



TRANSYLVANIA LAND OF LEGENDS

BY GENEVIEVE NORTHUP

FOR MANY, TRANSYLVANIA CONJURES UP IMAGES OF VAMPIRES, WEREWOLVES AND OTHER CREATURES OF THE NIGHT. LAST YEAR, I SURVIVED HALLOWEEN IN TRANSYLVANIA AND DISCOVERED THAT THE REAL ROMANIA IS FAR MORE FASCINATING, AND SPOOKIER, THAN THE FOLKLORE.

LAND OF LEGENDS

Transylvania bore the brunt of conquests for hundreds of years by various groups, including the Romans, Huns, Turks and Hungarians. This isolated region remained rural after much of Europe began to prosper. To pass the time on long, dark nights, villagers would recount chilling tales of vampires, werewolves and other supernatural phenomena, sure to make even the bravest cower in the night.

Even today, when venturing from bustling Bucharest, one of Europe's most populated cities, the landscape quickly transitions to a desolate countryside that is beautiful during the day but becomes extremely eerie at night. The empty, sinuous mountain roads, unbroken darkness, thick woods and howling wolves or wild dogs will cause your heart to race. The villages lack commercialization and transform into ghost towns as the farmers return from the fields and turn in for the night. Tiny chapels with dilapidated cemeteries dot the roadside, and in the distance loom foreboding fortified churches. Suddenly, the legends don't seem so far-fetched after all.

BRAM STOKER'S DRACULA

Bram Stoker's famous novel, "Dracula," capitalized on the vampire intrigue associated with Transylvania. After a great deal of research, he found that the allure of the area created the perfect setting for his spooky story of a diabolical vampire masquerading as the reclusive Count Dracula.

It has long been rumored that Dracula's secluded fortress in the novel was inspired by Castle Bran. Whether accurate or not, this medieval castle has become an icon of Transylvania. The path leading up to the fortress is a lively marketplace for all things Dracula. But as you approach the beautiful and imposing castle perched atop a rocky cliff, the wind picks up, the noise of the crowds below dissipates, and Stoker's fiction comes to life. The maze of furnished chambers and spiral staircases is dizzy-

ing, and a wood-paneled library is reached by climbing a dimly lit hidden staircase – perhaps Dracula is lurking in the secret passageway. A network of balconies offers fantastic views of the valley and the inner courtyard decorated with jack-o-lanterns at Halloween. An exhibit is dedicated to the history of Romanian folklore as well as the facts and fiction of Dracula. Go to www.bran-castle.com/en to plan your visit.

THE TYRANT BEHIND THE TALE

How Stoker's villainous character emerged is still somewhat of a mystery. Recent research points to the likelihood that Irish legends and history inspired his work. However, many still believe that a medieval Romanian ruler influenced the development of his famous vampire.

The Prince of Wallachia, Vlad III or Vlad Tepes, terrorized his enemies during the 15th century. He earned the reputation of "Vlad the Impaler" for his extremely cruel execution method of impaling prisoners. Rumors abound that Tepes drank victims' blood and may have boiled or burned villagers alive. Tepes was also known as "Dracula" – a nickname befitting the barbaric ruler – because his father, Vlad Dracul, served in the Order of the Dragon.

Retrace the steps of Tepes' dominion while in Romania. To see "Dracula's" former lair requires a trek up nearly 1,500 steps to the ruins of Poenari Castle, located near Curtea de Arges. According to legend, Tepes' first wife jumped from a castle window to her death to avoid being seized by an approaching enemy army. Some say the creepy castle ruin is haunted. Ghosts or not, one look over the edge of the crumbling walls will send chills down your spine.

Journey to the medieval walled city of Sighisoara to enjoy goulash and other local cuisine in Casa Vlad-Dracul, a restaurant located in the home where Tepes was born in 1431. An iron dragon on the facade and interior murals commemorate the ruler.

Tepes' final resting place has never been confirmed, though he was murdered sometime

during the winter of 1476-1477. You'll find memorials to him at both Snagov Monastery, near Snagov, and the monastery in Comana. When visiting his memorials, be mindful that to many Romanians, he was a courageous and respected noble who defended the region from enemy conquests.



Sighisoara

TRANSYLVANIAN TOURS

Several private companies offer tours of Tepes' castles and other creepy locales, as well as Transylvania's famous historical sites and scenic cities.

Visit Transylvania Travel (www.visittransylvania.ro) offers numerous itineraries. On the Halloween Tour, available in four-day or seven-day packages, you'll visit Tepes' stomping grounds, try to sleep during an overnight stay in a haunted medieval castle, and attend Dracula's midnight wedding. Or book a two, three, or five-day Dracula Tour, available throughout the year.

Adventure Transylvania (www.adventuretransylvania.com) has six-day excursions themed around Halloween or Dracula. In addition to castles Bran and Poenari, you'll see the remains of Tepes' palace in Bucharest and the

day exploring Brasov; admire the architecture, visit historical sites, and try to find Strada Sforii, one of Europe's narrowest streets.

Some military organizations have vacations deals to Romania, including RTT Travel (www.rtttravel.com) at Ramstein Air Base, which has a 4-day trip to Transylvania for Halloween. Check with your installation's leisure travel office for more information about Transylvania trips.

A TRULY TRANSYLVANIAN EXPERIENCE

During our trip, we stayed at the home of a Transylvanian count in Miklósvár. Count Kálnoky's Estate is a historical property with cottages providing comfortable, private, affordable accommodations, as well as bed & breakfast or half-board packages.

The rooms are decorated with Transylvanian antiques and wood-burning stoves. Cloves of garlic hang above the doors, and at night the silence is broken only by the howling of the wind and wolves. With the half-board option, you can expect a farm-fresh breakfast at a table in the detached kitchen. Each night, three-course meals of traditional Romanian cuisine are served in the wine cellar next to a roaring fireplace.

You won't find televisions or radios at the estate; days are for exploring on your own or on organized horseback riding

and hiking adventures, cultural expeditions and city tours. Nights are meant to be spent with good company, sipping wine and telling ghost stories next to the fire. For more information, visit www.transylvaniacastle.com.

Though vampires may be only legend, you'll find folklore, frights and fun any time of the year in Transylvania – but leave your wooden stakes and garlic cloves behind. ■

Count Kálnoky's Estate



gigantic, ornate Palace of Parliament. This architectural marvel ranks among the world's largest civilian administrative buildings, according to the World Record Academy.

In addition to longer tours, Transylvania Discovery Tours (<http://transylvania-discovery-tours.ro>) provide action-packed day trips. See Tepes' castles, impressive fortified churches, and the opulent Peles Castle tucked away in the forests of the Prahova Valley. Or spend the

OCTOBER NIGHTS

- Oct/04: Shot-Night @11 Shots € 1,50
- Oct/05: Hi 5 „Cover Rock“ Live
- Oct/11: Crazy-Party
- Oct/12: Willy Yellow Live
- Oct/18: „After Work-Party“
- Oct/19: Gorrest Fump Live
- Oct/25: „Late Night-Party“
- Oct/26: Oldies-Night
- Oct/31: Halloween-Party



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