17th centuries. The **Christ's Nativity Church** is one of the oldest among them and has the most interesting decorations. Along with the typical biblical scenes on the walls are portraits of the church's donors, Greek philosophers and the family tree of Jesus Christ.

Take time here as well to visit the **Konstantsaliev House**, built in the 17th century of stone and timbers and surrounded, like most of Arbanasi's early dwellings, with a high stone defensive wall. Inside, the house is decorated with typical 19th century furnishings befitting a well-to-do tradesman. Reception rooms, bedrooms, a kitchen, bakery and larder take up the first floor, while the basement floor houses the servants' quarters, stable and storerooms.

Head back to Veliko Tarnovo, stopping at the **Peter and Paul Monastery**, with great photo opportunities from the hilltop. On return, the remainder of the evening is free to take in the sights and sounds of this former capital.

Meals: B, L – *Hotel Gurko, M. Bolyarski Hotel, Grand Hotel Yantra or similar*



Credit: Richard Fejfar



Day Seven, Monday

Veliko Tarnovo • Ruse • Bucharest

After breakfast at the hotel, depart Veliko Tarnovo and head to Romania. Before reaching the border, take some time to visit the **Ivanovo Cave Monastery** complex near Ruse. Monks settled here during the 11th-14th centuries, digging cells, churches and chapels into the rock face one hundred feet above the Ruse River. The 14th century murals testify to the exceptional skill of the artists belonging to the Tarnovo school of painting. Today, the complex is listed as a **UNESCO World Heritage Site**.

After lunch in the Danubian city of Ruse, **cross the border and continue on to Bucharest, Romania**, arriving by early evening. After a short time to rest and refresh, enjoy a traditional Romanian dinner.

Meals: B, L, D – *Hilton Athenee Palace, Grand Continental, or similar*

Day Eight, Tuesday

Bucharest • fly to Suceava • Gura Humorului



Credit: David Allen

Tour the capital today and start to get to know this lovely country before heading north by air.

Start with the highlights of **Bucharest**. Known for its wide, tree-lined boulevards, glorious Belle Epoque buildings and reputation for the high life, Romania's capital was once known as the "Little Paris." Founded by Wallachian princes, it evolved from a fourteenth-century settlement that was part of a chain of fortresses built across the Danube plain to protect Wallachia from the Turks. Bucharest came into its own with Romanian independence in the late 19th century, when French and French-trained architects were called in to transform what had been a large village into an imperial capital. There is even an Arc de Triomphe on

the elegant Soseaua Kiseleff, a boulevard longer than Paris' famed Champs-Elysees.

Today Bucharest is experiencing renewed energy after its communist years. The city's older architecture remains one of its main attractions, reflecting the succeeding styles of its various rulers. The heart of the city is Piata Revolutiei, the site of the old Royal Palace. It lies halfway along Bucharest's historic Calea Victoriei, the city's main artery. The majority of sights are conveniently within walking distance of the Piata Revolutiei and, to the east of the Calea Victoriei, the Piata Universitatii.



The 1,100-room **Palace of the Parliament** was one of the grandiose schemes of Nicolae Ceausescu, Romania's deposed and executed president. Originally named the House of the People, it was intended to be the headquarters of the Romanian Communist Party. The monumental structure is one of the largest buildings in the world; only the Pentagon has more floor space. Ceausescu razed most of the historic buildings on Spirii Hill in the center of town in order to build it. The interior is clad with approximately one million cubic meters of Transylvanian marble; reportedly, Romanian tombstones had to be made of other stone during the years of construction, from 1984 to 1989. *(Please note: The tour inside the Parliament building is strictly controlled for security purposes and only "group" tours are conducted. Tour times are reconfirmed only 24 hours in advance so your guide will provide updates as needed. As security is strict on entry, please note that valid ID (passport) is required to enter and airport-style screening should be expected.)*



Continue with a visit to **St. Nicholas Russian Church** with its eye-catching seven onion domes, located just off University Square. Completed in 1909, its jurisdiction passed between the Russian Orthodox Church, the University of Bucharest, and finally, the Romanian Orthodox Church.

Next is the **Palace of the Patriarchate**. The Palace is part of a complex located on a small hill in Bucharest, called Dealul Patriarhiei, which was originally owned by a monastery. Today the residence of the Patriarch of Romania, the complex was also used as the legislative venue for the Assembly of Deputies of the Kingdom of Romania, as well as the meeting place of the Communist-era Great National Assembly. Repatriated to the Romanian Orthodox Church in 1997, the palace is decorated with paintings and sculptures depicting important historic events, as well as examples of vestments and religious objects.

During the touring today, view Bucharest's **Arc de Triomphe**. The first triumphal arch in Bucharest was built quickly of wood in time for the 1878 independence celebration. Later, a new concrete and plaster arch was built, but by 1936 it needed a facelift. Today the 89-foot arch sports bas-reliefs of King Ferdinand I, Queen Marie, and two coats of arms.

At the center of the city lies **Revolution Square, or Piata Revolutiei**, celebrated as the place where the revolution against Nicolae Ceausescu began in 1989. A huge crowd was brought together to publicly cheer the dictator, but instead the crowd jeered and booed. Today the square is lined with monumental buildings, including the former Royal Palace and the massive former Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party building, now the Ministry of Interior and Administrative Reform. Several monuments to the martyrs of the revolution are found in the square. *(Please note, today's touring is subject to change based on flight times to Suceava.)*

Transfer to the airport for a late afternoon flight to the Bucovina region. Arrival this evening and transfer to the hotel for dinner and overnight. Hilde's Residence is a small charming guesthouse complete with garden, orchard, and a restaurant serving locally sourced fresh ingredients.
Meals: B, L, D – Hilde's Residence or similar



Day Nine, Wednesday

Gura Humorului • Painted Monasteries

Explore the heritage of Bucovina, a remote province of northeastern Romania. This was once the heartland of the Ashkenazi Jews and today is famous for the beauty of its deep Carpathian forest and its lovely Orthodox monasteries. **The painted monasteries of Bucovina** – Moldovita, Sucevita, Voronet and Humor – are small structures originally constructed within thick fortress walls. Their 15th to 16th century stone exteriors are frescoed with biblical scenes that served as “painted Bibles” for illiterate peasants seeking sanctuary from the frequent battles that swept the area.

Humor Monastery is the smallest of Bucovina’s monasteries, but its interior frescoes are the most exciting. Wooden ramparts surround the hilltop church, and the exterior frescoes are predominantly red. Inside there are portraits of the monastery’s founders, reigning Prince Petru Rares and his minister, Teodor Bubuioag.



Voronet Monastery has become one of the most well known of the painted monasteries because of its wonderful fresco, the *Last Judgment*, painted on the protected west wall of the little church. At the top, angels are rolling up the zodiac to show that the world is ending, and toward the bottom the condemned – bearing an amazing resemblance to the Romanian enemies of the time, the Turks and Tatars – are being claimed by the devil. The fresco’s characteristic dark sky blue color, made with crushed lapis lazuli and still vivid today, has been named **Voronet Blue** in the art world.



Vama’s Egg Museum celebrates the craft of egg-painting, with displays of more than 3,000 hand-decorated eggs from all over the world. Learn about the traditions behind the striking colors and exacting patterns ornamenting the eggs from the proprietor, Letitia Orsivischi, with an opportunity to shop for your own handcrafted souvenirs.

Enjoy **lunch at the farmhouse home of a local artist** and her husband, then depart for Moldovita. **Moldovita Monastery** is found in the middle of a little village, and appears beloved and well tended. Originally built in 1410, the first church was destroyed by mudslides. Rebuilt in the early 16th century, the church is surrounded by thick fortress walls. Its exterior frescoes, painted mainly within square frames, show scenes

from 16th century daily village life.

Drive a short way to see the last monastery of the day, **Sucevita**. First begun in 1585, this sacred building was the last of the painted monasteries built in Romania. A small fortress set against the foothills protects



the chapel, which is seated firmly in the middle of the compound. The chapel walls are covered inside and out with well-preserved frescoes painted onto a background of green, including the *Ladder to Paradise*, replete with falling sinners being rounded up by demons and the faithful helped upward by angels.
Meals: B, L, D – Hilde’s Residence or similar

Day Ten, Thursday Gura Humorului • Sighisoara

Depending on timing and schedules today, after breakfast set off to **visit a local workshop** – either one focused on weaving in Baltatesti or on mask-making in nearby Tarpesti. Both workshops are a wonderful opportunity to learn the process of making these local crafts.

Next head to **Agapia Monastery**, located about six miles from Targu Neamt. This working monastery consists of two different complexes where more than 400 nuns live, work, and pray. The upper, older one, called Agapia on the Hill, founded in 1527, is small and lovely. The lower monastery was founded in the mid 17th century, and includes a beautifully frescoed church and a small museum. The nuns live and work tending gardens, weaving rugs, and embroidering fabrics. Agapia’s nuns wove some of the carpets that adorned Ceausescu’s “House of the People” in Bucharest, now called the Palace of Parliament.

Drive to Sighisoara this afternoon, stopping for lunch en route. The drive goes through the mountains via beautiful **Bicaz Canyon** and Red Lake. The road through immense Bicaz Canyon hugs the banks of the Bicaz River, which twists and turns among 700-foot limestone cliffs. One of the most spectacular roads in the country, it threads its way carefully between the rushing river on the one hand, and the sheer rock face on the other. At the bottom of Bicaz Canyon is **Lake Rosu, Red Lake**, formed when a rockslide dammed the Bicaz River in 1837. This is a gorgeous stop for photo ops.

Continue to **Sighisoara**, and on arrival enjoy a **private brandy tasting** at the home of a local family who have been involved with brandy making for more than three centuries.
Meals: B, L, D – Fronius Hotel or similar

Day Eleven, Friday Sighisoara • Brateiu • Biertan • Sibiu

Today will be a long day exploring the heart of Romania: Sighisoara; the Roma community in Brateiu; the fortified church in Biertan; and finally Sibiu, with a stop along the way in Apos for lunch with locals.

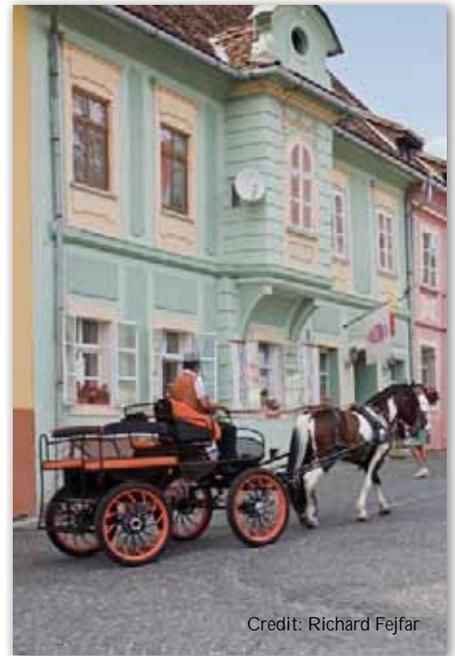
After breakfast, start with touring in Sighisoara, a **UNESCO-listed** medieval town in the heart of Transylvania. It was built by German Saxons, and considered the most beautiful and complete medieval architectural ensemble in Romania. In the

13th century, Hungarian overlords granted the Saxons land here in return for help defending the area from the Tatars. The Saxons typically built compact villages centered by fortified churches.



Dating from the 14th century, the **Clock Tower** formerly controlled the main gate of the 2,500-foot defensive wall. Its seven-foot-thick walls were used to store ammunition, food and the city's treasures. The clock was placed in the tower in 1648, and its Swiss mechanism added in 1906. Seven different slow-moving figurines carved from linden wood replace each other every midnight all week, and at the top of the spire is a meteorological clock that forecasts the weather. Since 1889 the Clock Tower has been home to two small history and torture museums. The **History Museum** has a fascinating collection of Renaissance furniture, clocks and Romanian crafts.

At the foot of the Clock Tower where prisoners were kept, the **Torture Room** displays various medieval methods of interrogation and punishment.



Credit: Richard Fejfar



Credit: Richard Fejfar

Depart to Biertan, stopping en route in the **village of Brateiu**, a Transylvanian town with a population that is nearly half Roma. The village has a Daco-Roman burial ground from the 4th century, as well as two lovely fortified churches.

Continue to **Biertan**, a town first mentioned in 1283. The city was founded on land granted to Saxons in the 13th century by Hungarian overlords. A **UNESCO World Heritage Site**, the town and its fortified church constitute one of the largest and most well-preserved of the medieval Saxon urban ensembles. The development of the town from the 13th to the 19th century can be traced in its architecture. Built on high ground, the church is the focal point of the village with its four guard towers and surrounding fortress walls. The vestry doors were displayed at the World Exposition in Paris in 1900 because of their ingenious medieval locking system.

Stop in nearby Apos to visit a **working tile workshop** and to learn about the art and science of tile-making. Afterwards, have lunch with locals at a nearby homestay.

Set off for **Sibiu**; drive timing should allow touring here on arrival. Sibiu is an early Saxon walled town in Transylvania. Established in the 12th century, and razed by the Tatars in 1241, Sibiu has two levels. The "upper town", surrounded by remnants of the 15th century defensive walls, contains most of Sibiu's historic sights. The "lower town" is a charming array of Sibiu's oldest houses and cobbled squares. Connecting the upper and lower towns are dozens of tunnels, stairways and hidden passages. The large medieval square **Piata Mare** is at the heart of the city and began life in 1411 as a corn market. Today it is home to many shops and cafes as well as museums.

Sibiu's **Little Square (Piata Mica)** sits next to the Bridge of Lies. Two sides follow the contour of the original city walls, and the buildings here are from the 14th to the 16th centuries, with the characteristic roof windows called "eyes of the city." Craftsmen used to occupy arcades along the edges of the square.



Romania's oldest cast iron bridge, **the Bridge of Lies**, is a charming arched affair that in 1859 took the place of an earlier wooden bridge. Its name comes from those earlier times when it was said that if someone on the bridge told a lie, the bridge would creak and groan as if it might toss the liar off. Other legends of lying scoundrels surround the bridge, and the townspeople refused to change its name when the new iron bridge was built.

Take a stroll down Sibiu's main **pedestrian street, Strada Nicolae Balcescu**, stopping at the little shops and shaded outdoor cafés. Flowers hang from every doorway, and townspeople and travelers alike pause to browse the market stalls, sip a beverage, or grab an ice cream.

Enjoy dinner at a local restaurant tonight before overnight at the four-star hotel here.
Meals: B, L, D – *Council Hotel or similar*



Day Twelve, Saturday

Sibiu • day trip to Hunedoara & Alba Iulia

Set off this morning after breakfast, to visit **Hunedoara Castle**. The castle was built in 1320 by the Anjou family on the site of old Roman fortifications. In 1409, the castle was given to the Voicu and Corvin family by Sigismund of Luxemburg in recognition of their bravery and military service. Between 1441-1453, King Iancu Corvin extensively renovated the castle, adding seven protective towers, a chapel, the Council and Knight's Halls and impressive winding staircases. Iancu

Corvin's successor, Matei Corvin, went to war with the Turks, during which time he captured and imprisoned Prince Vlad Dracul in Hunedoara Castle. Upon trial, Prince Vlad Dracul proved he was an ally to the Corvins and was freed.

Lunch will be near Hunedoara Castle, before setting off to **Alba Iulia**. This town was an important early Dacian and Roman city, mentioned by Ptolemy as Apulon. During the reign of Charles VI, Holy Roman Emperor from 1711 to 1740, the city realized its greatest glory. The upper city's star-shaped citadel with its seven bastions was built, and remains today in a remarkably preserved state. The fortress enclosed the Gothic cathedral, dating to the 12th or 13th centuries. Its walls were made of brick, stone and rubble from earlier Roman fortifications and measure nine feet at the base.

Return to Sibiu after touring and enjoy and overnight at the hotel after dinner at a local restaurant.
Meals: B, L, D – *Council Hotel or similar*

Day Thirteen, Sunday

Sibiu • Brasov

Leave Sibiu today, heading ultimately for Brasov, with countryside touring en route. The first stop is the Sambata de Jos horse farm, followed by a visit to a rural water-operated mill and nearby carpet workshop.



The next stop is massive **Fagaras Fortress**, built in 1310. From the 15th to 17th centuries it was one of the strongest fortresses in the country. Surrounded by a deep moat, the fortress was the home of several princes and their families. In 1948, the communist regime took the castle and made it into a prison, but today it houses the Fagaras County Museum, with an extensive collection of medieval artifacts and folk crafts.

Stop for lunch at a local restaurant, before the drive to **Brasov**. Brasov is an old Transylvanian town set at the foot of a mountain and filled with medieval architecture, cobblestone streets and small houses. The city dates back to the 13th century when it was a busy trading town. Many of Brasov's medieval and Renaissance buildings still exist, thanks to the diplomatic skill and military foresight of town leaders. During repeated Turkish attacks in the region from the 15th to the 18th century, Brasov's strong fortifications helped it escape major war damage.
Meals: B, L, D – *Aro Palace or similar*

Day Fourteen, Monday

Brasov • day trip to Rasnov & Bran

Today's day trips include Rasnov and Bran, heading out after breakfast and returning to Brasov for afternoon touring and dinner.

Rasnov is a small Carpathian town ten miles from Brasov on Bran Pass, with a population of around 16,000. Its main point of interest is its 13th century citadel. Towering about the town, with a splendid view across the valley to the Piatra Craiului Mountains, the **Rasnov Fortress** was built to withstand sieges. The ruling Teutonic Knights constructed the fortress sometime after 1215, and its walls sheltered houses, a school and a chapel. During its long history, the citadel was conquered only once, in the early 17th century when the secret passageway to its water supply was discovered. After that, a well was hand-dug 146 meters through the rock, and was used until 1850. Legend says that two Turkish prisoners dug the well, and were guaranteed their freedom on completion of the project, but it took them 17 years to hit water.

Depart for **Bran**, arriving in the early afternoon. Located in a mountain pass between the Bucegi and the Piatra Craiului mountains, Bran was an important defensive town along the trade road in the 15th and 16th centuries. Today it is best known for imposing **Bran Castle** in the center of town.

Saxons from Brasov built turreted Bran Castle in a mountain pass between the Bucegi and the Piatra Craiului Mountains in the 14th century. Its original purpose was to protect Brasov from the Ottoman Turks, but it also became a strategic trade center. The castle's connection to Prince Vlad Tepes, aka Vlad the Impaler, is tentative. Yet, its placement on a cliff looming 60 meters above the town, with Gothic stone walls, towers, and secret passageways have come to embody the popular image of a Transylvanian vampire castle. Thus it came to be called "Dracula's Castle," by popular reference.



Return to Brasov to take in the sights of this charming city, with the **Black Church of Brasov** dominating the medieval town center. Among the many buildings and monuments of Romania, it holds a special place as one of the most important churches built by the Transylvanian Saxons during their 850-year history.



Credit: John Baker

The Black Church gets its name from damage sustained in the great fire of 1689, when flames and smoke blackened its walls. The church's reconstruction took more than 100 years to complete. Today displays include artwork, carpets, and tombs of community members dating back to the 16th century.

Other highlights of this well-preserved town include the **Council Square** at the center of the old city with the **old City Hall** as its centerpiece, and the **First Romanian School Museum**, which houses some of the oldest examples of Romanian printing and typography.

Meals: B, L, D – Aro Palace or similar

Day Fifteen, Tuesday

Brasov • Sinaia • Azuga • Bucharest

Today is the last leg of the journey back to Romania's capital. Begin by driving to Sinaia to visit **Sinaia Monastery**. Founded by Prince Mihail Cantacuzino in 1695 after returning from a pilgrimage to Mount Sinai (where it's believed Moses was given the Ten Commandments), the monastery is one of the oldest in Romania, nestled into a Carpathian forest near Peles Castle. Along with several small buildings and courtyards, Sinaia Monastery features two Byzantine-style churches built 150 years apart: the 1695 Old Church ("Biserica Veche") and the 1846 Great Church ("Biserica Mare"). The monastery's museum includes gilded icons, a 17th-century Bible, and royal jewels of the Cantacuzino family.

The next stop is **Peles Castle**, one of Romania's most important museums and the final resting place of several Romanian monarchs, including King Carol I, King Ferdinand and Queen Maria. Inaugurated in 1883, Peles combines elements of the German and Gothic Renaissance that bring to mind the extravagant Bavarian castles of King Ludwig. Seven terraces surround the castle's 160 rooms, which are opulently decorated with leather, ebony, walnut and mother-of-pearl and display invaluable collections of art and furnishings.

(Please note: Peles Castle is a state-owned and operated museum, and does not permit anyone but its own sanctioned museum guides to conduct tours. As such, MIR's private guides will not be allowed to conduct private tours of the castle on their own. The group may be asked to join-in with other visitors at the scheduled tour times conducted by the museum guides.)





Drive back to **Azuga for a visit to a wine cellar and wine tasting.** In the little mountain town of Azuga, visit the Rhein Cellar, where winemakers produce sparkling wines using the traditional Romanian method. Opened in 1892, the Rhein Cellar was originally the supplier of the Romanian court. Learn how its signature sparkling wine is produced, then sample the results in the cellar's tasting room.

Enjoy lunch in Sinaia and then head back to Bucharest, about a 90-minute drive. After hotel check-in and some time to rest, walk to the **farewell dinner** at a

nearby restaurant and toast the end of the journey.

Meals: B, L, D – *Epoque Hotel, Hilton Athenee Palace, Grand Continental or similar*

Day Sixteen, Wednesday

Depart Bucharest

Following breakfast at the hotel, the tour concludes with a transfer to the airport.

Meals: B

Dates for 2020 – Two Departures – Premier Series

The land itinerary is scheduled to be operated on the following dates. Please note that you will need to depart the U.S. one day prior to the tour start date due to airline flight schedules.

June 2-17, 2020

August 25-September 19, 2020

Package Prices – 2020

5-16 passengers, \$7,095 per person, double occupancy
Plus internal air \$155 (economy class, subject to change)
Single supplement \$1,095 per person

About your MIR Host: Patricia Schultz – August 25, 2020

We are pleased to advise that NY Times #1 bestselling travel author Patricia Schultz will be joining you as MIR's guest on the **August 25-September 9, 2020** departure and looks forward to traveling with you. Enjoy this once-in-a-lifetime chance to travel on this tour with the author of *1,000 Places to See Before You Die®*, the "world's best selling travel book" (amazon.com). Ms. Schultz, world traveler and maven of must-see sites, will share her observations, travel tips and tales with you during your journey.



2020 Tour Includes

- Accommodations as noted in itinerary.
- 15 breakfasts, 14 lunches and 12 dinners, per the itinerary. Some meals are not included so that you may enjoy a chance to experiment on your own.
- Restaurant tips for included meals.
- Services of experienced, English-speaking local guides, drivers and other staff, including a MIR Tour Manager.
- Arrival/departure airport transfers. MIR will arrange for all travelers to be met on arrival and seen off on departure whether we make your airfare arrangements or not, provided you arrive and depart on the tour start/end dates in the tour start/end cities.
- Ground transportation throughout itinerary by private coach or minibus (size of vehicle depends on group size).
- Guided sightseeing tours and entrance fees as outlined in itinerary.
- Special events, excursions and cultural performances per the itinerary.
- Baggage handling where available.
- Gratuities to local guides, drivers, porters and other service personnel.
- Assistance booking your custom flight arrangements (on request; please note that international airfare is not included in the land tour cost).
- Complete pre-departure information including detailed packing list, reading list, *Touring with MIR* handbook with country-specific information, maps, and travel tips.
- Final document packet including luggage tags, final updates and more.

Not Included

- Internal airfare (internal airfare is quoted separately and is subject to change by airlines).
- International airfare or taxes/fuel surcharges.
- Meals not specified as included in the itinerary.
- Single supplement charge, if requested or required.
- Items of a personal nature (phone calls, email, laundry, alcohol, excess baggage, etc).
- Gratuities to Tour Manager.
- Visa/passport fees or airport departure fees if required. (Note: no visas are required for U.S. passport holders).
- Expenses incurred as a result of delay, modification or extension of a tour due to causes beyond MIR's control.
- Travel and trip cancellation insurance.

Interested in travel insurance?

To learn more about all the benefits of purchasing a Travel Guard travel insurance plan, please visit www.travelguard.com/mircorp or contact Travel Guard at 1-877-709-5596.



Start Planning Next Year Now

Dates for 2021- Two Departures – Premier Series

At the time of writing, the land itinerary for this program next year is projected to be generally as depicted for this year. Next year's dates and prices are shown below – please call if you're ready to book now. Note: 2021 Rose Festival dates have not been announced, but generally coincide with our June dates. Also note Patricia Schultz is **not scheduled to host** either departure of this program in 2021.

June 1-16, 2021

August 24-September 8, 2021

Package Prices – 2021

5-16 passengers, \$7,295 per person, double occupancy
Plus internal air \$200 (economy class, subject to change)
Single supplement \$1,125 per person.

Premier Series

MIR's Premier Series programs feature some of our most distinctive tour concepts and include uncommon and educational experiences, including visits to small towns and villages outside the major urban areas and capital cities. While all MIR trips feature comfortable, well-located hotels, Premier Series programs take advantage of five star or best-in-class properties along the way wherever possible.

Important Notes: Is This Trip Right For You?

While the accommodations are as comfortable as possible, it is important to keep in mind that parts of Romania and Bulgaria are not up to the standards North American travelers expect. Services are improving in the region; nevertheless, you may encounter problems with plumbing, bureaucratic service, road conditions, unpaved sidewalks, uneven surfaces and steps, and availability of public restrooms. You will be traveling in some areas which, relatively speaking, have seen few travelers, and the infrastructure is not yet fully developed.

While this program is designed to be as comfortable as possible for travel in this region, this is an adventurous tour. It is rated as **rigorous touring** due to the daily walking involved, the length of some drives (causing evening arrivals in some cities), particularly in Transylvania and northern Romania, and the overall shortcomings of the tourism infrastructure. Some architectural sites, such as the steep cobblestone streets of Plovdiv or Tsarevets Hill in Veliko Tarnovo, can be difficult for travelers with limited mobility. To reap the full rewards of this tour, you must be able to walk at least one to two miles a day, keeping up with fellow travelers. Flexibility, a sense of humor and a willingness to accept local standards of amenities and services are essential components to the enjoyment of this trip.

Every effort has been made to ensure that the information in this schedule is accurate. However, trip itineraries are always subject to change. We will do our best to inform you in advance of any changes, but, due to the nature of travel in Bulgaria and Romania, this may not always be possible. Only those willing to accept these conditions should consider joining this program.



Are You Prepared?

A Travel Guard travel insurance plan can help cover your vacation investment, offset expenses from travel mishaps and provide you with emergency travel assistance. To learn more about all of the benefits of purchasing a Travel Guard travel insurance plan, please visit www.travelguard.com/mircorp

Please read the U.S. State Department's Travel Advisory regarding travel to Romania here: <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/romania-travel-advisory.html>

Please read the U.S. State Department's Travel Advisory regarding travel to Bulgaria here: <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/bulgaria-travel-advisory.html>

If you are not already enrolled in STEP, Smart Traveler Enrollment Program, a free service to enroll your trip with the nearest U.S. Embassy or Consulate, please consider enrolling. For more information: <https://step.state.gov/step/>

Weather

Bulgaria and Romania are wonderful places to visit any time of the year. Summer and early fall weather should both be quite nice, with daytime temperatures ranging from 65-85 degrees Fahrenheit in June and 55-75 degrees Fahrenheit in September. Rain is always possible.

Please remember, weather at all times of year has an element of the unpredictable. This information comes from weatherbase.com and is based on data from previous temperatures on record. It is always advisable to check with weatherbase.com closer to your departure date for current conditions and forecasts.

International Airfare

MIR's in-house, full-service air department is available to assist with your air travel needs. Check with MIR before booking air on your own, as we are happy to research and compare the best fares available through multiple channels. Airfare varies depending on a wide variety of factors, such as dates of travel and seasonality, seat availability, special airline promotions, how restrictive ticket changes are, how long the fares can be held without purchase, routing considerations such as stopovers and more. Tour dates are based on the land tour only. Our preferred carriers for this tour are Lufthansa, Austrian Airlines and Swiss Air, as they offer convenient itineraries and competitive rates from multiple cities across the U.S. to the region.

Please call us at 1-800-424-7289 to discuss air options and routings for this program, and to request a quote for your specific plans and dates of travel. We will be happy to put together a no-obligation suggested air itinerary and estimate for you at your request.

Visas

Please note that no visas are required for this itinerary for U.S. passport holders. Citizens of other countries **will likely require** visas for one or both of these countries; please call for more information.



Pre- and Post-Tours

MIR can arrange for an extended program in Sofia before the tour begins or in Bucharest at its conclusion. Please contact us for more information.

Also Nearby...

For more tours to this region, you may want to check out:

Flexible Essential Trips – Classic Private Journeys

Essential Baltics, 7 days. Take an overland survey of the Baltic capitals, Vilnius, Riga and Tallinn, exploring the centers of their UNESCO-listed Old Towns. The hearts of these cities feature cobble streets, red-tiled roofs and robust old churches and fortress walls. Admire the lush farms and winding rivers between the cities, and pay visits to important rural sites like Lithuania's Hill of Crosses and Latvia's baroque Rundale Castle.

Essential Ukraine, 8 days. Ukraine is the new borderland between Europe and Russia. Spend eight days exploring this resilient region influenced by Polish princes and Lithuanian lords, by Cossack *hetmen* and Turkish khans, by Russian communists and Ukrainian nationalists.

Essential St. Petersburg, 7 days. St. Petersburg, home of the czars and their courts, is a rich repository of extravagant palaces, brilliant museums and renowned theaters overflowing with music and dance. Its fashionable boulevards and serene canals glisten in the "White Nights" of summer and dazzle on sunny winter days.

Essential Russia, 7 days. A compact and compelling survey of Russia's political capital, Moscow, and its cultural capital, St. Petersburg, this tour communicates the character of Western Russia in a succinct and meaningful series of experiences.

Essential Balkans, 14 days. Visit seven Balkan countries in 14 days on this compact overland journey through history. A remarkably complex region, the mountainous Balkan Peninsula is fascinating, diverse and incredibly beautiful.

Small Group Tours

Kaliningrad & The Baltics, 13 days. This overland journey roves the countryside and urban centers of four distinct nations: the three independent Baltic countries – Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia – and Kaliningrad, an exclave of Russia.

Belarus, Ukraine & Moldova, 14 days. Traverse a little-known region that has changed hands from its earliest history. Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova are three of the least frequented and least familiar countries in Europe. Time slowed drastically here after the devastation of WWII, but these beautiful countries are emerging from the shadows.

Russia's Imperial Capitals & Ancient Villages, 11 days. Discover where Russian art, architecture and culture began. In between the urban centers of Moscow and St. Petersburg, experience the Russian countryside. The oldest and loveliest churches in Russia, Sergiev Posad's wooden crafts and Fedoskino's glowing lacquer boxes all put a shine on Russia's Golden Ring.



Conditions of Participation

Your participation on a MIR Corporation trip is subject to the conditions contained in the 2020 Tour Reservation Form and Release of Liability and Assumption of Risk Agreement. Please read this document carefully and contact us with any questions.

Cancellation and Refund Policy

Payment Terms: Non-refundable deposits are accepted by check, Visa, MasterCard or American Express. Final land payments may be made by check or credit card for reservations made directly with MIR. If booking through a travel agent, please contact your agent to find out what form of payment they accept. (MIR can accept final payment from travel agents by agency check only.) Airfares are subject to change until ticketed; payment policies vary by carrier.

If you cancel your trip, please notify MIR in writing. Upon MIR's receipt of notice the following charges apply to land tours (policies for air tickets, custom group trips vary).

Small Group Tours

Cost of cancellation, if received:

61 or more days prior to departure, deposit due or paid in full of \$750;

31-60 days prior to departure, 50% of land tour cost;

30 days prior to or after trip departure, no refund.

References

We encourage you to speak directly with satisfied past travelers. Please request a list of references.

Why MIR?

Regional knowledge is crucial to the success of any trip to our corner of the world. MIR combines detailed information about geography and infrastructure, history and art, language and culture, with the depth of knowledge that comes only from decades of regional experience. You may wonder how we differ from other tour operators...

Destination Specialization

MIR focuses exclusively on the exceptional region at the crossroads of Europe and Asia. This area has been our overriding passion since 1986; we don't do the rest of the world. Our hard-earned expertise gained over the last three decades can take you from end to end of the largest country in the world – Russia – and to all of its neighbors. We specialize in travel to Siberia, the Silk Route, St. Petersburg & Beyond. Our destinations include: Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, the Baltics (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), the Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Slovenia), Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan), the South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia), Turkey, Mongolia, China, Tibet, and Central/East Europe (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia).





Over 30 Years of Experience

A travel company doesn't last more than 30 years in the business without a solid track record. MIR has helped thousands of individuals achieve their travel goals. Our dedication and experience have earned us their trust and the trust of many well-respected institutions. Today MIR is the preferred tour operator for museum, alumni and special interest organizations across the country.

Recommended & Respected

MIR has twice been rated one of the "Best Adventure Travel Companies on Earth" by *National Geographic Adventure*. Several of our tours have won awards in top travel publications, such as *Outside* magazine and *National Geographic Traveler*. Our trips have been featured in books such as *Riding the Hula Hula to the Arctic Ocean* and *1,000 Places to See Before You Die*.

More Questions?

Please feel free to call us with questions at 1-800-424-7289, 8:30am-5:30pm Pacific Time.

MIR Corporation
 85 South Washington Street, Suite 210
 Seattle, WA 98104
 800-424-7289, 206-624-7289
 Fax 206-624-7360
 info@mircorp.com
 www.mircorp.com

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