

a tale of two cities

BY BRIAN E. ROWLAND

In Eastern Europe, Bucharest Makes a Bid as a Tourism Destination while Budapest Juxtaposes Ancient and Modern Worlds

ROMANIA'S BUCHAREST

Now seeking to attract tourists, Bucharest offers sights such as this Russian church and University Square (opposite page), the site of statues and student protests.



You might recall the CNN coverage when Nicolae Ceaușescu, the monstrous dictator of Romania, made a speech from his balcony to 80,000 people, only to be stupefied when the crowd began chanting anti-government slogans. In that moment in December 1989, the “supreme leader” went from deified tyrant to deposed despot. A week later, he and his wife were executed, and Romania emerged as a free country.

Not even 20 years later, the Romanian economy is on its feet, and people open their arms to welcome American tourists, inviting them to share their culture, history and ideas.

Recently, Delta Air Lines started direct service from John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York City to Bucharest. Our flight was filled with Americans wanting to go where very few Westerners have been before. The nine-hour flight arrives midday in Bucharest, and within 30 minutes one can pull up to a first-class Hilton hotel in the heart of the city.

Bucharest might be compared to Hungary's Budapest, although it's about 50 years behind in its journey to become a hub of social and cultural activities. The infrastructure is there, and it will take time and money to restore the beautiful city. The heart and the work ethic of the Romanian people are strong, as everyone I met doing business had an entrepreneurial spirit and great pride in his or her profession.

But the following service plan compensates for inconveniences caused by Bucharest's newness as a tourist destination: An airport pickup in a luxury vehicle by your personal driver and English-speaking guide for the week, six nights' accommodations in three- and four-star hotels in Bucharest and the surrounding countryside, lunch and dinners at restaurants few tourists would find, floor-show entertainment

on a couple of nights, a few wine tastings at lunch, entry and tours of many destinations of interest, and interpretation and personal time with a very kind and knowledgeable gentleman, who will bring the life and history of Romania alive on this adventure. This six-night, seven-day cultural experience costs less than \$2,000 for two people.

As this destination has many uncharted routes and limited amounts of English spoken, I strongly suggest securing a guide for your entire stay.

summer home of Romania's royal family. Perhaps the most beautiful in southeastern Europe, the castle was built in 1875, designed in a neo-Renaissance style with more than 170 rooms – as well as electricity provided by an on-site electric plant powered by the local creek. It also boasts one of Europe's most valuable painting collections, with more than 2,000 pieces.

The other castle we visited – Count Dracula's – has a darker history. We saw no shadow of the vampire, but



In Bucharest, we visited the Palace of Parliament, the second largest administrative building in the world. (Only the Pentagon is bigger.) It is magnificent, but it also is a testament to the power of Ceaușescu, who had a quarter of the city's historic center demolished and 40,000 people relocated to accommodate his grand vision.

After visiting the Museum of the Romanian Peasant, we boarded a train to Brașov, home of the Golden Stag international music festival and the Black Church – so named because a fire blackened its walls in the 17th century – the largest gothic church in Romania.

While there we would visit two castles; the first the Castle Peleş, the

we were impressed by the fortifications and large dungeon of this Gothic castle, located on top of a rock in a pass between the Bucegi and Piatra Craiului mountains.

On our final day in Romania, we traveled to Sighișoara, a medieval citadel built by the Saxons between the 12th and 17th centuries. We had lunch – and our fortunes told – at Dracula's birthplace and enjoyed a medieval show with professional actors.

Do you have a true adventurous spirit? Book a Eurail Pass and hop on the 11 p.m. train in Sighișoara and head across the border to Budapest, Hungary – but only on the first-class sleeper coach. While traveling, we

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heard an announcement similar to the one you get from flight attendants that advise you to “use your seat cushion as a flotation device.” In this case, our stewards advised us to “double-lock” our room doors after we passed the Romanian border, as thieves could stop the train and enter your room in search of valuables. The warning did cause me a moment of hesitation, but such robberies apparently are rare.

Budapest is the grand capital city of Hungary – boasting a level of cultural and visual appeal comparable to many of the great cities of Europe. It has hotel brands such as the Four Seasons, Sofitel and Marriott, but we chose to stay at the brand-new Lanchid 19 Hotel.

A “design hotel,” it has only 48 rooms and a hip, stylish look. The contemporary facility has grand views of the Danube River and the Royal Palace and is within walking distance of many other sites of interest.

One of the Lanchid 19’s design highlights – a transparent floor in the lobby that lets the Roman ruins underneath show through – is a metaphor for Budapest itself – a city with an ancient history that melds with a modern identity.

We spent the morning taking in Budapest’s attractions. Near our hotel was the Chain Bridge. Built in 1849, the 1,230-foot suspension bridge across the Danube linked the provincial towns of Pest and Buda.

The city is full of impressive architecture. The Buda Castle dates back to the 13th century and is home to several museums. Offering a counterpoint across the river on the Pest side is the Parliament Building. An elevator ride to the top on one of the towers of St. Stephen’s Basilica offers a panoramic view of this historic place.

After sightseeing, we lunched at the Robinson Restaurant. There was steak and fusion cuisine on the menu, but it was the perfect opportunity to try the Hungarian goulash and wiener schnitzel.

For nearly 2,000 years, people have been partaking of the healing powers of Budapest’s thermal waters. Honored as “Spa City” and humorously known as “Mecca of the Rheumatics,” the city’s favorite spa is the Széchenyi Baths. It has all the amenities of an old-school spa – saunas, massages, mud

SEEING THE SIGHTS Those with a taste for the dramatic will enjoy the ghoulish history of Count Dracula’s castle (below). The grand Parliament Building (bottom) sits on Danube River in Budapest. Built in 1849, the Chain Bridge connected the cities of Buda and Pest and contributed to Hungary’s emergence as a nation (right).



packing, mineral waters and a huge outdoor pool – all contained in a beautiful butter-yellow building with gorgeous tilework, statuary, fountains, arches and columns.

Dinner was a special treat at Café Spoon, a restaurant situated in a three-decker boat docked in the shadow of the Chain Bridge.

A short train ride away was Esztergom, one of the oldest towns in Hungary. It was the site of rich palaces and churches, as well as battles and ruin. The cityscape is dominated by the Esztergom Basilica. Hungary’s King Stephen I, began construction of the first church on the site in the year 1000 A.D., marking the Christianization of the nation. Churches had been built and destroyed on the site over the ensuing century, and the existing complex is the country’s largest ecclesiastical structure.

On the return trip we stopped in the small town of Visegrád, at the bend of the Danube, for a meal at the Renaissance Restaurant. As a tip of the hat to the town’s medieval past, Visegrád offers a pageant and feast from a venue with a beautiful view of the river. Our final stop was Szentendre, to visit the artists’ village that is one of the small city’s main attractions.

The next day, we flew home. We were exhausted but exhilarated to visit a part of the world that has made such great strides. ■

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