

A BRIEF GUIDE

EASTERN EUROPE AND BALKANS TOUR

August-October 2016

with

Adriatic Moto Tours

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Material in this guide is not original. It's been unashamedly lifted from various Internet sites. Mostly Lonely Planet. Thank you LP.

The Tour: Introduction

This tour will visit 15 countries across Eastern Europe and the Balkans: Slovenia, Austria, Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Albania, Kosovo, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Croatia.



The tour starts and finishes in Ljubljana, Slovenia, and travels clockwise.

The tour runs for 48 days. There are twelve stops of more than one day. We have a full day for sightseeing in Ljubljana, Prague, Krakow (two days), Budapest, Sibiu, Bucharest, Sofia, Ohrid, Mokra Gora, Belgrade, Sarajevo and Dubrovnik. There will also be some riding on days in Sibiu and Ohrid.

There'll be a few long days because of distance to be covered; and several because of difficult terrain (we cross and/or intermingle with at least six major mountain ranges). We'll also have several shorter days which will allow time for sightseeing in places where we spend only one night.

We'll be joined by friends who plan to ride sections of the route.

The tour has been put together by taking several of the guided tours of Adriatic Moto Tours and joining, intertwining, truncating and generally editing them into one continuous 48-day tour.

Ljubljana

Slovenia's capital and largest city also happens to be one of Europe's greenest and most liveable capitals. Car traffic is restricted in the centre, leaving the leafy banks of the emerald-green Ljubljanica River, which flows through the city's heart, free for pedestrians and cyclists. In summer, cafés set up terrace seating along the river. It almost feels like a nightly street party.

Slovenia's master of early-modern, minimalist design, Jože Plečnik, graced Ljubljana with beautiful buildings and accoutrements. Attractive cities are often described as 'jewel boxes', but here the name really fits. And bringing life to these historical riches, the city's 50,000-odd students support an active clubbing and cultural scene; and the museums, hotels and restaurants are among the best in the country.

Prešeren Square



The centrepiece of Ljubljana's wonderful architectural aesthetic is this marvellous square, a public space of understated elegance that not only serves as the link between the Centre district and the Old Town but as the city's favourite meeting point. Taking pride of place is the Prešeren monument (1905) designed by Maks Fabiani and Ivan Zajc, and erected in honour of Slovenia's greatest poet, France Prešeren (1800–49). On the plinth

are motifs from his poems.

Immediately south of the statue is the city's architectural poster-child, the small but much acclaimed Triple Bridge (Tromostovje). To the east of the monument at No 5 is the Italianate Central Pharmacy, an erstwhile café frequented by intellectuals in the 19th century. To the north sits the Franciscan Church of the Annunciation, and on the corner of Trubarjeva cesta and Miklošičeva cesta, the delightful Secessionist¹ Palača Urbanc building from 1903, which now houses a fancy department store. Diagonally across the square at No 1 is another Secessionist gem: Hauptman House. Two doors down at Wolfova ulica 4 you'll see a terracotta figure peeking out from a window. It's Julija Prielič gazing at her lifelong admirer Prešeren.

Ljubljana Castle

Crowning a 375-metre-high hill east of the Old Town, the castle is an architectural mishmash, but most of it dates to the early 16th century when it was largely rebuilt after a devastating earthquake. It's free to ramble around the castle grounds, but you'll have to pay to enter the Watchtower, the

¹ 'Secessionist' is a term associated with a group of artists who set out to bring more abstract and purer forms to the designs of buildings and furniture, glass and metalwork. This movement represented a protest of the younger generation against the traditional art of their forebears, a "separation" from the past towards the future.

Chapel of St George, to see the worthwhile Exhibition on Slovenian History, visit the new Puppet Theatre and take the Time Machine tour.

There are several ways to access the castle, with the easiest being a 70m-long funicular that leaves from Old Town not far from the market on Vodnikov trg. There's also an hourly tourist train that departs from south of the Ljubljana Tourist Information Centre. There are three main walking routes: Študentovska ulica, which runs south from Ciril Metodov trg; steep Reber ulica from Stari trg; and Ulica na Grad from Gornji trg.

You can explore the castle's various attractions at your own pace, or join one of the highly recommended 90-minute Time Machine tours, led by costumed guides who walk you through six of the city's most noteworthy periods, starting with Roman Emona.

The castle's 19th-century watchtower is located on the southwestern side of the castle courtyard. The climb to the top, via a double wrought-iron staircase (95 steps from the museum level) and a walk along the ramparts, is worth the effort for the views down into the Old Town and across the river to the Centre. Within the watchtower, there is a 12-minute video tour in several languages of Ljubljana and its history.

Situated below the watchtower down a small flight of stairs, the remarkable Chapel of St George (Kapela Sv Jurija) is one of the oldest surviving remnants of the castle, dating from 1489. It is covered in frescoes and the coats of arms of the Dukes of Carniola.

The Slovenian History Exhibition (Razstava Slovenska Zgodovina) is an interesting and well-presented interactive exhibition on Slovenian history through the ages, running from the very earliest Roman times, through the Middle Ages, the 19th century, WWI and WWII, and ending with socialist Yugoslavia and independence.

Graz

Austria's second-largest city is probably Austria's most relaxed. After Vienna, it is also Austria's liveliest for after-hours pursuits. It's an attractive place with bristling green parkland, red rooftops and a small, fast-flowing river gushing through its centre. Architecturally, Graz has Renaissance courtyards and provincial baroque palaces complemented by innovative modern designs. Styria's capital also has a very beautiful bluff connected to the centre by steps, a funicular and a glass lift. Last but not least, a large student population (some 50,000 in four universities) helps propel the nightlife and vibrant arts scene, creating a pleasant, active and liveable city.

Schlossberg

The Schlossberg is a tree-clad hill and the site of a fortress in the centre of the city. It's the site of the original fortress where Graz was founded and is topped by the city's most visible icon – the Uhrenturm. Its wooded slopes can be reached by a number of bucolic and strenuous paths, but also by lift or Schlossbergbahn funicular. Take tram 4 or 5 to Schlossplatz/Murinsel for the lift.



Schloss Eggenberg

Graz' elegant palace was created for the Eggenberg dynasty in 1625 by Giovanni Pietro de Pomis (1565–1633) at the request of Johann Ulrich (1568–1634). Admission is on a highly worthwhile guided tour during which you learn about the idiosyncrasies of each room, the stories told by the frescoes and about the Eggenberg family itself.

Johann Ulrich rose from ordinariness to become governor of Inner Austria in 1625, at a time when Inner Austria was a powerful province that included Styria, Carinthia, and parts of Slovenia and northern Italy. His baroque palace was built on a Gothic predecessor (which explains an interesting Gothic chapel in one section of the palace, viewed from a glass cube) and has numerous features of the Italian Renaissance, such as the magnificent courtyard arcades.

The guided tour is in English or German and takes you through the 24 Prunkräume (staterooms), which, like everything else in the palace and gardens, are based on astronomy, the zodiac, and classical or religious mythology. The tour ends at Planet Hall, which is a riot of white stucco work and baroque frescoes.

Salzburg

Salzburg is storybook Austria. Standing beside the fast-flowing Salzach River, your gaze is raised inch by inch to the Altstadt's (the Old Town) mosaic of graceful domes and spires, the formidable cliff-top fortress and the mountains beyond. It's a view that never palls. It's a backdrop that once did the lordly prince-archbishops and home-grown genius Mozart proud.



As tempting as it is to spend every minute in the Unesco-listed Altstadt, drifting from one baroque church and monumental square to the next in a daze of grandeur, Salzburg rewards those who venture further. Give Getreidegasse's throngs the slip, meander side streets where classical music wafts from open windows, linger decadently over coffee and cake, and let Salzburg slowly, slowly work its magic.

Beyond Salzburg's two biggest money-spinners – Mozart and The Sound of Music – hides a city with a burgeoning arts scene, wonderful food, manicured parks and concert halls that uphold musical tradition 365 days a year. Everywhere you go, the scenery, the skyline, the music and the history send your spirits soaring higher than Julie Andrews' octave-leaping vocals².

Festung Hohensalzburg

Salzburg's most visible icon is this mighty 900-year-old cliff-top fortress, one of the biggest and best preserved in Europe. It's easy to spend half a day up here, roaming the ramparts for far-reaching views over the city's spires, the Salzach River and the mountains. The fortress is a steep 15-minute jaunt from the centre or a speedy ride in the glass Festungsbahn funicular.

The fortress began life as a humble bailey³, built in 1077 by Gebhard von Helffenstein at a time when the Holy Roman Empire was at loggerheads with the papacy. The present structure, however, owes its grandeur to spendthrift Leonard von Keutschach, prince-archbishop of Salzburg from 1495 to 1519 and the city's last feudal ruler. Highlights of a visit include the Golden Hall, where lavish banquets were once held, with a gold-studded ceiling imitating a starry night sky. Your ticket also gets you into the Marionette Museum, where skeleton-in-a-box Archbishop Wolf Dietrich steals the (puppet) show, as well as the Fortress Museum, which showcases a 1612 model of Salzburg, medieval instruments, armour and some pretty gruesome torture devices.

The Golden Hall is the backdrop for year-round Festungskonzerte (fortress concerts), which often focus on Mozart's works.

Český Krumlov

Crowned by a spectacular castle, and centred on an elegant old town square, Český Krumlov is a pocket-sized Prague. Renaissance and baroque buildings enclose the meandering arc of the Vltava river, housing riverside cafés and bars. Following architectural neglect during the communist era, the undeniable fairy-tale beauty of Český Krumlov is radiant again, with thoughtful restoration transforming the heritage buildings lining the narrow lanes into cosy restaurants and classy boutique hotels.



² Don't forget: these aren't my words. They likely come straight from Lonely Planet!

³ A bailey is a courtyard of a castle or fortification. The outer bailey was the defended outer enclosure of a castle. The inner bailey was the strongly fortified enclosure at the heart of a medieval castle.

Český Krumlov State Castle

Český Krumlov's striking Renaissance castle, occupying a promontory high above the town, is one of the most important historic sites in Central Europe. It began life in the 13th century. It acquired its present appearance in the 16th to 18th centuries under the stewardship of the noble Rožmberk and Schwarzenberg families. The interiors are accessible by guided tour only, though you can stroll the grounds on your own. Together with the magnificent Church of St. Vitus, the castle is a unique feature of the entire region.

See also attachment on the [Vltava River at page 53](#).

Prague

Prague's maze of cobbled lanes and hidden courtyards is a paradise for the aimless wanderer, always beckoning you to explore a little further. Just a few blocks away from the Old Town Square you can stumble across ancient chapels, unexpected gardens, cute cafés and old-fashioned bars with hardly a tourist in sight. One of the great joys of the city is its potential for exploration – neighbourhoods such as Vinohrady and Bubeneč can reward the urban adventurer with countless memorable cameos, from the setting sun glinting off church domes, to the strains of Dvořák wafting from an open window.

Prague (Praha in Czech) was the ancient capital of Charles IV's Bohemian Kingdom and has played a pivotal role in the development of Central Europe since the Middle Ages. The city centre of Prague is divided into five areas. These span both banks of the Vltava River, which runs through the heart of the city. On one side of the Vltava River is the Old Town (Staré Město), with the Old Town Square at its heart; the New Town (Nové Město), with Wenceslas Square at its heart; and the Jewish Quarter (Josefov). On the other side of the river is the Lesser Town (Malá Strana), and higher up, the Castle District (Hradčany) which is dominated by Prague Castle

The best beer in the world just got better. Since the invention of Pilsner Urquell in 1842, the Czechs have been famous for producing some of the world's finest brews. But the internationally famous brand names – Urquell, Staropramen and Budvar – have been equalled, and even surpassed, by a bunch of regional Czech beers and microbreweries that are catering to a renewed interest in traditional brewing. Never before have Prague's pubs offered such a wide range of ales – names you'll now have to get your head around include Kout na Šumavě, Svijanský Rytíř and Velkopopovický Kozel.



The 1989 Velvet Revolution that freed the Czechs from communism bequeathed to Europe a gem of a city to stand beside stalwarts such as Rome, Amsterdam and London. Not surprisingly, visitors from around the world have come in droves, and on a hot summer's day it can feel like you're

sharing Charles Bridge with half of humanity. But even the crowds can't take away from the spectacle of a 14th-century stone bridge, a hilltop castle and a lovely, lazy river – the Vltava – that inspired one of the most hauntingly beautiful pieces of 19th-century classical music, Smetana's *Moldau* (or, preferably, *Vltava*).

Prague's art galleries may not have the allure of the Louvre, but Bohemian art offers much to admire, from the glowing Gothic altarpieces in the Convent of St Agnes, to the luscious *art nouveau* of Alfons Mucha, and the magnificent collection of 20th-century surrealists, cubists and constructivists in the Veletržní Palác. The weird and witty sculpture of David Černý punctuates Prague's public spaces, and the city itself offers a smorgasbord of stunning architecture, from the soaring verticals of Gothic and the exuberance of baroque to the sensual elegance of *art nouveau* and the chiselled cheekbones of cubist facades.

Prague Castle

Prague Castle – Pražský hrad, or just hrad to Czechs – is Prague's most popular attraction. Looming above the Vltava's left bank, its serried ranks of spires, towers and palaces dominate the city centre like a fairy-tale fortress. Within its walls lies a varied and fascinating collection of historic buildings, museums and galleries that are home to some of the Czech Republic's greatest artistic and cultural treasures.



According to the Guinness World Records, it's the largest ancient castle in the world: 570m long, an average of 128m wide and covering a total area bigger than seven football fields.

The castle has always been the seat of Czech monarchs as well as the official residence of the head of state. Its history begins in the 9th century, when Prince Bořivoj founded a fortified settlement here. It grew haphazardly as rulers made their own additions – there have

been four major reconstructions, from that of Prince Soběslav in the 12th century to a classical facelift under Empress Maria Theresa (r 1740–80) – creating an eclectic mixture of architectural styles.

Charles Bridge

Strolling across Charles Bridge is everybody's favourite Prague activity. However, by 9am it's a 500m-long fairground, with an army of tourists squeezing through a gauntlet of hawkers and buskers beneath the impassive gaze of the baroque statues that line the parapets. If you want to experience the bridge at its most atmospheric, try to visit it at dawn.

In 1357 Charles IV commissioned Peter Parler (the architect of St Vitus Cathedral) to replace the 12th-century Judith Bridge, which had been washed away by floods in 1342. (You can see the only surviving arch of the Judith Bridge by taking a boat trip with 'Prague Venice')

The new bridge was completed in 1390, and took Charles' name only in the 19th century – before that it was known simply as Kamenný most (Stone Bridge). Despite occasional flood damage, it withstood wheeled traffic for 500-odd years – thanks, legend says, to eggs mixed into the mortar (though recent investigations have disproved this myth) – until it was made pedestrian-only after WWII.

At the Staré Město end of the bridge, look over the downstream parapet at the retaining wall on the right and you'll see a carved stone head known as Bradáč (Bearded Man). When the river level rose above this medieval marker, Praguers knew it was time to head for the hills. A blue line on the modern flood gauge nearby shows the level of the 2002 flood, no less than 2m above Bradáč!

In the crush, don't forget to look at the bridge itself (the bridge towers have great views) and the grand vistas up and down the river. Pickpocket gangs work the bridge day and night, so keep your purse or wallet safe.

Vyšehrad

Vyšehrad Castle is Prague's second castle and or as its name states *High Castle*. It sits perched high above the Vltava River and gets little attention from visitors. It's more of a local place where people come to relax and enjoy the peacefulness. The easiest way to get here is to take the Prague metro (C line) to Vyšehrad station and follow the signs.

There's lots to see here. But, it's a different feeling than Prague Castle. The area is more of a park than a fairy tale castle.

Visit the Casemates. These are deep passages within the fortress ramparts. They now house some of the original statues of Charles Bridge. The casemates were almost destroyed at the end of the First Silesian War in 1742. The Prussians placed 133 barrels of gunpowder within the casemates, but the slow fuse was never lit by the last soldier in the garrison to leave.



The cemetery at Vyšehrad Castle is, in a way, more of an open air art exhibition. Numerous famous Czechs have been laid to rest here with ornate graves, frescoes and sculptured headstones. Among them include: Antonin Dvorak, Bedrich Smetana, Jan Neruda and Karel Capek. At the back of the cemetery you'll find the Slavin. This is a large resting place for numerous guests including Alfons Mucha.

The fortress is guarded by a series of incredibly large brick walls and formidable gates. The Leopold Gate in particular tells you without a doubt - you are entering a castle. From the western and northern sides of Vyšehrad Castle you will find lovely views of Prague, the Vltava River and the surrounding suburbs.

In the 20th century, the trademark twin spired Church of Saints Peter and Paul was built and the national cemetery was founded.

Olomouc

As countless tourists embrace the overt charms of Prague and Český Krumlov, Olomouc exudes a subdued appeal, emerging as the traveller's equivalent of a special restaurant that is your own little secret. An old town square rivalling that in Prague for scale and beauty combines with the youthful vivacity of a modern student town amid the graceful campus of the country's second oldest university. Some of Moravia's most impressive religious structures play host to a thrilling history; and a youthful population looks to the future with a quiet confidence. With tourist numbers at a mere trickle, Olomouc is one of the Czech Republic's best-value cities.

Holy Trinity Column

The town's pride and joy is this 35m-high baroque sculpture that dominates the square and is a popular meeting spot for local residents. The trinity column was built between 1716 and 1754 and is allegedly the biggest single baroque sculpture in Central Europe. In 2000 the column was awarded an inscription on Unesco's World Heritage list.



The individual statues depict a bewildering array of Catholic religious motifs, including the Holy Trinity, the twelve apostles, the assumption of Mary and some of the best-known saints. There's a small chapel at the base of the column that's sometimes open during the day for you to poke your nose in.

Marian Plague Column

This monument was built in baroque style after the plague swept through Olomouc in 1713-1715. The lower part of the statue

shows eight patron saints against plagues, while the upper part is dedicated to the Virgin Mary.

St Moritz Cathedral

This vast Gothic cathedral is Olomouc's original parish church, built between 1412 and 1540. The western tower is a remnant of its 13th-century predecessor. The cathedral's amazing sense of peace is shattered every September with an International Organ Festival; the cathedral's organ is Moravia's mightiest. The tower (more than 200 steps) provides the best view in town.

Kraków

If you believe the legends, Kraków was founded on the defeat of a dragon; and it's true a mythical atmosphere permeates its attractive streets and squares.

Wawel Castle is a major drawcard, while the Old Town contains soaring churches, impressive museums and the vast Rynek Główny, Europe's largest market square. In the former Jewish quarter, Kazimierz, remnant synagogues reflect the tragedy of the 20th century, just as its lively squares and backstreets symbolise the renewal of the 21st. Here and throughout the Old Town are hundreds of restaurants, bars and clubs.

However, there's more to the former royal capital than history and nightlife. As you walk through the Old Town, you'll sometimes find yourself overwhelmed by the harmony of a quiet back street, the 'just so' nature of the architecture and light. It's at times like these that Kraków reveals its harmonious blend of past and present, an essential part of any visit to Poland.

Wawel Royal Castle

As the political and cultural heart of Poland through the 16th century, Wawel Castle is a potent symbol of national identity. It's now a museum containing five separate sections: Crown Treasury & Armoury; State Rooms; Royal Private Apartments; Lost Wawel; and the Exhibition of Oriental Art. Each requires a separate ticket. Of the five, the State Rooms and Royal Private Apartments are most impressive. There's also a special display here of the city's most valuable painting, Leonardo da Vinci's *The Lady with an Ermine*.



The Renaissance palace you see today dates from the 16th century. An original, smaller residence was built in the early 11th century by King Bolesław I Chrobry. Kazimierz III Wielki (Casimir III the Great) turned it into a formidable Gothic castle, but when it burned down in 1499, Zygmunt I Stary (Sigismund I the Old; 1506–48) commissioned a new residence. Within 30 years, the current Italian-inspired palace was in place. Despite further extensions and alterations, the three-storey structure, complete with a courtyard arcaded on three sides, has been preserved to this day.



Repeatedly sacked and vandalised by the Swedish and Prussian armies, the castle was occupied in the 19th century by the Austrians, who intended to make Wawel a barracks, while moving the royal tombs elsewhere. They never got that far, but they did turn the royal kitchen and coach house into a military hospital and raze two churches. They also built a new ring of massive brick walls, largely ruining the original Gothic fortifications.

After Kraków was incorporated into re-established Poland after WWI, restoration work began and continued until the outbreak of WWII. The work was resumed after the war and has been able to recover a good deal of the castle's earlier external form and interior decoration.

Schindler's Factory

This impressive interactive museum covers the Nazi occupation of Kraków in WWII. It's housed in the former enamel factory of Oskar Schindler, the Nazi industrialist who famously saved the lives of members of his Jewish labour force during the Holocaust. Well-organised, innovative exhibits tell the moving story of the city from 1939 to 1945.

From the main post office in the Old Town, catch any tram down ul Starowiślna and alight at the first stop over the river at Plac Bohaterów Getta. From here, follow the signs east along ul Kącik, under the railway line to the museum.

Museum of Pharmacy

The name of this museum doesn't sound that exciting, but the Jagiellonian University Medical School's Museum of Pharmacy is one of the largest museums of its kind in Europe and arguably the best. Accommodated in a beautiful historic townhouse worth the visit alone, it features a 22,000-piece collection, which includes old laboratory equipment, rare pharmaceutical instruments, heaps of glassware, stoneware, mortars, jars, barrels, medical books and documents.

Several pharmacies dating back to the 19th and early 20th centuries, including one from Lesko, have been painstakingly recreated here, and the garret is crammed with elixirs and panaceas, including vile vials of dried mummy powder. Much attention is given to the 'righteous gentile' Tadeusz Pankiewicz and the Pharmacy Under the Eagle he courageously kept in operation in the Jewish ghetto during the German occupation.

Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial & Museum



Auschwitz-Birkenau is synonymous with genocide and the Holocaust. More than a million Jews and many Poles and Roma were murdered here by the German occupiers during WWII. Both sections of the camp, base camp Auschwitz I and a much larger outlying camp at Birkenau (Auschwitz II), have been preserved and are open for visitors. It's essential to visit both to appreciate the extent and horror of the place.

From April to October it's compulsory to join a tour if you arrive between 10am and 3pm; book well ahead either via www.visit.auschwitz.org, or by phoning.

English-language tours leave at numerous times throughout the day, generally most frequently between 11.30am and 1.30pm, when they operate half-hourly. All tours include a short documentary film about the liberation of the camp by Soviet troops in January 1945 (not recommended for children under 14).

The Auschwitz extermination camp was established in April 1940 by the German occupiers in pre-war Polish army barracks on the outskirts of Oświęcim. Auschwitz was originally intended for Polish

political prisoners, but the camp was then adapted for the wholesale extermination of the Jews of Europe in fulfilment of Nazi ideology. For this purpose, the much larger camp at Birkenau (Brzezinka) was built 2km west of the original site in 1941 and 1942, followed by another one in Monowitz (Monowice), several kilometres to the west.

Auschwitz

Auschwitz was only partially destroyed by the fleeing Germans. Many of the original brick buildings stand to this day as a bleak testament to the camp's history. Some 13 of the 30 surviving prison blocks now house museum exhibitions – either general or dedicated to victims from particular countries or ethnic groups that lost people at Auschwitz.

From the visitor centre in the entrance building, you enter the barbed-wire encampment through the infamous gate, displaying the grimly cynical message in German: 'Arbeit Macht Frei' (Work Brings Freedom). The sign is in fact a replica, which replaced the original when it was stolen in late 2009. Though it was recovered within a few days, it had been cut into pieces by the thieves and took 17 months to restore. The replica has remained in place, with the original sign now on display within the museum.

Birkenau

It was actually at Birkenau, not Auschwitz, that most of the killing took place. Massive (175 hectares) and purpose-built for efficiency, the camp had more than 300 prison barracks – they were actually stables built for horses, but housed 300 people each. Birkenau had four huge gas chambers, complete with crematoriums. Each could asphyxiate 2000 people at one time; and there were electric lifts to raise the bodies to the ovens.

Though much of Birkenau was destroyed by the retreating Germans, the size of the place, fenced off with long lines of barbed wire and watchtowers stretching almost as far as your eye can see, will give you some idea of the scale of the crime. Climb the tower at the entrance gate to get the full effect. Some of the surviving barracks are open to visitors for viewing, silent contemplation and prayer

Wieliczka Salt Mine

Some 14km southeast of Kraków, Wieliczka is famous for its deep salt mine. It's an eerie world of pits and chambers, and everything within its depths has been carved by hand from salt blocks. The mine has a labyrinth of tunnels, about 300km distributed over nine levels, the deepest being 327m underground. A section of the mine, some 22 chambers connected by galleries, from 64m to 135m below ground, is open to the public by guided tour. It's a fascinating trip.



The mine is renowned for the preservative qualities of its microclimate, as well as for its health-giving properties. An underground sanatorium has been established at a depth of 135m, where chronic allergic diseases are treated by overnight stays.

The salt-hewn formations include chapels with altarpieces and figures, while others are adorned with statues and monuments – and there are even underground lakes. The showpiece is the ornamented Chapel of St Kinga (Kaplica Św Kingi), which is actually a fair-sized church measuring 54m by 18m, and 12m high. Every single element here, from chandeliers to altarpieces, is of salt. It took over 30 years (1895) for one man and then his brother to complete this underground temple, and about 20,000 tonnes of rock salt had to be removed. Other highlights are the salt lake in the Erazm Barącz Chamber, whose water contains 320g of salt per litre, and the 36m-high Stanisław Staszic Chamber.

Included in the entry price is a visit to the Kraków Saltworks Museum, accommodated in 14 worked-out chambers on the third level of the mine, where the tour ends, but most visitors appear to be 'over-salted' by then. From here a fast mining lift takes you back up to the real world.

Visitors are guided in groups and the tour takes about two hours. You walk about 2km through the mine, so wear comfortable shoes (like motorcycle boots). The temperature in the mine is 14°C. In July and August English-language tours depart every half-hour from 8.30am to 6pm. During the rest of the year there are between six and eight daily tours in English.

Vysoke Tatry

The High Tatras (Vysoké Tatry), the tallest range in the Carpathian Mountains, towers over most of Eastern Europe. Some 25 peaks measure above 2500m. The massif is only 25km wide and 78km long, but photo opportunities are enough to get you fantasising about a *National Geographic* career – pristine snowfields, ultramarine mountain lakes, thundering waterfalls, undulating pine



forests and shimmering alpine meadows. Most of this jagged range is part of the Tatra National Park. The Tatra National Park complements a similar park across the peaks in Poland.

The town of Vysoké Tatry is special in many respects. It is not a true town, but a conglomerate of separate and different settlements (originally separate villages), whose only common feature is that they are the main tourist resorts in the Slovak High Tatras, while being connected through a common railway network (the Tatra Railway). It is located at an elevation of 1,010 m.

Budapest

Straddling the Danube River, with the Buda Hills to the west and the Great Plain to the east, Budapest is a gem of a city.

The city is blessed with an abundance of hot springs. As a result, 'taking the waters' has been a Budapest experience since the time of the Romans. The choice of bathhouses is generous – you can choose among Turkish-era, Art Nouveau and modern establishments. Some people come seeking a cure for whatever ails them, but the majority are there for fun and relaxation – though we still maintain it's the world's best cure for what Hungarians call a *macskajaj* (cat's wail) – hangover.



There's a lot more to Hungarian food than goulash, and it remains one of the most sophisticated styles of cooking in Europe. Magyars may exaggerate when they say that there are three essential world cuisines: French, Chinese and their own. But Budapest's reputation as a food capital dates largely from the late 19th and the first half of the 20th century and, despite a fallow period under

Communism, the city is once again commanding attention. So, too, are its excellent wines – from Villány's big-bodied reds and Somló's flinty whites to honey-gold sweet Tokaj.

They say the past is another country, but it's always been just around the corner in Budapest. Witness the bullet holes and shrapnel pockmarks on buildings from WWII and the 1956 Uprising. There are sad reminders like the poignant Shoes on the Danube memorial, but ones, too, of hope and reconciliation – like the sword of the former secret-police building on Andrassy út now beaten into the ploughshare that is the Terror House, with both sides of the story told. And there's joy as much-loved concert halls and theatres are built and renovated, metro lines extended and busy streets repaved and pedestrianised.

Budapest's beauty is not all God given; humankind has played a role in shaping this pretty face too. Architecturally, the city is a treasure trove, with enough baroque, neoclassical, Eclectic and Art Nouveau (or Secessionist) buildings to satisfy everyone. Overall, though, Budapest has a *fin-de-siècle* feel to it, for it was then, during the capital's 'golden age' in the late 19th century, that most of what you see today was built.

Royal Palace

The former Royal Palace has been razed and rebuilt at least half a dozen times over the past seven centuries. Béla IV established a royal residence here in the mid-13th century and subsequent kings added to the structure. The palace was levelled in the battle to rout the Turks in 1686; the

Habsburgs rebuilt it but spent very little time here. Today the Royal Palace contains two important museums as well as the National Széchenyi Library.

There are two entrances to the Royal Palace. The first is via the Habsburg Steps, southeast of Szent György tér and through an ornamental gateway dating from 1903. The other way in is via Corvinus Gate, with its big black raven symbolising King Matthias Corvinus, southwest of the square.

The Hungarian National Gallery is an overwhelming collection over four floors that traces Hungarian art from the 11th century to the present. The largest collections include medieval and Renaissance stonework, Gothic wooden sculptures and panel paintings, late Gothic winged altars, and late Renaissance and baroque art.

The museum also has an important collection of Hungarian paintings and sculpture from the 19th and 20th centuries. Keep an eye open for the overwrought Romantic Nationalist 'heroic' paintings by Gyula Benczúr, the harrowing depictions of war and the dispossessed by László Mednyánszky, the unique portraits by József Rippl-Rónai, the almost religious canvases by Tivadar Csontváry, the paintings of carnivals by Vilmos Aba-Novák and works by the realist Mihály Munkácsy.

The Castle Museum, which is part of the Budapest History Museum, looks at the 2000 years of the city on three floors. Restored palace rooms dating from the 15th century can be entered from the basement, where there are three vaulted halls, one



with a magnificent Renaissance door frame in red marble that bears the seal of Queen Beatrix, and tiles with a raven and a ring (the seal of her husband, King Matthias Corvinus), leading to the Gothic Hall, the Royal Cellar and the 14th-century Tower Chapel.

On the ground floor, exhibits showcase Budapest during the Middle Ages, with important Gothic statues of courtiers, squires and saints discovered during excavations in 1974. There are also artefacts recently recovered from a well dating from Turkish times, most notably a 14th-century tapestry of the Hungarian coat of arms with the fleur-de-lis of the House of Anjou. A wonderful new exhibit on the 1st floor traces the history of the city from the Turkish occupation to modern times in 10 multimedia sections, which takes an interesting and very intelligent look at housing, ethnic diversity, religion and other such matters over the centuries. The excellent audioguide is 1200Ft.

Széchenyi Chain Bridge

This twin-towered span is the oldest and arguably the most beautiful bridge over the Danube. It is named in honour of its initiator, István Széchenyi, but was built by a Scotsman named Adam Clark. When it opened in 1849, Széchenyi Chain Bridge was unique for two reasons: it was the first permanent dry link between Buda and Pest, and the aristocracy, previously exempt from all taxation, had to pay the toll.

Castle Hill

“No trip to Budapest is complete without a visit to Castle Hill (Varhegy). Take a walk around the cobbled streets of this historic part of the city, and make sure you head up to Fisherman's Bastion, one of my favourite lookout points in the whole city. It's a nice area to simply wander, but if you want to step inside for a while, you can visit the Hungarian National Gallery in Buda Castle.” (Trip Advisor)

Today, Castle Hill is recognized as a World Heritage Site, and has many must-see attractions, Gothic arches, eighteenth-century Baroque houses and cobblestone streets. Though Castle Hill has changed much since building began in the 13th century, its main streets still follow their medieval paths.



Your best option is to walk along the cobblestone streets and discover Castle Hill at your own pace. Take your time, as there is a lot to see and do, and exploring Castle Hill can take an entire day. If you don't have much time, visit Trinity Square, Matthias Church (Mátyás templom) and Fishermen's Bastion (Halászbástya).

Fishermen's Bastion

The bastion is a neo-Gothic masquerade that looks medieval and offers among the best views in Budapest. Built as a viewing platform in 1905 by Frigyes Schulek, the architect behind Matthias Church, the bastion's name was taken from the medieval guild of fishermen responsible for defending this stretch of the castle wall. The seven gleaming white turrets represent the Magyar tribes that entered the Carpathian Basin in the late 9th century. In front of the bastion is an ornate equestrian monument of St Stephen by sculptor Alajos Stróbl.

Hungarian State Opera House (Magyar Állami Operaház)

“One of my favourite buildings in Budapest, the Hungarian State Opera House is one of the city's most beautiful monuments and a must-see on your trip to the Hungarian capital. If you have more time then make sure you catch a show, otherwise you can simply take a guided tour of the interior. And if you're really in a hurry, then just stop by and snap a photo!” (Trip Advisor)

Szechenyi Baths and Pool

At the northern end of City Park, the Széchenyi Baths is unusual for three reasons: its immense size (with 15 indoor pools and three outdoor); its bright, clean atmosphere; and its water temperatures (up to 38°C), which really are what the wall plaques say they are. Because they contain hot water the baths are open all year, and it's quite a sight to watch men and women playing chess on floating boards while snow dusts the treetops in City Park.

The baths are open to both men and women at all times in mixed areas, so bathing suits (available for hire at 1100Ft) must be worn.

“Walking around the city can be tiring and sometimes you need a good pick-me-up. An afternoon at the Széchenyi Baths is the ideal way to enjoy the city and relax at the same time. The thermal waters here hold curative properties and bubble up warm, making them perfect to bathe in all year round. You can either splash about in the main area or soak yourself in the steaming hot pool where the old men sit around and play chess for hours.” (Trip Advisor)

Turda

Since its main square was semi-pedestrianised back in 2010, Turda is more inviting. With its lustrously coloured Hapsburg facades and two ace cards – the epic Turda Gorge and eerily awesome Salt Mine – it’s an attractive overnight stop.

Turda was an important salt-mining town from the 13th century until 1932, when the main mine shut down. A quarter of the town’s residents are Hungarian. Turda’s central street, Str Republicii, is home to several banks, the post office and a taxi stand at its north end (at Piața Republicii, near where the roads go around the 15th-century Catholic church).



Salt Mine

Like a Bond villain's hideout, these creepy caverns seem an apt place for hatching world domination; the most popular is Rolf Mine, some 40m-deep (13 storeys high). (We might be well salted, however, after Wieliczka.)

Transalpina Road



Transalpina road (DN67C) is the highest road in Romania. It’s one of the famous Romanian high altitude roads. With a length of 146 km, it goes through the Carpathian Mountains, reaching a maximum altitude of 2,145m above sea level in Pasul Urdele.

(<http://www.dangerousroads.org>)

The road was built under King Carol II. That’s the reason why Romanian locals in the area call it The King’s Road (“Drumul Regelui”). It was opened in 1938, when it was inaugurated by King Charles II in Poiana Sibiu and it was rebuilt during

World War II by German troops, when they needed a road for military purposes, but remained inaccessible for most normal drivers and vehicles until only a few years ago. In 2007 work started to transform this spectacular road into a modern highway allowing a rapid transit between Oltenia and Transylvania. In 2009 it was completely paved. It was totally opened to traffic in 2012. Located in the Parâng Mountains group, in the Southern Carpathians of Romania, it's one of the most spectacular roads of the Carpathian Mountains. The road links Novaci, south of Parâng Mountains and Sebeş in the north.

This road has humbled many egos. It's not for the sissies and shouldn't be attempted by novice drivers (also read "riders"⁴). The road is in dreadful condition and requires strong nerves to negotiate it. It's certainly breath-taking and it has a fearsome reputation.

Sibiu

Instantly charming with a maze of cobbled streets and baroque squares undulating downhill, Romania's cultural gem has a magic all of its own. Franz Liszt and Johan Strauss were drawn here in the 19th century. In 2007 the city was voted European Capital of Culture. In fact, the country's first hospital, school, library and pharmacy were all established here, so there must be a spirit of enterprise in the air.

Most months have myriad things going on, from festivals (more festivals here than any other city in Romania), exhibitions, theatre and opera, as well as plenty of cafés to people-watch in the city's three main squares. Sibiu has a bohemian yet stately ambience, which is perhaps what makes it so appealing: its back streets of wilting pea-green houses with their distinctive eyelid windows, watching a cast of artists, visiting guildsmen and buskers bustle below them, just as they did back in the 18th century when the city really blossomed.



Biserica Evanghelică

The Gothic church, built from 1300 to 1520, was closed and covered in scaffolding during our research due to long-term renovation. The work should be complete by 2016. Once the church reopens, visitors will again be able to admire the 1772 organ, featuring a staggering 6002 pipes, or climb the church tower. The tomb of Mihnea Vodă cel Rău (Prince Mihnea the Bad), son of Vlad Țepeș, is in a closed-off section behind the organ. The prince was murdered in front of the church in 1510.

⁴ OK, so that's my addition!

Sighișoara

So pretty it should be arrested; from the moment you enter its fortified walls, wending your way along cobblestones to its centrepiece square, Sighișoara burns itself into your memory. It's like stepping into a kid's fairy tale, the narrow streets aglow with lustrously coloured 16th-century houses, their gingerbread roofs tumbling down to pretty cafés. Horror fans won't be disappointed either, for this Unesco-protected citadel, the best preserved of its kind in Europe, was the birthplace of one of history's great monsters – Vlad Țepeș (Vlad the Impaler).

The area was settled by the Romans, but it wasn't until the 12th century that immigrant Saxons established a thriving trading town here and the citadel you see today. It was later extended and enlarged in the 14th century. Grab a caffeine burst outside Țepeș' house (opposite the fantastical church with the onion-dome spire); visit the sights of the citadel then wind yourself up for the climb to the church on the hill.

Citadel

Most of Sighișoara's sights are clustered in the compact old town - the delightful medieval citadel - perched on a hillock and fortified with a 14th-century wall, to which 14 towers and five artillery bastions were later added. Today the citadel, which is on the Unesco World Heritage list, retains just nine of its original towers (named for the guilds in charge of their upkeep) and two of its bastions. You'll have more than a couple of chances to get Dracula T-shirts and locally made brandy these days.



Church on the Hill

A powerfully evocative late-Gothic church is situated high atop 'School Hill' (420m) and is well worth the hike up here to see the restored interior, with remains of frescoes dating back to the 15th century. The period altarpiece dates from 1520. Entry is via a covered wooden stairway (scara acoperită). Opposite the church is a historic German cemetery (daily 8am-8pm).

Clock Tower

The symbol of the town is this magnificent medieval clock tower, built in the 14th century and expanded 200 years later. It originally housed the town council, but these days it's purely decorative. The clock and figurines were added in the 17th century. The figurines represent different medieval characters, including Peace, Justice and Law, as well as those representing Day and Night.

The tower houses a history museum, which affords access to the viewing platform on the upper floor. The museum is hard to follow (English signage is spotty), but there's a small exhibition on local hero and physicist Hermann Oberth. A couple floors up you can see the clock's famed figures, as well as the clanking innards of the clock behind them.

Mediaş

From Wikipedia: Mediaş has one of the best preserved historical centres in Romania and also some well-preserved medieval fortifications. One symbol of the town is the Tower of the Buglers, which is about 70 metres tall. Its construction started in the 13th century. In the 15th century it was raised to 5 tiers. The St. Margaret Church was finished at about the same time. Later, 3 more tiers were added in only two months. The roof consists of coloured vitrified tiles, and four turrets were built. The tower had a guard, who would sound his bugle whenever an enemy approached. The tower has in its South-Western corner (between the clocks) a small wooden man who rings a bell, thus announcing in advance when the clock will ring on the hour. The heavy pressure of the tower on the sandy soil is the reason why the tower is slightly tilted to the North. Between 1927 and 1930, and later in 1972, the tower was consolidated. The tilt of the tip compared with the base is 2.32 m.

The city lies in the middle of the area which was inhabited by Transylvanian Saxons and in an area of 20 km around it there are dozens of fortified churches, two of them UNESCO World heritage sites.

The Transfăgărășan

While most Transylvanian roads are heavily potholed or unpaved, the Transfăgărășan Road bucks the trend. Built as a military route in the 1970s on Ceaușescu's order, it winds up and over the towering Făgăraș Mountains. The road zigzags up a barren valley to Lake Bâlea and through a 900m-long tunnel, before continuing down through the forests of Wallachia region. Heavy snow means the road is open only a few months a year, usually from late June until early October, when it's packed with petrol-heads.



The Transfăgărășan was constructed between 1970 and 1974 during the rule of Nicolae Ceaușescu as a response to the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Soviet Union. Ceaușescu wanted to ensure quick military access across the mountains in case of a Soviet invasion. At the time, Romania already had several strategic mountain passes through the Southern Carpathians, whether inherited from the pre-communist era (the DN1 and the high-pass DN67C) or built during the initial years of the Communist regime (the DN66). These passes, however, were mainly through river valleys, and would be easy for the Soviets to block and attack. Ceaușescu therefore ordered the construction of a road across the Făgăraș Mountains, which divide north-western and southern Romania.

The road climbs to an altitude of 2,042 metres making it the second highest mountain pass in Romania after the Transalpina. It is a winding road, dotted with steep hairpin turns, long S-curves, and sharp descents. It is both an attraction and a challenge for hikers, cyclists, drivers and motorcycle enthusiasts. Due to the topography, the average speed is around 40 km/h. The road also provides access to Bâlea Lake and Bâlea Waterfall.

The Transfăgărășan was featured in a segment of the British TV show *Top Gear*, in the first episode of Series 14 (November 2009). Host Jeremy Clarkson proclaimed that the Transfăgărășan was "the best road in the world," a title the presenters had previously given to the Stelvio Pass in Italy.

One of the links to old Transylvania and, indeed, to Vlad Țepeș himself, are the ruins of Poenari Castle. See more on this and the [Transfăgărășan in attachment at page 58](#).

Bran



On a rocky bluff rising from wolf-prowled forests perches a gaunt castle, its mass of turrets a sinister refrain...right? Sort of, but Bran Castle, despite its tenuous link to Vlad Țepeș, is anything but gloomy. Inside it's positively sunny, with a geranium-festooned courtyard, bright white rooms, hidden stairways and a palpable effort on the part of its blue-blooded owner to distance the place from any mention of garlic.

Guarded from the east by the Bucegi Mountains and from the

west by the Piatra Craiului massif, its setting is indisputably stunning. If you've a determined taste for the Gothic you'll find the castle is best seen from a distance, its grey facade often shrouded in mist. Creep a little closer and Bran town itself is a carnivalesque gauntlet of stalls hawking vampiric T-shirts, and myriad day trippers who take away from the atmosphere. There's even a 'haunted castle' funhouse next to the entrance, complete with staff dressed as werewolves and vamps who chase you around. Embrace the tack!

The entrance to Bran Castle, signposted 'Muzeul Bran', is on the left as you enter the town. By far the bulk of visitors see Bran as a half-day trip, along with a stop at Râșnov Castle. Daring hiking trails down from the Bucegi wind up here too.

Bran Castle

The 60m-tall Bran Castle, sometimes mistakenly called 'Dracula's Castle', is spectacular and one of the country's leading attractions. It was built by Saxons from Brașov in 1382 to defend Bran pass against the Turks. It may have housed Vlad Țepeș (aka Dracula) for a few nights on his flight from the Turks in 1462. Castle ticket include entry to the open-air village museum, with a dozen traditional buildings at the foot of the castle.

From 1920, Queen Marie lived in the castle, and it served as a summer royal residence until the forced abdication of King Michael in 1947. It became a museum in 1957. Much of the original furniture imported from Western Europe by Queen Marie is still inside.

On the southern side of the castle wall is a small chapel built in 1940 in memory of the queen. The church is a copy of another church in the queen's palace grounds in Balchik, Bulgaria (formerly part

of Romania). A memorial tomb where the queen's heart lies has been carved in the mountain, on the north side of the wall.

Brasov



Legend has it the Pied Piper re-emerged from Hamelin in Braşov, and indeed there's something whimsically enchanting about it, with its fairy-tale turrets and cobbled streets. Dramatically overlooked by Mt Tâmpa, with trees sporting a russet-gold coat (and cocky Hollywood-style sign), this is a remarkably relaxed city.

Wander its maze of streets, stopping for caffeine injections at bohemian cafes between losing yourself in a beguiling coalescence of Austro-Hungarian gingerbread roofs, baroque gods, medieval spires and Soviet flat-tops. The city's centrepiece square is Piaţa Sfatului, a people-watcher's mecca. There are myriad things to see here, great restaurants and oodles of accommodation. This wide square, chock with cafes, was once the heart of medieval Braşov. In the centre stands the 1420 Council House (Casa Sfatului), topped by the Trumpeter's Tower, in which town councillors, known as centurions, would meet. These days at midday, traditionally costumed musicians appear from the top of the tower like figures in a Swiss clock.

Braşov's main landmark, the Black Church is the largest Gothic church between Vienna and Istanbul, and still used by German Lutherans today. Built between 1383 and 1480, it was named for its appearance after a fire in 1689. The original statues from the exterior of the apse are now inside.

Peleş Castle

A 20-minute walk uphill of the town centre, of all the castles you'll marvel at in Transylvania this one has to be the most magical. Fairy-tale turrets rise above green meadows, and grand reception halls fashioned in Moorish, Florentine and French styles collectively overwhelm.

Endless wood-carved ceilings and gilded pieces induce cross-eyed swoons, and even if you're bent on chasing creepy Dracula-type castles, it's hard not to get a thrill visiting this one. The first European castle to have central heating, electricity and vacuuming(!), Peleş was intended to be the summer residence of Romania's longest-serving monarch, King Carol I. Construction on the 3500-sq-metre edifice, built in a predominantly German-Renaissance style, began in 1875. Some 39 years, more than 400 weary craftsmen and thousands of labourers later, it was completed, just months before the king died in 1914. King Carol I's wife Elisabeta was largely responsible for the interior decoration. During Ceauşescu's era, the castle's 160 rooms were used as a private retreat for leading

communists and statesmen from around the globe. US presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, Libyan leader Moamar Gaddafi and PLO leader Yasser Arafat were all entertained by the Romanian dictator here.



The basic 40-minute tour takes in about 10 rooms on the ground floor, while two additional tours also take in the 1st and 2nd floors. In the first Armoury Hall (there are two) look for one of the 11 medieval knight suits with the long pointed boots. Rembrandt reproductions line the walls of the king's office, while real Gustav Klimt works are in the last stop, a theatre/cinema behind the entry.

Guides will point out a secret door in the small library; all rooms have such a door apparently. Queen Elisabeta painted and wrote some

43 books in her life under a pseudonym; the paintings in the poetry room depict 'fairy-tale' scenes she wrote about in one book. Tickets are sold in a kiosk in the central courtyard. Guides speak English, French, Russian and German.

Bucharest

Romania's capital gets a bad rap, but in fact it's dynamic, energetic and quite fun. It's where still-unreconstructed communism meets unbridled capitalism; where the soporific forces of the EU meet the passions of the Balkans and Middle East. Take in the good museums, stroll the parks and hang out at trendy cafes. While much of the centre is modern and garish, you will find some splendid



17th- and 18th-century Orthodox churches tucked away in quiet corners and graceful art nouveau villas. Communism changed the face of the city for good, and nowhere is this more evident than at the gargantuan Palace of Parliament, the craziest and arguably crassest tribute to dictatorial megalomania you'll ever see.

Palace of Parliament

The Palace of Parliament is the world's second-largest building (after the Pentagon) and former dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu's most infamous creation. Built in 1984 (and still unfinished), the building has more than 3000 rooms and covers 330,000 sq metres. Entry is by guided tour only (book in advance). Bring your passport since they check IDs. Today it houses the parliament.

National History Museum

This museum houses an excellent collection of maps, statues and ancient jewels and is particularly strong on the country's ties to ancient Rome, including a replica of the 2nd-century Trajan's Column. Our favourite piece, though, is not inside the museum at all, but rather on the steps outside: a controversial (and funny) Statue of Emperor Trajan standing naked holding a Dacian wolf.

Caru' cu Bere

Despite a decidedly tourist-leaning atmosphere, with peasant-girl hostesses and sporadic traditional song-and-dance numbers, Bucharest's oldest beer house continues to draw in a strong local crowd. The colourful belle époque interior and stained-glass windows dazzle, as does the classic Romanian food. Dinner reservations recommended.

Stavropoleos Church

The tiny and lovely Stavropoleos Church, which dates from 1724, perches a bit oddly a block over from some of Bucharest's craziest Old Town carousing. It's one church, though, that will make a lasting impression, with its courtyard filled with tombstones and an ornate wooden interior and carved wooden doors.

Romanian Athenaeum

The historic Athenaeum is home to the respected George Enescu Philharmonic and offers a wide array of classical music concerts from September to May as well as a number of one-off musical shows and spectacles throughout the year. Buy tickets at the venue box office.

Veliko Târnovo

The evocative capital of the medieval Bulgarian tsars, sublime Veliko Târnovo is dramatically set amidst an amphitheatre of forested hills, divided by the ribboning Yantra River. Commanding pride of place is the magisterial, well-restored Tsarevets Fortress, citadel of the Second Bulgarian Empire. It's complemented by scores of churches and other ruins, many still being unearthed.

As the site of Bulgaria's most prestigious university, Veliko Târnovo also boasts a revved-up nightlife of which many larger towns would be jealous. There's great food and drink, too, in restaurants offering commanding views of the river and castle, or the old-world ambience of the Varosha quarter, with its terracotta rooftops and lounging cats.

As a major stop on the Bucharest–Istanbul express train, Veliko Târnovo is also a backpackers' fave. However, it's also popular with weekenders Bulgarians drawn by its romantic ambience and European tour groups peering over the sites. Certainly, it's one of the 'obligatory' destinations for getting the full Bulgarian experience, but Târnovo is well worth it, and will keep you entranced for at least a few days. (We'll have to settle on less!)

Veliko Târnovo is stacked upwards along a ridge above the Yantra River – try to think vertical to make sense of city maps. The river winds in a horseshoe bend between four hills: Tsarevets, site of the fortress; Momina Krepost, several kilometres to the east; Trapezitsa; and Sveta Gora (Holy Mountain).



The centre of town runs along ul Nezavisimost and ul Stefan Stambolov, between the post office and a huge underpass. Follow ul Rakovski as it branches up from Stambolov for the traditional crafts shopping quarter, Samovodska Charshiya, and beyond it the quiet and cobblestoned old town, Varosha. Târnovo's nondescript modern part is west and southwest from ul Vasil Levski.

Tsarevets Fortress

The inescapable symbol of Veliko Târnovo, this reconstructed fortress dominates the skyline, and is one of Bulgaria's most beloved monuments. The former seat of the medieval tsars, it boasts the remains of more than 400 houses, 18 churches, the royal palace, an execution rock and more. Watch your step: there are lots of potholes, broken steps and unfenced drops. The fortress morphs into a psychedelic spectacle with a magnificent night time sound-and-light show, held on public holidays.

Tsarevets Museum-Reserve is located on Tsarevets Hill, which has been settled since time immemorial due to its strategic location. Thracians and Romans used it as a defensive position, but the Byzantines built the first significant fortress here between the 5th and 7th centuries. The fortress was rebuilt and fortified by the Slavs and Bulgars between the 8th and 10th centuries, and again by the Byzantines in the early 12th century. When Târnovgrad became the Second Bulgarian Empire's capital, the fortress was truly magnificent, but with the Turkish invasion in 1393, it was sacked and destroyed. Tourists can thank the communists for returning it to a semblance of its former glory (although some archaeologists grumble about the faithfulness of the restoration).

Church of Sveti Dimitâr

Across the river, enclosed by a high wall, is Târnovo's oldest church, the beautifully proportioned Church of Sveti Dimitâr. Built in the so-called Târnovo style, it was named after St Dimitrios, patron saint of Thessaloniki (Greece). During its 1185 consecration, Tsars Asen and Petâr proclaimed an uprising against Byzantine rule, which would create the Second Bulgarian Empire (1185–1396). It's often closed, but the Church of Sveti Petar & Pavel's caretaker can open it on request.

Shipka Pass

About 13km along a winding road north of Shipka village is the Shipka Pass (1306m). Some 900 steps lead to the top of Mt Stoletov (1326m), dominated by the impressive, 32m-high Freedom Monument. It was built in 1934 as a Russo-Turkish War memorial. The monument pays tribute to the Russian troops and Bulgarian volunteers who died while successfully repelling Turkish attacks.



Shipka Pass (Shipchenski Prokhod) is on the main road from Ruse on the Danube River to Edirne (Adrianople) in Turkey. So it was a strategically important pass and was the scene of fierce fighting during the Russo-Turkish War (1877–78). The pass was originally held by a Turkish force of 4,000 men, but the Russian general I.V. Gurko seized it by surprise in July 1877. In response, the Turkish general Süleyman Paşa attacked Shipka in August. The Russian force there, which included 7,500 Bulgarian volunteers, held the position against Süleyman's 30,000

Turks, and the fighting continued until late September, when both sides entrenched themselves in the pass. After the capitulation of the Turkish forces at Pleven, Bulgaria, in December, the Russians began a general advance, and, in January 1878, General F.F. Radetsky attacked the Turks at Shipka Pass. The fall of Pleven made Turkish resistance strategically useless, and so, on January 9, General Vessil Paşa (who had succeeded Süleyman) surrendered.

The Russians had lost 5,500 men in the battle for Shipka Pass, while the Turks had lost approximately 13,000. The way Süleyman had sacrificed his men earned him the name of the "Shipka butcher."

Plovdiv

With its art galleries, winding cobbled streets and bohemian cafés, Plovdiv equals Sofia in things cultural and is a determined rival in nightlife as well – it has a lively, exuberant spirit befitting its status as a major university town. Being a smaller and less stressful city than Sofia, Plovdiv is also great for walking.

Plovdiv's appeal derives from its lovely old town, largely restored to its mid-19th-century appearance. It's packed with atmospheric house museums and art galleries and – unlike many other cities with 'old towns' – has eminent artists still living and working within its tranquil confines. The neighbourhood boasts Thracian, Roman, Byzantine and Bulgarian antiquities, the most impressive being the Roman amphitheatre – the best-preserved in the Balkans. It's still used for performances.

Plovdiv's modern centre, on the south side of the Maritsa River, features a shop-lined pedestrian mall, ul Knyaz Aleksandâr, which passes over the Roman Stadium and up to a splendid square with gushing fountain. The nearby Tsar Simeon Garden is a shady, popular spot for relaxing. Plovdiv's cafés and bars are widespread, though one concentration of popular places is in the Kapana district, northwest of the old town.



Like Rome, Plovdiv boasts seven hills, though one was flattened by communists and only four impress: Nebet Tepe, with Thracian fort ruins above the old town; Sahat Tepe (Clock Hill), crowned with a clock tower; Bunardjika (the 'Hill of the Liberators') to the west; and Djendem ('Hill of the Youth') in the southwest.

Plovdiv's always been one of Bulgaria's wealthiest and most cosmopolitan cities, and it's also Bulgaria's second-largest road and railway hub and economic centre. Although travellers often merely regard it as a stopover point between Bulgaria and Greece or Turkey, Plovdiv repays a longer visit and will certainly draw you in if you let it.

Roman Amphitheatre

Plovdiv's magnificent 2nd-century-AD amphitheatre, built during the reign of Emperor Trajan, was only uncovered during a freak landslide in 1972. It once held about 6000 spectators. Now largely restored, it's one of Bulgaria's most magical venues, once again hosting large-scale special events and concerts. Visitors can admire the amphitheatre for free from several lookouts along ul Hemus, or pay admission for a scarper around.

Thrace

Ancient Greek and Roman historians agreed that the ancient Thracians, who were of Indo-European stock and language, were superior fighters; only their constant political fragmentation prevented them from overrunning the lands around the north-eastern Mediterranean. Although these historians characterised the Thracians as primitive partly because they lived in simple, open villages, the Thracians in fact had a fairly advanced culture that was especially noted for its poetry and music. Their soldiers were valued as mercenaries, particularly by the Macedonians and Romans.

Sofia

Bulgaria's pleasingly laid-back capital, Sofia is often overlooked by tourists heading straight to the coast or the ski resorts, but they're missing something special. It's no grand metropolis, true, but it's a largely modern, youthful city, while its old east-meets-west atmosphere is still very much evident. A scattering of onion-domed churches, Ottoman mosques and stubborn Red Army monuments



shares the skyline with vast shopping malls and glassy five-star hotels. Sofia's grey, blocky civic architecture lends a lingering Soviet tinge to the place, but it's also a surprisingly green city. Vast parks and manicured gardens offer welcome respite from the busy city streets; and the ski slopes and hiking trails of mighty Mt Vitosha are just a short bus ride from the city centre. Home to many of Bulgaria's finest museums, galleries, restaurants and entertainment venues, Sofia may persuade you to stick around and explore further.

Aleksander Nevski Church

One of the symbols not just of Sofia but of Bulgaria itself, this massive, awe-inspiring church was built between 1882 and 1912 in memory of the 200,000 Russian soldiers who died fighting for Bulgaria's independence during the Russo-Turkish War (1877–78).

Monument to the Soviet Army

Near the entrance to Borisova Gradina, this gigantic monument was built in 1954 and is a prime example of the forceful socialist-realism of the period. The place of honour goes to a Red Army soldier atop a column, surrounded by animated cast-iron sculptural groups depicting determined, gun-waving soldiers and grateful, child-caressing members of the proletariat.

Archeological Museum

Housed in a former mosque built in 1496, this museum displays a wealth of Thracian, Roman and medieval artefacts. Highlights include a mosaic floor from the Church of Sveta Sofia, a 4th-century BC Thracian gold burial mask, and a magnificent bronze head, thought to represent a Thracian king.

Boyana Church

The tiny, 13th-century Boyana Church is around 2km south of the National Museum of History. It's on Unesco's World Heritage list and its 90 murals are rare survivors from that period, and are among the very finest examples of Bulgarian medieval artwork. They include the oldest known portrait of St John of Rila, along with representations of King Konstantin Asen and Queen Irina.

Manastirska Magernitsa

This traditional mehana (tavern) is among the best places in Sofia to sample authentic Bulgarian cuisine. The enormous menu features recipes collected from monasteries across the country, with

dishes such as 'drunken rabbit' stewed in wine as well as salads, fish, pork and game options. Portions are generous and service attentive.

Sveta Nedelya Cathedral

Completed in 1863, this magnificent domed church is one of the city's major landmarks, noted for its rich, Byzantine-style murals. It was blown up by communists on 16 April 1925 in an attempt to assassinate Tsar Boris III.

Demir Kapija

Demir Kapija is located near the ominous limestone gates of the same name. It has 3,725 inhabitants. The name of the town comes from Turkish *Demir Kapı* (Iron Gate) when the settlement was part of the Ottoman Empire, and is still called *Demir Kapı* in Turkish.



The Vardar river makes a wonderful gorge close to Demir Kapija, while the "Bela Voda" cave is very interesting to see at 955m long. When passing "The Iron Gates", the road leads to the Valandovo and Gevgelija valley. It is the most picturesque region in Macedonia, as well as the most varied with its agricultural products. This valley is under the influence of the Aegean climate. Demir Kapija has recorded the highest temperature in whole Macedonia. 45.7°C was recorded here the 24th July 2007. It is also a national monument of nature and an ornithological reserve, home to many rare species of birds and endemic plants.

The former Yugoslavic King Aleksandar Karadjordjevic had his summer home and winery built here. The winery is the oldest on the Balkans and still produces quality wines under the privately owned Agropin name. Newer wineries, like Popova Kula, have opened up additionally and paves the way for exports and economic stimulus of the region. Demir Kapija is also home to the flour mill Dekamel and has a modern farm for production of eggs known as Salmak.

Ohrid

Sublime Ohrid is Macedonia's prime destination, with its atmospheric old quarter with beautiful churches along a graceful hill, topped by a medieval castle overlooking serene 34km-long Lake Ohrid. It's undoubtedly Macedonia's most alluring attraction, especially when you factor in the nearby Galičica National Park and the further secluded beaches that dot the lake's eastern shore.

Lake Ohrid, 300m deep and three million years old, shared by Macedonia (two-thirds) and Albania (one-third), is among Europe's deepest and oldest. Although usually calm, during storms Ohrid seethes with steely-grey whitecaps evoking the sea.



Church of Sveti Jovan at Kaneo

This stunning 13th-century church is set on a cliff over the lake, and is possibly Macedonia's most photographed structure. Peer down into the azure waters and you'll see why medieval monks found spiritual inspiration here. The small church has original frescoes behind the altar.

Sveta Sofia Cathedral

Ohrid's grandest church, 11th-century Sveta Sofia is supported by columns and decorated with elaborate, if very faded Byzantine frescoes, though they are well preserved and very vivid in the apse, still. Its superb acoustics mean it's often used for concerts (300MKD). The exposed beams reveal the very real achievement constructing a church this size would have been in the 11th century.

Car Samoil's Castle

The massive, turreted walls of the 10th-century castle indicate the power of the medieval Bulgarian state. Ascend the stairways to the ramparts for fantastic views over the town and lake.

Sveti Naum



The Monastery of Saint Naum (Macedonian Sveti Naum/Свети Наум) is an Eastern Orthodox monastery named after the medieval Saint Naum who founded it. He was a medieval Bulgarian writer, enlightener, one of the seven Apostles of the First Bulgarian Empire and missionary among the Slavs. He was among the disciples of Saints Cyril and Methodius and is associated with the creation of the Glagolitic and Cyrillic scripts.

Sveti Naum is 29km south of Ohrid, just before the Albanian border, and is surrounded on both sides by a sandy beach. Naum's Church of the Holy Archangels (AD 900) became the 16th-century Church of Sveti Naum; this multidomed, Byzantine-style structure on a cliff, surrounded by roses and peacocks, boasts 16th- and 19th-century frescoes.

Inside, drop an ear to the tomb of Sveti Naum to hear his muffled heartbeat. Outside, a wishing well collects spare denars. From the wall, lake views are excellent. Sveti Naum has one of Ohrid's only sandy beaches, with good swimming and a hotel.

Gjirokaster/Gjirokastra

Defined by its castle, roads paved with chunky limestone and shale, imposing slate-roofed houses and views out to the Drina Valley, Gjirokastra is an intriguing hillside town described beautifully by Albania's most famous literary export and locally born author, Ismail Kadare (b 1936), in *Chronicle in Stone*. There has been a settlement here for 2500 years, though these days it's the 600 'monumental' Ottoman-era houses in town that attract visitors. The town is also synonymous for Albanians with former dictator Enver Hoxha, who was born here and ensured the town was relatively well preserved during his reign; though, as with everywhere else in the country, he is not remembered with any particular fondness here today. While tourism is booming, development has been haphazard. On the one hand many unique and historically important Ottoman mansions have been saved, but on the other there seems to be a fairly lax attitude towards building in the Unesco-listed old town, which is concerning.

Gjirokaster Castle

Gjirokastra's eerie hilltop castle is one of the biggest in the Balkans and easily the town's best sight, most definitely worth the steep walk up from the Old Town. Inside there's an eerie collection of armoury, two good museums, a shot down US Air Force jet and a hilariously hard to use audiotour that is included in your entry fee.

There's been a fortress here since the 12th century, although much of what can be seen today dates to the early 19th century. The castle remains somewhat infamous due to its use as a



prison under the communists. One of the quirkier sights on display is that of a recovered US Air Force jet that was shot down during the communist era. The views across the valley are simply superb.

Old Bazaar and Historic Ottoman Houses

The 'Neck of the Bazaar' makes up the centre of the Old Town and contains artisan shops that support masters of the local stone- and wood-carving industries. The old bazaar is still the social and commercial centre of the Old Town of Gjirokastra. Though the newer sections of the city have attracted many businesses and people, the bazaar and its surrounding homes dating from the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries still manage to capture a bit of the bygone era of Gjirokastrite life. Several of the houses are at various levels of restoration and are open to the public. Traditional houses include Cabej House, Kadare House, Topulli House, and Skenduli House. The Bazaar itself has recently undergone a cleaning and exterior restoration as part of the government's revitalization plan.

The Gjirokastra Mosque, located in Old Bazaar, is a true testimony of the communist religious ban in Albania. Spared from destruction from its religious importance, the mosque was transformed as a circus training centre only to return to its original setting after the 1990s in the form of a Muslim school.

Butrint



The ancient ruins of Butrint lie 18km south of Sarandë and are a real gem if you have a fascination for the ancient world. The remains are from a variety of periods, spanning 2500 years. The poet Virgil claimed that the Trojans settled Butrint, but the site has been pored over by archaeologists and no evidence of this has been found.

Greeks settled Butrint during the 6th century BC, although the area had been settled long before by the Illyrians.

Within a century of the Greeks arriving,

Butrint had become a fortified trading city with its own acropolis, the ruins of which you can still visit. Just below the acropolis in the forest is the 3rd century BC theatre, also used for performances by the Romans. Nearby are public baths with geometrical mosaics, and deeper into the forest is a wall with Greek inscriptions and a 6th-century baptistry decorated with colourful mosaics of animals and birds. Overlooking the whole site is an acropolis with a fortress erected by warlord Ali Pasha Tepelena early in the 19th century.

Sarandë

Sarandë has grown rapidly in the past decade; skeletal high-rises crowd around its horseshoe shape and hundreds more are being built in the outlying region. Sarandë is bustling in summer – buses are crowded with people carrying swimming gear and the weather means it's almost obligatory to go for a swim. A daily stream of Corfu holidaymakers takes the 45-minute ferry trip to Albania, add the Albanian stamp to their passports and hit Butrint or the Blue Eye Spring before heading back.



Twenty-two kilometres east of Sarandë, the Blue Eye Spring is a hypnotic pool of deep-blue water surrounded by electric-blue edges like the iris of an eye. Bring your swimming gear and a towel, as it's a great spot for a dive into the cold water on a summer's day. It feeds the Bistrica River and its depth is unknown. (I suspect on 14th Sept, it might not be such a good idea!)

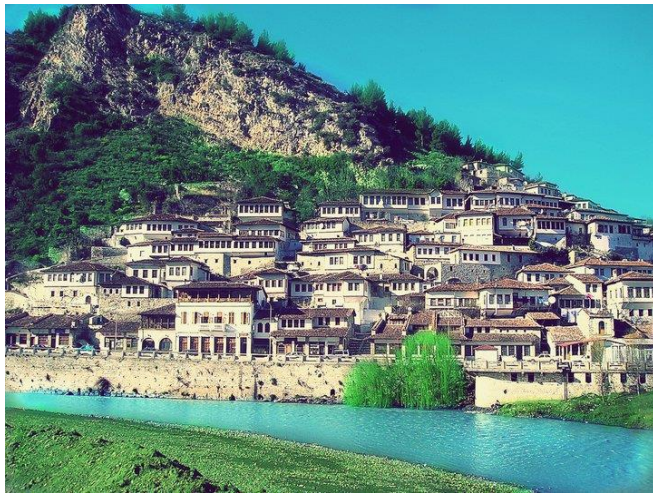
The town's name comes from Ayii Sarandë, an early monastery dedicated to 40 saints. Its bombed remains (including some preserved frescos) are still high on the hill above the town. The town was called Porto Edda for a period in the 1940s, after Mussolini's daughter.

Between Sarandë and Butrint, the lovely beaches and islands of Ksamil are perfect for a dip after a day of exploring.

Four main streets arc around Sarandë's bay, including the waterfront promenade that becomes prime *xhiro* (evening walk) territory in the evening.

The Castle of Lëkurësit is now a restaurant with superb views over Sarandë and Butrint lagoon, especially at sunset. A taxi costs about 1000 lekë return; arrange a time for the driver to pick you up, or it's a 15-minute walk up from the Sarandë–Tirana road.

Berat



Berat weaves its own very special magic, and is easily a highlight of visiting Albania. Its most striking feature is the collection of white Ottoman houses climbing up the hill to its castle, earning it the title of 'town of a thousand windows' and helping it join Gjirokastra on the list of Unesco World Heritage sites in 2008. Its rugged mountain setting is particularly evocative when the clouds swirl around the tops of the minarets, or break up to show the icy top of Mt Tomorri.

The old quarters are lovely ensembles of whitewashed walls, tiled roofs and cobblestone roads. Surrounding the town, olive and cherry trees decorate the gentler slopes, while pine woods stand on the steeper inclines. The modern town is dominated by the incongruously modern dome of Berat University, while elsewhere the bridges over the Osumi River to the charmingly unchanged Gorica side include a 1780 seven-arched stone footbridge.

In the 3rd century BC an Illyrian fortress called Antipatrea was built here on the site of an earlier settlement. The Byzantines strengthened the hilltop fortifications in the 5th and 6th centuries, as did the Bulgarians 400 years later. The Serbs, who occupied the citadel in 1345, renamed it Beligrad, or 'White City'. In 1450 the Ottoman Turks took the town. After a period of decline, in the 18th and 19th centuries the town began to thrive as a crafts centre specialising in woodcarving. Berat today is now a big centre for tourism in Albania, though it has managed to retain its easy-going charm and friendly atmosphere. Don't miss it.

The neighbourhood inside the Berat Castle's walls still lives and breathes; if you walk around this busy, ancient neighbourhood for long enough you'll invariably stumble into someone's courtyard thinking it's a church or ruin (no one seems to mind, though). In spring and summer the fragrance of camomile is in the air (and underfoot), and wildflowers burst from every gap between the stones.

The highest point is occupied by the Inner Fortress, where ruined stairs lead to a Tolkienesque water reservoir. Views are spectacular in all directions, and guided tours are available from the entry gate for €10. It's a steep ten minute walk up the hill from the centre of town.

Illyria



Illyria was inhabited from about the 10th century BC onward by the Illyrians, an Indo-European people. The Illyrians were divided into tribes, each a self-governing community with a council of elders and a chosen leader. A strong tribal chieftain, however, could unite several tribes into a kingdom. The last and best-known Illyrian kingdom had its capital at Scodra (modern Shkodër, Albania). The Roman province of Illyricum expanded



further. Its administrative centre was Salonae (near present-day Split) in Dalmatia.

Tirana

Lively, colourful Tirana is the beating heart of Albania, where this tiny nation's hopes and dreams coalesce into a vibrant whirl of traffic, brash consumerism and unfettered fun. Having undergone a transformation of extraordinary proportions since it awoke from its communist slumber in the early 1990s, Tirana's centre is now unrecognisable, with its buildings painted in primary colours, and public squares and pedestrianised streets a pleasure to wander.

Trendy Blloku buzzes with the well-heeled and flush hanging out in bars or zipping between boutiques, while the city's grand boulevards are lined with fascinating relics of its Ottoman, Italian and communist past – from delicate minarets to loud socialist murals. Tirana's traffic does daily battle with both itself and pedestrians in a constant scene of unmitigated chaos. Loud, crazy, colourful and dusty – Tirana is never dull.



National History Museum

The largest museum in Albania holds many of the country's archaeological treasures and a replica of Skanderbeg's⁵ massive sword (how he held it, rode his horse and fought at the same time is a mystery). The excellent collection is almost entirely signed in English and takes you chronologically from ancient Illyria to the post-communist era. One big highlight of the museum is a terrific exhibition of icons by Onufri, a renowned 16th-century Albanian master of colour.

⁵ Skanderbeg is built in part of [antemurale myth](#) complex which portrays Albanians united by Skanderbeg as protectors of the nation and Christendom against "invading Turks".

A disturbing and very important gallery devoted to those who suffered persecution under the communist regime is the most recent addition to the collection, though frustratingly almost none of this display is in English. The mosaic mural adorning the museum's facade is entitled Albania and shows Albanians victorious and proud from Illyrian times through to WWII.

Prizren

Picturesque Prizren is Kosovo's second city and it shines with post-independence euphoria and enthusiasm that's infectious. The charming mosque and church-filled old town is well worth setting aside a few hours to wander about in. However, the town's current glow masks a tragic and divisive past: of the 20,000 Serbs who lived here in 1999, only 20 remain, guarding the remnants of their once strong presence here.



The town's most important site is the Orthodox Church of Our Lady of Ljeviš, a 14th-century Serbian church that was used as a mosque by the local population until 1911. After a full renovation in the 1950s, the church was again badly damaged in 2004 by the Albanian population and placed on Unesco's World Heritage in Danger list in 2006.

Given its location, the church is not exactly welcoming; it's surrounded by barbed wire and closed except for when visitors come to see it. You'll need to present yourself

first at St George's Church on the other side of the river, to get approval to visit from one of the few remaining Serbs in the town. This is well worth doing, however, as even though the frescoes in the church are heavily damaged, there are some stunning, ancient wall paintings here and the entire experience is a sad and troubling example of how ethnic hatred can fracture previously peaceful societies.

Peja (Peć)

Peja (known as Peć in Serbian) is Kosovo's third-largest city and one flanked by sites vital to Orthodox Serbians. With a Turkish-style bazaar at its heart and the dramatic but increasingly accessible Rugova Mountains all around it, it's a diverse and progressive place that's fast becoming Kosovo's tourism hub.

Patriarchate of Peć



This church and monastery complex is a slice of Serbian Orthodoxy that has existed here since the late 13th century. Peja was the seat of the Serbian patriarchate since medieval times. Following the war, the buildings are guarded by NATO's Kosovo Force (KFOR) and you will need to hand in your passport for the duration of your visit. From the food stands around the main square, walk along Lekë Dukagjini with the river on your left for 15 minutes until you reach the monastery walls.

Visoki Dečani Monastery

This imposing whitewashed monastery, 15km south of Peja, is one of Kosovo's absolute highlights. Located in an incredibly beautiful spot beneath the mountains and surrounded by a forest of pine and chestnut trees, the monastery has been here since 1327 and is today heavily guarded by KFOR. Its construction started with the reign of Serbian King Stefan Uroš III Dečanski in 1327 and the original founding charter from 1330 has been preserved. Dečanski's son, Stefan Dušan, seized the Serbian throne in 1331 and had his father strangled to death in the Zvečan Fortress shortly afterwards. Dečanski was buried in the still incomplete Visoki Dečani monastery in 1331 and its construction was continued and completed by Dušan, who, incidentally, is regarded as the founder and first king of a much expanded Serbian Empire.

Despite frequent attacks from locals who'd like to see the Serbs leave – most recently a grenade attack in 2007 – the 25 Serbian monks living here in total isolation from the local community have stayed. Here they get on with the serious business of making delicious wines, cheeses and honey (on sale at the small shop) and of slowly restoring the monastery's fabulous icons and frescoes.

Keep to the roads – KFOR warns of UXO (unexploded ordnance) in the area. You'll need to surrender your passport while visiting. (We should be passing through this site on our way from Prizren to Peja.)

Višegrad

Višegrad's main attraction is its glorious 10-arch Mehmet Paša Sokolović Bridge built in 1571. The structure was immortalised in Ivo Andrić's Nobel Prize-winning classic *Bridge on the Drina*.

It looks especially fine at dusk as the mists rise off the canyon-backed river, though major ongoing restoration works mean that actually crossing the bridge is likely to be impossible until 2016.

Mokra Gora

Mokra Gora is a valley in western Serbia, which nestles between the mountains of Tara and Zlatibor. Connected to it is the Šargan Pass. Mokra Gora, meaning the *Wet Mountain*, is also a village on the

northern slopes of mountain Zlatibor. Emphasis on historical reconstruction has made it into a popular tourist centre with unique attractions.

Together with Šargan, Mokra Gora was in the distant past situated on an important road route, which can be seen in the remains of an old Roman cobbled road and graves from the Roman era.

Today the areas of Šargan and Mokra Gora are best known for the Šarganska Eight, a narrow-gauge railway, famous for the impressive engineering that enables it to climb rapidly over a short distance. Alongside the track there are a number of exhibits – old locomotives and wagons which are preserved as examples of the engineering of yesteryear – making this a unique open-air museum.



Another great attraction is the Drvengrad ('Wooden Town') ethnic village built on the hill of Mećavnik on the initiative of the famous Serbian filmmaker Emir Kusturica. Authentic log cabins from the region were transported to the location and used in the construction of the village. The oldest of these cabins dates back 90 years.

Belgrade



Outspoken, adventurous, proud and audacious: Belgrade is by no means a 'pretty' capital, but its gritty exuberance makes it one of the most happening cities in Europe. While it hurtles towards a brighter future, its chaotic past unfolds before your eyes: socialist blocks are squeezed between art nouveau masterpieces, and remnants of the Habsburg legacy contrast with Ottoman relics.

It is here where the Sava River meets the Danube (Dunav), contemplative parkland nudges

hectic urban sprawl, and old-world culture gives way to new-world nightlife.

Grandiose coffee houses, quirky sidewalk ice-creameries and smoky dens all find rightful place along Knez Mihailova, a lively pedestrian boulevard flanked by historical buildings all the way to the ancient Kalemegdan Citadel, crown of the city. The old riverside Savamala quarter has gone from ruin to resurrection, and is the city's creative headquarters. Deeper in Belgrade's bowels are

museums guarding the cultural, religious and military heritage of the country. Josip Broz Tito and other ghosts of the past have been laid to rest here.

Kalemegdan Citadel

Some 115 battles have been fought over imposing, impressive Kalemegdan, and the citadel was destroyed more than 40 times throughout the centuries. Fortifications began in Celtic times, and the Romans extended it onto the flood plains during the settlement of 'Singidunum', Belgrade's Roman name. The fort's bloody history, discernible despite today's plethora of jolly cafes and funfairs, only makes Kalemegdan all the more fascinating.

Skadarska street (Skadarlija)

Belgrade's hedonist quarter, Skadarlija was the gathering point for poets and artists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It connects the Republic square with the Skadarlija (Bajloni) market, one of the largest in the city centre.

Today it is home to some of the most famous Belgrade restaurants and cafes, as well as a few art galleries. This short cobblestone street also includes antique and souvenir shops, all night bakeries and folk groups singing traditional city music. An impressive mural is featured on the wall of the old brewery at the bottom of the street. The famous Šebilj fountain is located in the lowest part of the street, in front of the large Skadarlija green market.

Museums

Explore the most important (open) museums to learn a bit more about the local culture, history and tradition. We suggest the Ethnographic museum, Military history museum, the SANU gallery and the Frescoes (Medieval art) gallery. The Frescoes Gallery features full-size replicas (and the odd original) of Byzantine Serbian church art, right down to the last scratch. Unlike the sensitive originals, these frescos can be photographed to your heart's content.

Sarajevo

In the 1990s Sarajevo was besieged and on the edge of annihilation. Today, its restored historic centre is full of welcoming cafes and good-value lodgings, the bullet holes largely plastered over on the city's curious architectural mixture of Ottoman and Austro Hungarian buildings.

The antique stone-flagged alleys of Baščaršija give the delightful Old Town core a certain Turkish feel. Directly north and south, steep valley sides are fuzzed with red-roofed Bosnian houses and prickled with uncountable minarets, climbing towards green-topped mountain ridges. Westward, Sarajevo sprawls for over 10km through Novo Sarajevo and dreary Dobrinja past dismal ranks of bullet-scarred apartment blocks. At the western-most end of the tramway spine, affluent Ilidža gives the city a final parkland flourish. In winter, Bjelašnica and Jahorina offer some of Europe's best-value skiing, barely 30km away.

Sarajevo 1878-1918

This one-room exhibition examines the city's Austro-Hungarian-era history and the infamous 1914 assassination of Franz Ferdinand that happened right outside, ultimately setting off WWI. Free audioguide.

Tunnel Museum

The most visceral of Sarajevo's many 1990s war-experience 'attractions', this unmissable museum's centrepiece and *raison d'être* is a short section of the 1m wide, 1.6m high hand-dug tunnel under the airport runway which acted as the city's lifeline to the outside world during the 1992–95 siege, when Sarajevo was virtually surrounded by Serb forces.

During the siege Butmir was the last Bosniak-held part of the city still linked to the outside world. However, between Butmir and the rest of Sarajevo lies the airport runway. Although that was supposedly neutral and under tenuous UN control, crossing it would have been suicidal during the conflict. The solution, *in extremis*, was an 800m tunnel beneath the runway, eventually equipped with rails to help transport food and arms. That proved just enough to keep Sarajevo supplied during nearly four years of siege. Most of the tunnel has since collapsed, but this museum lets



you walk through the short section that survives. Photos and maps are displayed around the shell-pounded house that hid the tunnel entrance, there's a new museum section of tools and documents; and the garden houses a demonstration minefield as well as two projection rooms showing two wordless videos: five minutes' footage of the city bombardment and around 12 minutes depicting the wartime tunnel experience.

Getting here by public transport is a bit of a fiddle. Take tram 3 to Ilidža (the far terminus, 35 minutes, 11km from Baščaršija), then switch to Kotorac-bound bus 32 (10 minutes). Get off at the last stop, walk across the Tilava bridge, then turn immediately left down Tuneli for 500m. The bus runs around twice hourly weekdays but only every 90 minutes on Sundays so it's often faster to walk from Ilidža (around 30 minutes). ☺ Many city tours include a visit here – if you're alone, joining such a tour can prove cheaper than coming by taxi. And your guide can add a lot of useful insight. ☺

National Museum

Bosnia's biggest and best-endowed museum was closed in October 2012 due to persistent funding problems. Ironically, it had been a rare institution to have remained at least partly functioning throughout the siege era, and its impressive quadrangle of neo-classical 1913 buildings survived reasonably intact.

Assuming it reopens, the greatest highlights are its Illyrian and Roman carvings and especially the world-famous Sarajevo Haggadah, a 14th-century Jewish codex said to be worth nearly a billion US dollars. Geraldine Brooks' 2007 historical novel *People of the Book* is a part-fictionalised account of how the Nazis failed to grab it during WWII. But for now the institution's continued closure is a source of shame to many citizens. A handwritten sign in the window translates roughly as 'Without museums, without culture, without morals'. If you're passing, you can still admire the open-air collection of exceptional medieval *stećci* (carved grave slabs) in the grounds out front.

Mostar

At dusk the lights of numerous mill house restaurants twinkle across gushing streamlets. Narrow Kujundžiluk ('gold alley') bustles joyously with trinket sellers. And in between, the Balkans' most celebrated bridge forms a majestic stone arc between reincarnated medieval towers. It's an enchanting scene. Do stay into the evening to see it without the summer hordes of day trippers. Indeed, stay longer to enjoy memorable attractions in the surrounding area as well as pondering the city's darker side – still-vivid scars of the 1990s conflict, especially around Spanski Trg, well beyond

the cobbled lanes of the attractively restored Ottoman quarter.



Stari Most

The world-famous Stari Most (Old Bridge) is Mostar's indisputable visual focus. Its pale stone arch magnificently throws back the golden glow of sunset or the tasteful night-time floodlighting. The bridge's swooping stone arch was originally built between 1557 and 1566 on the orders of Suleiman the Magnificent. The current structure is a very convincing 2004 rebuild following the

bridge's 1993 bombardment during the civil war. Numerous well-positioned cafés and restaurants tempt you to sit and savour the splendidly restored scene.

The bridge has always been Mostar's *raison d'être*. The 16th-century stone version replaced a previous suspension bridge whose wobbling had previously terrified tradesmen as they gingerly crossed the fast-flowing Neretva River. An engineering marvel of its age, that new bridge had long become the 'old' bridge when, after 427 years, it was pounded into the river during a deliberate Croat artillery attack in 1993. Depressing footage of this sad moment is shown on many a video in Mostar. But the structure was laboriously reconstructed using original techniques and reopened in 2004. It's now a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Durmitor NP and Žabljak



Magnificent scenery ratchets up to stupendous in this national park, where ice and water have carved a dramatic landscape from the limestone. Forty-eight peaks soar to over 2000m in altitude, with the highest, Bobotov Kuk, reaching 2,523m. From December to March Durmitor is a major ski resort, while in summer it's a popular place for hiking, rafting and other active pursuits.

The park is home to enough critters to cast a Disney movie, including 163 species of bird, about 50 types of

mammals and purportedly the greatest variety of butterflies in Europe. It's very unlikely you'll spot bears and wolves, which is either a good or bad thing depending on your perspective. We were assured that the wolves are only dangerous if they're really starving at the end of a long winter.

Durmitor National Park covers the Durmitor mountain range and a narrow branch heading east along the Tara River towards Mojkovac. Žabljak, at the eastern edge of the range, is the park's principal gateway and the only town within its boundaries. It's not very big and neither is it attractive, but it has a supermarket, a post office, a bank, hotels and restaurants, all gathered around the car park masquerading as the main square.

West of the park, the Tara forms the border with Bosnia and joins the Piva River near Šćepan Polje.

Petrovac

The Romans had the right idea, building their summer villas on this lovely bay. If only the new crop of developers had a scrap of their classic good taste. Still, once you get down to the pretty beachside promenade where lush Mediterranean plants perfume the air and a 16th-century Venetian fortress guards a tiny stone harbour, the aberrations up the hill are barely visible. This is one of the best places on the coast for families: the accommodation is reasonably priced, the water is clear and kids roam the esplanade at night with impunity.



In July and August, you'll be lucky to find an inch of space on the fine reddish pebbles of the town beach, but wander south and there's cypress and oleander-lined Lučice Beach, with a kids' waterslide on its far end. Continue over the leafy headland for another 30 minutes and the 2.4km-long sweep of Buljarica Beach comes into view, most of which is blissfully undeveloped – at least for now.

Dubrovnik



Regardless of whether you are visiting Dubrovnik for the first time or the hundredth, the sense of awe never fails to descend when you set eyes on the beauty of the old town. Indeed, it's hard to imagine anyone becoming jaded by the city's marble streets, baroque buildings and the endless shimmer of the Adriatic, or failing to be inspired by a walk along the ancient city walls that have protected a civilised, sophisticated republic for centuries.

Although the shelling of Dubrovnik in 1991 horrified the world, the city has bounced back with characteristic vigour to enchant visitors again. Take the revamped cable car up to Mt Srđ; marvel at the Mediterranean lifestyle and the interplay of light and stone; trace the rise and fall of Dubrovnik in museums replete with art and artefacts; exhaust yourself retracing history – then plunge into the azure sea.

City Walls and Forts

No visit to Dubrovnik would be complete without a walk around the spectacular city walls, the finest in the world and the city's main claim to fame. From the top, the view over the old town and the shimmering Adriatic is sublime. You can get a good handle on the extent of the shelling damage in the 1990s by gazing over the rooftops: those sporting bright new terracotta suffered damage and had to be replaced.

The first set of walls to enclose the city was built in the 9th century. In the middle of the 14th century the 1.5m-thick defences were fortified with 15 square forts. The threat of attacks from the Turks in the 15th century prompted the city to strengthen the existing forts and add new ones, so that the entire old town was contained within a stone barrier 2km long and up to 25m high. The walls are thicker on the land side – up to 6m – and range from 1.5m to 3m on the sea side.

The round Minčeta Tower protects the northern edge of the city from land invasion, while the western end is protected from land and sea invasion by the detached Lovrjenac Fort. Pile Gate is protected by the Bokar Tower, and the Revelin Fort guards the eastern entrance.

There are entrances to the walls from near the Pile Gate, the Ploče Gate and the Maritime Museum. The Pile Gate entrance tends to be the busiest, and entering from the Ploče side has the added advantage of getting the steepest climbs out of the way first (you're required to walk in an anticlockwise direction). Don't underestimate how strenuous the wall walk can be, especially on a hot day. There's very little shelter and the few vendors selling water on the route tend to be overpriced.

Cable Car

Dubrovnik's cable car whisks you from just north of the city walls to Mt Srđ in under four minutes. Operations cease if there are high winds or a thunderstorm brewing. At the end of the line there's a stupendous perspective of the city from a lofty 405m, taking in the terracotta-tiled rooftops of the old town and the island of Lokrum, with the Adriatic and distant Elafiti Islands filling the horizon.

Hvar

Hvar is the number-one holder of Croatia's superlatives: it's the most luxurious island, the sunniest place in the country (2,724 sunny hours each year) and, along with Dubrovnik, the most popular tourist destination. Hvar Town, the island's capital, is all about swanky hotels, elegant restaurants, trendy bars and clubs, posh yachties and a general sense that, if you care about seeing and being seen, this is the place to be. The coastal towns of Stari Grad and Jelsa, the cultural and historical centres of the island, are the more serene and discerning spots.



Hvar is also famed for the lilac lavender fields that dot its interior, as well as for other aromatic plants such as rosemary and heather. You'll find that some of the really deluxe hotels use skin-care products made out of these gorgeous-smelling herbs.

The interior of the island hides abandoned ancient hamlets, towering peaks and verdant, largely uncharted landscapes. It's worth exploring on a day trip, as is the southern end of the island, which has some of Hvar's most beautiful and isolated coves.

The island's hub and busiest destination, Hvar Town, is estimated to draw around 20,000 people a day in the high season. It's odd that they can all fit in the small bay town, where 13th-century walls surround beautifully ornamented Gothic palaces and traffic-free marble streets, but fit they do. Visitors wander along the main square, explore the sights on the winding stone streets, swim on the numerous beaches or pop off to the Pakleni Islands to get into their birthday suits, but most of all they party at night.

Stari Grad (Old Town), on the island's north coast, is a quieter, cultured and altogether sober affair than its stylish and stunning sister. If you're not after pulsating nightlife and thousands of people crushing each other along the streets in the high season, head for Stari Grad and enjoy Hvar at a more leisurely pace.

Although most ferries connecting the island to the mainland list Stari Grad as their port of call, the town is actually a couple of kilometres northeast of the new ferry terminal. Stari Grad lies along a horseshoe-shaped bay, with the old quarter on the southern side of the horseshoe. The bus station is at the foot of the bay. The northern side is taken up by residences, a small pine wood and the sprawling Helios hotel complex.

Pag



Pag is like something you'd find in a 1950s Italian film, perfect for a broody black-and-white Antonioni set – it's barren, rocky, and sepia coloured, with vast empty landscapes stretching across the horizon. The Adriatic is a steely blue around it and, when the sky is stormy, it's the most dramatic-looking place in the whole of Croatia. Its karstic rock forms a moonscape defined by two mountain ridges, patches of shrubs and a dozen or so villages and hamlets.

Nowadays it's connected to the mainland by a bridge – but in terms of culture and produce it's very independent and distinct. Islanders farm the miserly soil and produce some excellent wine. Tough local sheep graze on herbs and salty grasses, lending their meat and milk a distinctive flavour and producing *paški sir* (Pag cheese; soaked in olive oil and aged in stone). Intricate Pag lace is famed and framed on many a Croat's wall.

Pag has a new twist to its image as a place of centuries-old tradition and culture, in the form of the clubbing mecca of Zrće beach.

Historic Pag Town enjoys a spectacular setting, fringing a narrow spit of land between sun-scorched hills, with an azure bay on its eastern flank and shimmering salt pans to its west. It's an intimate, somewhat shabby collection of narrow lanes and bleak-looking stone houses with pebble beaches close by.

In the early 15th century the prosperous salt business prompted the construction of Pag Town when adjacent Stari Grad could no longer meet the demands of its burgeoning population. Venetian rulers engaged the finest builder of the time, Juraj Dalmatinac, to design a new city – the first cornerstone was laid in 1443. In accordance with what were then the latest ideas in town planning, the main streets and the cross lanes intersect at right angles and lead to four city gates. In the centre, there's a square with a cathedral, a ducal palace and an unfinished bishop's palace. In 1499 Dalmatinac began working on the city walls, but only the northern corner, with parts of a castle, remains.

Rovinj

Rovinj (Rovigno in Italian) is coastal Istria's star attraction. While it can get overrun with tourists in summer, and residents have developed a sharp eye for maximising profits by upgrading hotels and restaurants to four-star status, it remains one of the last true Mediterranean fishing ports. Fishers haul their catch into the harbour in the early morning, followed by a horde of squawking gulls, and mend their nets before lunch. Prayers for a good catch are sent forth at the massive Church of St Euphemia, the 60m-high tower of which punctuates the peninsula. Wooded hills and low-rise hotels surround the old town, which is webbed with steep cobbled streets and piazzas. The 14 green islands of the Rovinj archipelago make for a pleasant afternoon away; the most popular islands are Sveta Katarina and Crveni Otok (Red Island), also known as Sveti Andrija.



The old town is contained within an egg-shaped peninsula. About 1.5km south is the Punta Corrente Forest Park and the wooded cape of Zlatni Rt (Golden Cape), with its age-old oak and pine trees and several large hotels. There are two harbours: the northern open harbour and the small, protected harbour to the south.

The town's showcase is the church of St Euphemia. This imposing church dominates the old town from its hilltop location in the middle of the peninsula. Built in 1736, it's the largest baroque building in Istria, reflecting the period during the 18th century when Rovinj was its most populous town. Inside, look for the marble tomb of St Euphemia behind the right-hand altar.

In AD 304, Rovinj's patron saint was tortured for her Christian faith by Emperor Diocletian before being thrown to the lions. According to legend, the body disappeared one dark, stormy night only to appear off the coast of Rovinj in a spectral boat. The townspeople were unable to budge the heavy sarcophagus until a small boy appeared with two calves and moved it to the top of the hill, where it still stands in the present-day church. On the anniversary of her martyrdom (16 September), devotees congregate here.

Modelled on the belfry of St Mark's in Venice, the 60m bell tower is topped by a copper statue of St Euphemia, which shows the direction of the wind by turning on a spindle. You can climb the tower (to the left of the altar) for 15KN.

Montovan

Motovun is a captivating little town perched on a 277m hill in the Mirna River Valley, about 25km northeast of Poreč. It was the Venetians who decided to fortify the town in the 14th century, building two sets of thick walls.

There are a number of galleries and shops before you enter the old town and between the town gates, including a wine-tasting shop and a Zigante food store. Within the walls, an atmospheric cluster of Romanesque and Gothic buildings houses a smattering of artist studios. Newer houses have sprung up on the slopes leading to the old town, where the popular film festival takes place every summer – the very film fest that has, in recent years, made Motovun the most touristy of Istria's hilltop towns.

A Venetian lion scowls down from the outer gate, beyond which sprawls a terrace with a baroque loggia and a cafe's outside tables, perfect for watching the sun go down below the valley. A cheerier lion adorns the inner gate, which holds a long-running restaurant. Inside is a tree-shaded square with the town's hotel, an old well and the Church of St Stephen.

Ljubljana

We have finally come full circle. Go to page

Vltava River

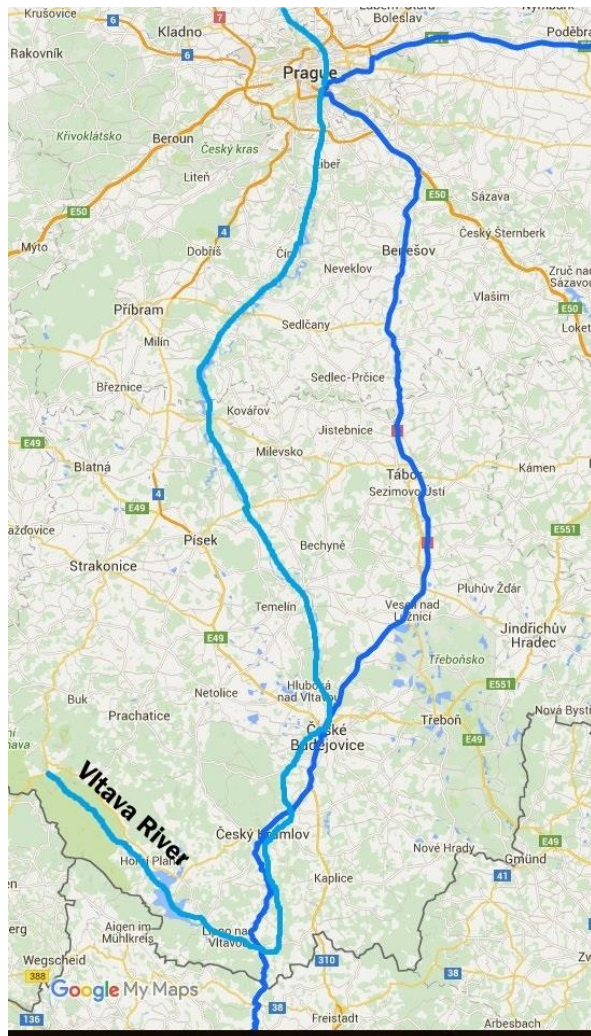
Following the Vltava river and crossing it many times are highlights of our sojourn in the Czech Republic.

The Vltava is the longest river within the Czech Republic and is commonly referred to as the Czech national river.

The best pre-introduction to the Vltava is listening to the 'symphonic poem' *Vltava*, one of six that make up the composition *Má vlast* (My Country) by Czech composer Bedřich Smetana. It'll likely be on one of your CDs, but probably under its German name of *[Die] Moldau* ([The] Moldau); and possibly hidden amongst unrelated music. If it's not, be patient and wait until you finish reading this.



Vltava and Us



We'll pick up the Vltava shortly after crossing into the Czech Republic, which we do just after crossing the Danube (which I was relieved to discover is actually blue on my map). In fact, we cross the Vltava as soon as we meet it; and then flow with it to Český Krumlov, where it meanders through the centre of town and where we spend a night with it. Next day we stay with it to České Budějovice before it wanders off to our west only to be waiting to welcome us into Prague for two nights and a whole day to spend intimately with it. After that we go our separate ways.

The River

The Vltava river is 430 kilometres long and drains an area about 28,090 square kilometres in size, over half of Bohemia and about a third of the Czech Republic's entire territory. It rises in south-western Bohemia from two sources in the Bohemian Forest, the Teplá Vltava and the Studená Vltava. It flows first south-east, then north across Bohemia, and empties into the Elbe River at Mělník, 29 km north of Prague.

There are 107 bridges over the Vltava river. There are 17 in Prague. By far the most famous and beautiful one is Charles Bridge (Karlův most) though there are many others that are worth seeing, such as Čechův Bridge and Mánes Bridge. A popular tourist attraction is cruising the Vltava river in Prague and admiring its beauty from the deck of a boat or steamboat. (There are two places in Prague from where you can take a river cruise, the first one is at Čechův Bridge and the second one by the Palacký Bridge.)



Vltava in Cesky Krumlov

Vltava and Smetana



Vltava in Prague

You already know Smetana is a Czech composer. But how do you pronounce his name? This is what Wikipedia has to say about that:

Bedřich Smetana (Czech pronunciation: [\[ˈbɛdřɪx ˈsmɛtanɔ\]](#) ([listen](#)); 2 March 1824 – 12 May 1884).

And just in case you're thinking that's helpful, take note that the phonetic alphabet is telling us the stress is on the first syllable in Smetana; while the voice prompts clearly put it on the second syllable! Pass.

The Vltava – through Smetana

– lead me into various aspects of Czech history. The old Kingdom of Bohemia had quite a czeched history. Through most of the Middle Ages (and before) Bohemia was either part of or under the aegis of the Holy Roman Empire, which in turn was pretty much controlled by the Prussians (mostly

in an unholy alliance with the Vatican). German influence was always strong; hence no doubt the frequency of the German nomenclature for Vltava.



Vltava winds through Prague

And it didn't help Bohemia by being a centrepiece of the Thirty Years' War, which was kicked off by an incident known to history as the Defenestration of Prague (and that doesn't mean that Prague was deprived of its windows).

Smetana lived at a time when Bohemian ambition to gain political and cultural independence after centuries of repression was high. This spirit drove Smetana in many respects; and *Má vlast* was an expression of that. Echoes of Sibelius. (Bedřich Smetana's Museum is situated right by the Vltava river in the immediate vicinity of Charles Bridge.)

Má vlast ultimately became Smetana's most enduring composition, and of its movements, the second, *Vltava* (*Moldau*), has remained the most popular. Encyclopaedia Britannica, paraphrasing Smetana's own description of *Vltava*, explains:

The movement starts with light, rippling figures that represent the emergence of the Vltava River as two mountain springs, one warm and one cold. Water from the springs then combines to become a mighty river, symbolized by a thickly orchestrated, stately theme that recurs periodically throughout the remainder of the work. Farther downstream, the river passes jubilant hunters, portrayed by a horn melody, and then passes a village wedding, signalled by a passage in polka rhythm. The river then enters a gorge where, according to legend, water nymphs—suggested by serene and mysterious melodies—come out to bathe in the moonlight. With the morning light, the main river theme returns, though it soon breaks into tumultuous dissonance as the river enters the St. John's Rapids.

Beyond the white water, the river reaches Prague, where to grand arpeggios⁶ of a regal hymn, it flows past the castle Vyšehrad, once the seat of power for Bohemian kings. After fading to a trickle, the piece—and the journey—come to an unambiguous close with a loud two-chord cadence.

If you couldn't find *Vltava* amongst your CDs you can Czech it out here:

<https://youtu.be/exz6zD056zk>

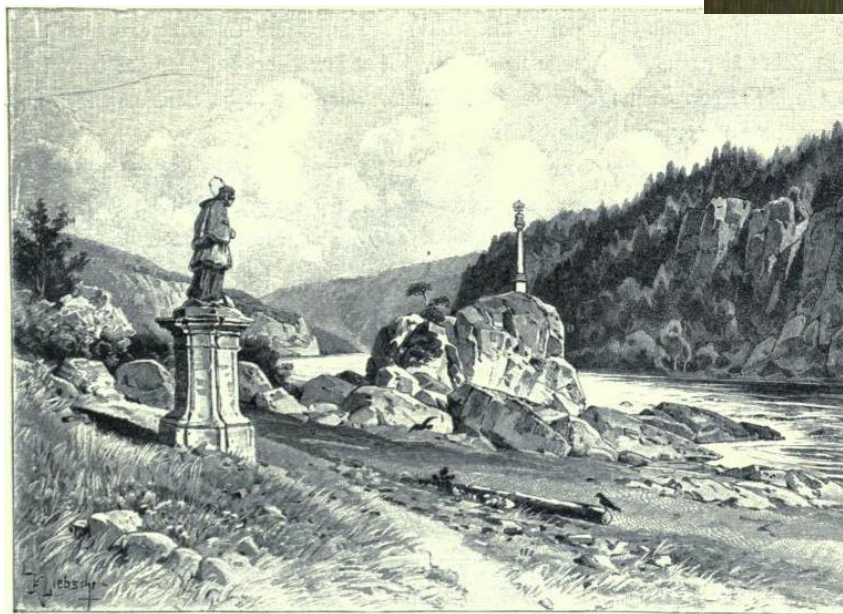
Sadly, we won't get to see the St John's Rapids.

But there might be opportunity to bathe in the moonlight with the nymphs like the wood nymph opposite recently photographed on the banks of the Vltava.

St John's Rapids

St. John's Rapids were a stretch of fast flowing water on the Vltava. The rapids were part of the inspiration for Smetana's *Má vlast*, specifically its second symphonic poem, *Vltava*.

The St John's Rapids were situated at the place of today's Štěchovice Reservoir, which is a dam on the Vltava River built during 1937–1945 as the second stage of the Vltava Cascade. The dam is named after nearby village Štěchovice



Stromschnellen der Moldau bei Střekowitz.

St. John's Rapids at the beginning of the 19th century, by Karel Liebscher

⁶ An arpeggio is a type of broken chord. Other types of broken chords play chord notes out of sequence or more than one note but less than the full chord simultaneously. Arpeggios can rise or fall for more than one octave. (I had to look this one up in the dictionary!)

Vyšehrad Castle

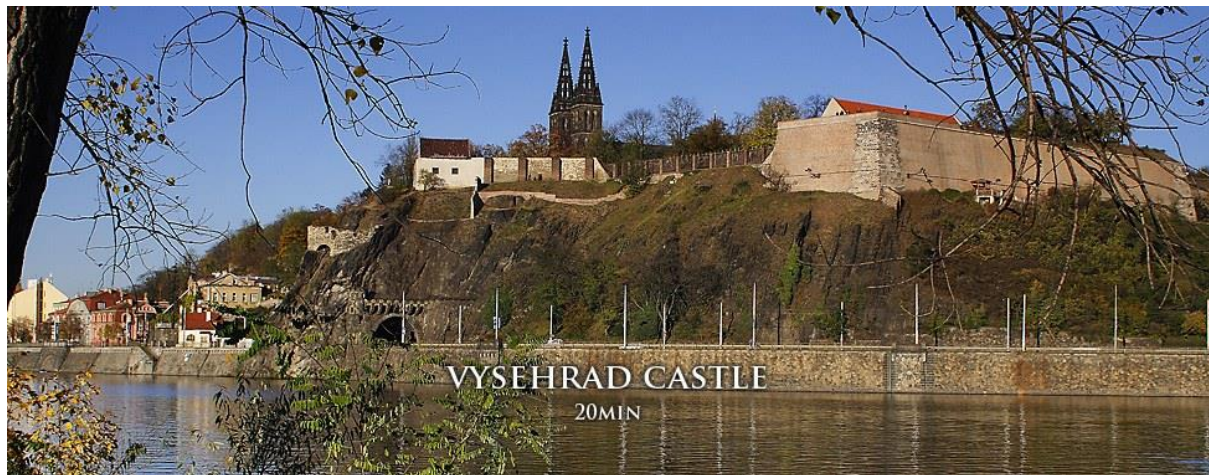
The Vyšehrad Castle or Citadel refers to the complex of buildings and structures on Vyšehrad Hill that have played a role in Czech history for over 1000 years. While most structures date from the 18th century, the citadel is still viewed as the city's spiritual home

Vyšehrad Castle is Prague's second castle and or as its name states *High Castle*. It sits perched high above the Vltava River.

The cemetery at Vyšehrad Castle is, in a way, more of an open air art exhibition. Numerous famous Czechs have been laid to rest here with ornate graves, frescoes and sculptured headstones. Among them include: Antonin Dvorak, Bedrich Smetana, Jan Neruda and Karel Capek. At the back of the cemetery you'll find the Slavin. This is a large resting place for numerous guests including Alfons Mucha.

The fortress is guarded by a series of incredibly large brick walls and formidable gates. The Leopold Gate in particular tells you without a doubt - you are entering a castle. From the western and northern sides of Vyšehrad Castle you will find lovely views of Prague, the Vltava River and the surrounding suburbs.

In the 20th century, the trademark twin spired Church of Saints Peter and Paul was built and the national cemetery was founded.



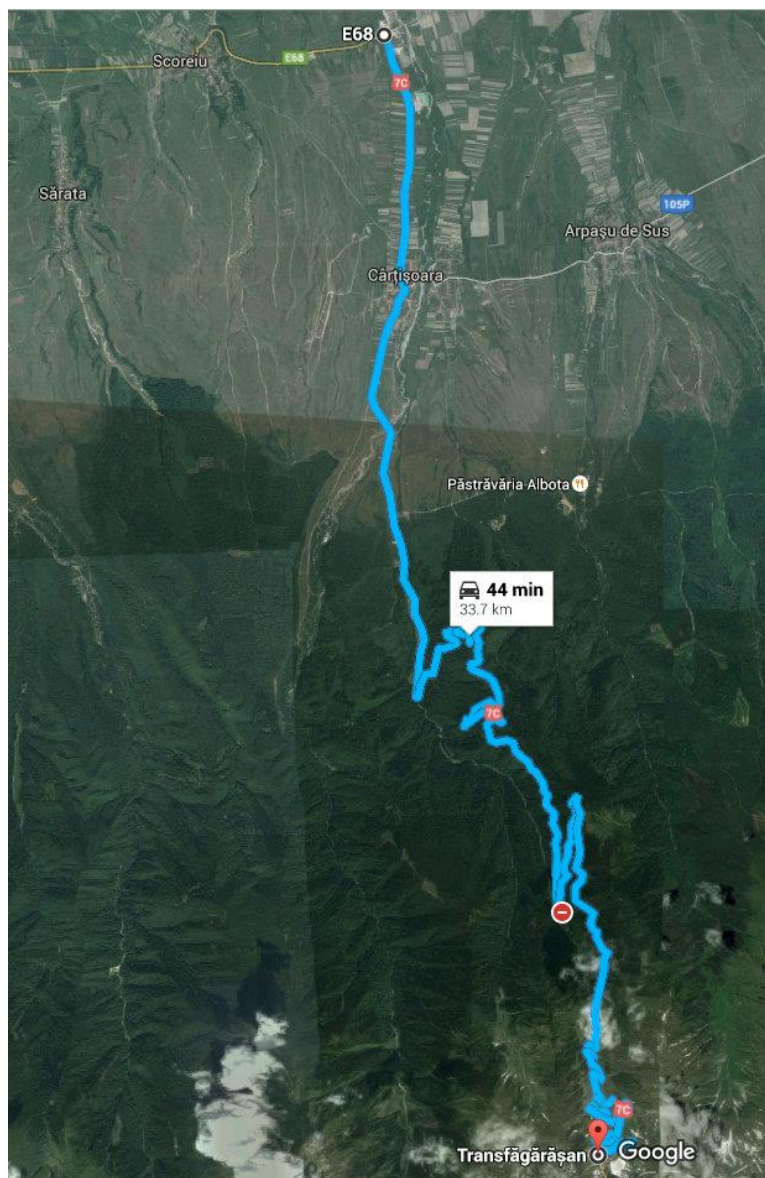
Return to [Český Krumlov in main document](#)

The Transfăgărășan⁷

The Transfăgărășan winds up and over the towering Făgărăș Mountains in Transylvania and Wallachia, Romania. The road zigzags up a barren valley to Lake Bâlea and through a 900m-long tunnel, before continuing down through the forests of Wallachia region. Heavy snow means the road is open only a few months a year, usually from late June until early October, when it's packed with petrol-heads.

The road climbs to an altitude of 2,042 metres making it the second highest mountain pass in Romania after the Transalpina. It is a winding road, dotted with steep hairpin turns, long S-curves, and sharp descents. It is both an attraction and a challenge for hikers, cyclists, drivers and motorcycle enthusiasts. Due to the topography, the average speed is around 40 km/h. The road also provides access to Bâlea Lake and Bâlea Waterfall.

Stage 1



We start the Transfăgărășan when we turn off the E68 coming from Sibiu. This first section takes us to the Capra Tunnel and the highest part of the highway.

The highway initially passes through flat agricultural land to the town of Cartisoara, where the Badea Cartan Museum features a collection of painted glass icons and an old shepherd's house complete with thatched roof.

From Cartisoara the 25km climb to Lake Bâlea is the most spectacular part of the Transfăgărășan; and takes around 45 minutes, although at weekends - when half of Romania can often appear to turn up - it can take double that (unfortunately, owing to my lack of foresight, we're doing it on a Saturday).

One of the few easy places to stop will be Bâlea Cascada (the Bâlea Waterfall) at 1200 m altitude. It is the largest waterfall in increments of Romania, with a drop of 60m. There's mention of a walk of about 50 minutes right to the waterfall. I

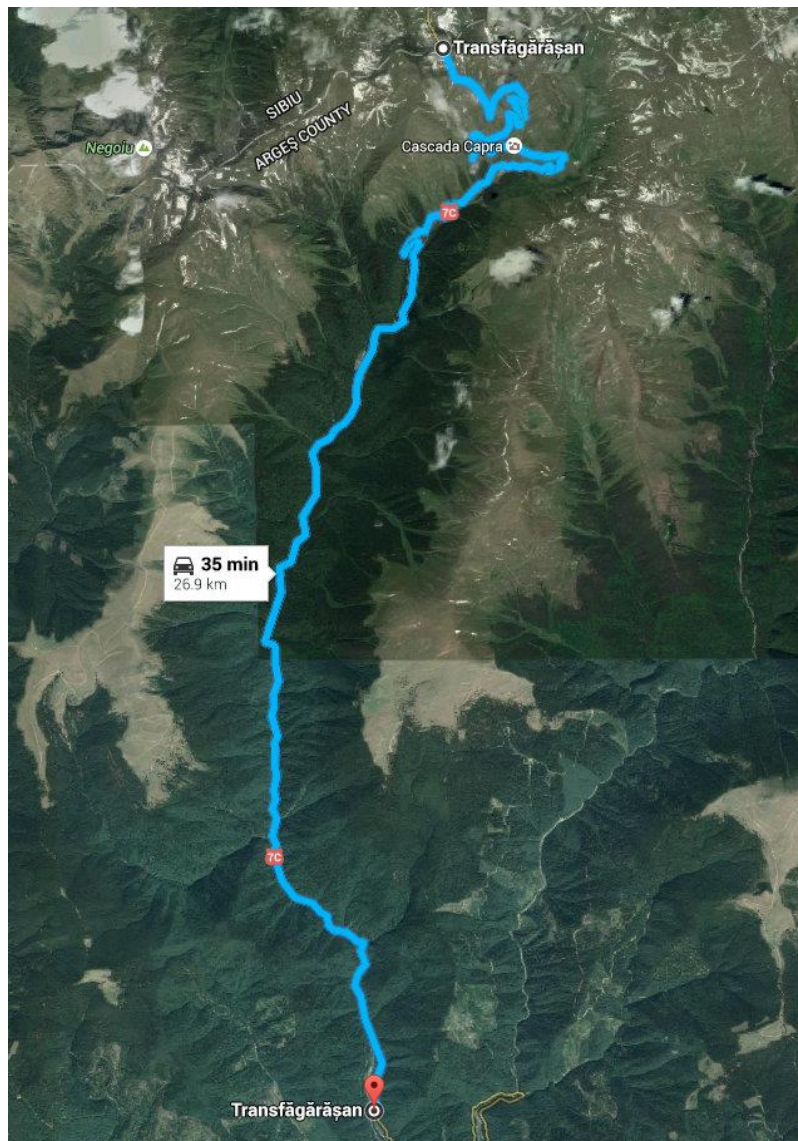
⁷ With thanks to websites for lots of (unauthorised) copying and pasting.

don't know if you can see anything from the road!

The final part of this section is a steep climb to the highway's highest point within the 890m Capra Tunnel at 2042m, with Bâlea Lac just below the tunnel.

It's the view of the Transfăgărășan from this point that moved Jeremy Clarkson to call it 'every great corner from every great race track lined up one after the other.'

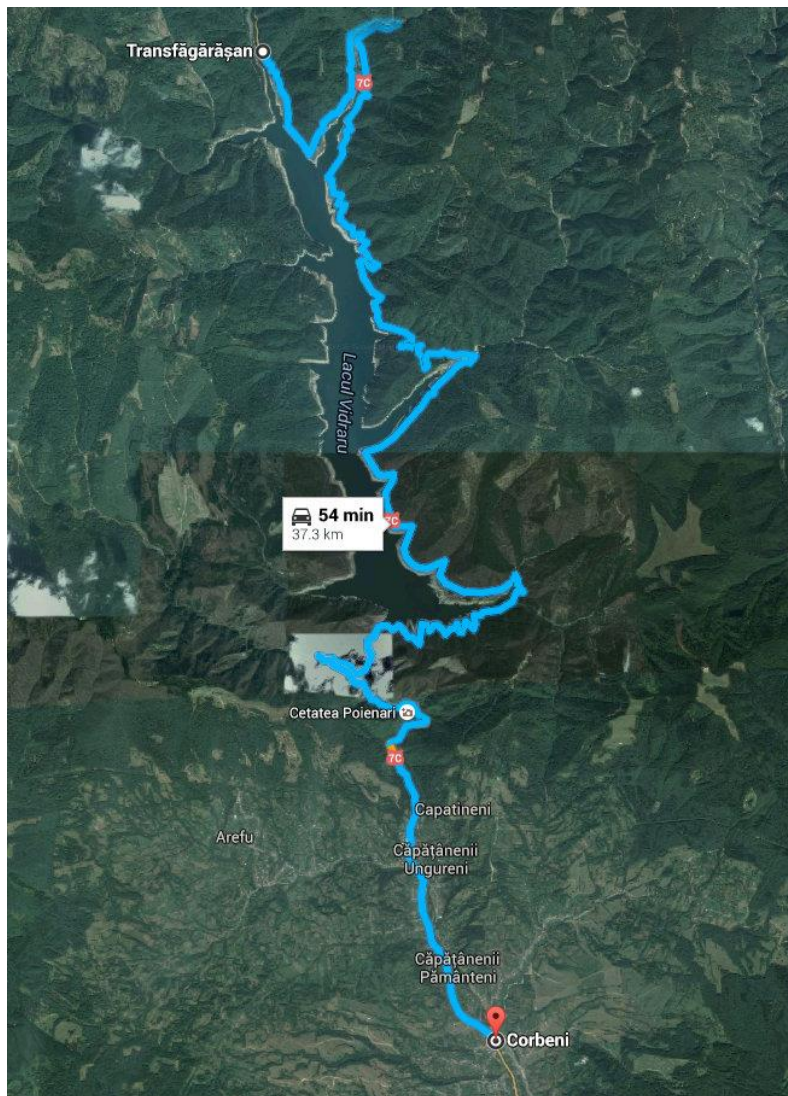
Stage 2



On exiting the Capra Tunnel, the road descends rapidly through several sharp turns into a long valley.

It then follows the valley and the Argeș River for several kilometres to the northern reaches of Vidraru Lake.

Stage 3



From the far northern reaches of the lake where it meets the Argeș River, the Transfăgărășan then follows the outline of the lake, the water often visible through the trees, without much change in altitude but lots of sweeping curves.

There are a few sharper corners as the road finally approaches and crosses the wall of the Vidraru Dam, driving one of the largest hydroelectric plants in Europe.

The dam wall offers fabulous views of Vidraru Lake. Just try to ignore the huge ad for a cement company which has been painted without thought for the surroundings onto the rock. Just before the dam wall, look out for the electricity pylon disguised as a statue of Prometheus/Prometheus representing power. If you can find a parking space, some steps allow you to climb up to the statue, from where there are even better views of the lake.

Below the lake, the road winds through some more hairpins and through three short tunnels before dropping down further through more spectacular scenery into less rugged country.

By the time the Transfăgărășan passes the Vidraru Hydroelectric Power Station (about where the lower red 7C is on the map) not far north of Corbeni, it's pretty much out of the climbs, descents and corners.

However, maybe the Transfăgărășan has kept the best for this section; but we're not talking motorcycling.

Vlad Tepeș Castle: Poenari Castle

Along the Transfăgărășan, before we're out of the woods, we pass by the Poenari Castle or, at least, the ruins of it. Poenari Castle is the work of Vlad the Impaler - so, in a sense, it really is Dracula's castle. There was a fortress on this high, mountainous lookout since early Medieval times; but Vlad the Impaler decided that it needed to be strengthened.

The views from the citadel are outstanding - and you can be assured that the real life Dracula really did stay here. The slight drawback is that visiting involves a climb up some 1500 steep steps. It is not for the faint of heart. (Actually it doesn't look all that bad on You Tube clips.)

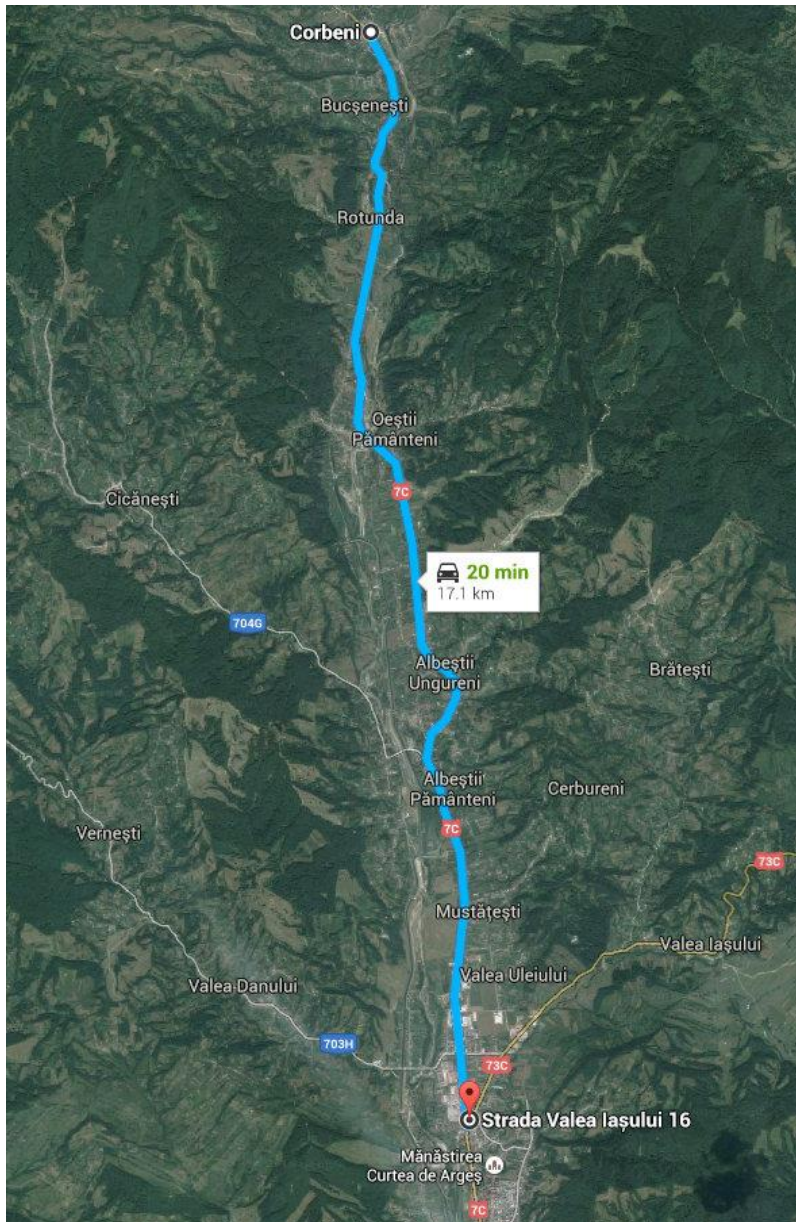
It's marked on the map above as "Cetatea Poienari"

The ruins of Poienari Fortress stand high on a cliff overlooking the Arges River, at the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains. Built at the beginning of the 13th century by the first Walachian rulers, the castle changed names and residents a few times over the decades; eventually, it was abandoned and left in ruins.



Vlad Tepes (Vlad the Impaler) recognized the potential of the location and upon taking over the throne, he ordered that the structure be repaired and consolidated, turning it into one of his main fortresses. When the Turks attacked and captured the castle in 1462, Vlad escaped via a secret passageway leading north through the mountains. Although the castle was used for many years after Vlad's death in 1476, it was eventually abandoned again in the first half of the 16th century and left to the ravages of time and weather. In 1888, a major landslide brought down a portion of the castle which crashed into the river far below. The castle underwent repairs and the remnants of its walls and towers stand to this day.

Stage 4



This part of the Transfăgărășan seems a fairly straight run through a wide valley, village-dotted along both sides of the river, with higher mountains forming the backdrop.

Reaching the town of Curtea de Argeș, we can tick the Transfăgărășan off the bucket list.

The day is far from over. We have Bran Castle to visit on the way to Brasov. It often passes for Vlad's Castle but there's no evidence that he visited it or, for that matter, that Bram Stoker even saw it, although it's said to resemble Bram's description of Dracula's castle.

Return to [Transfăgărășan in main document](#).

Some Pronunciations

| City/Town on Route | Guide to Pronunciation |
|---|---|
| Ljubljana | lyoo- blyarn -a |
| Ljubljana | lyoo- blyarn -itsa |
| Prešeren | presh-er-en |
| Graz | <u>grarts</u> |
| Salzburg | sarlz -berg |
| Český Krumlov | chess -kee krum -loff (u as in bull) |
| Olomouc: | oll - om oats. |
| Kraków | krark -ov |
| Wawel (Castle in Krakow) | var -vel |
| Wieliczka | vyeh- leech -kah |
| Vysoké Tatry | vi- sok -air tutt -ri (u and in fun) |
| Budapest | bood -a-pesht |
| Turda | toor -da (oo as in fool) |
| Sibiu | see- beew (as in “be wine!” without the ‘ine’) |
| Sighișoara | see ghee swahr' ah |
| Medias | med-i-arsh |
| Transfăgărășan | trans-fa-ga- rash -arn |
| Brașov | bra- shov |
| Demir Kapija | dem -ir Karp -iya (ar as in father) |
| Ohrid | Och -rid (ch as in loch as in Scotland) |
| Gjirocastr/Gjirocastra (latter is purer Albanian) | j – as in jam; or d - as in due? |
| Sarandë/Saranda | sar- and -a (the ë is pronounced like thug) |
| Prizren | preez -ren (ee a bit like reach) |
| Pejë/Peja (Alb) Peć/Пeћ (Serb) | pe -ya or pech |
| Mokra Gora | mock -ra gor -a |
| Petrovac | pet -ra vats |
| Rovinj | rov- inye |

NB “ar” is trying to replicate “a” as in “father” (so not really an “r” sound at all).