

Romania: land that charms and surprises

Romania might be corrupt, but its food is cheap and — after the blandness of Hungarian cuisine — a taste delight for **BILL SWALLOW**, of Christchurch. He backpacks and travels by train in charming countryside.

Romania is different. As soon as the Dacia Express crosses the border into Romania, the countryside changes noticeably. Gone are the large round hay bales of Russia and other Eastern European countries — in their place are hundreds of small manually built conical haystacks.

Perhaps it is the morning mist and light, but the view out of the train window is like a Monet painting, complete with people working in the fields. There appears to be little mechanisation of Romanian farms. Another feature is the number of large, abandoned, decaying factory buildings. The results of centrally planned "good ideas" that weren't, perhaps? If this is the case there was clearly a wealth of "good ideas" at various times.

As the train chugs through Transylvania (deep into Dracula territory), the ghosts of the old Austro-Hungarian Empire reveal themselves in the German and Hungarian influences on some of the towns and villages — in particular Sighisoara and Brasov. Except for the presence of these villages, the scenery is rather like parts of New Zealand, with fertile flats and bushed hills. However, in New Zealand you would quickly come to the head of the valley, whereas in Transylvania the valley just keeps opening up. Beyond Brasov the mountains become impressive with peaks up to 2600 metres and several charming alpine ski-resort villages.

The train squeezes its way through a narrow valley and soon we are out on the other side of the mountains and heading downhill to Ploesti. Ploesti was an important Axis oilfield in World War 2, and the field is obviously still productive with many oil derricks and several refineries. Leaving Ploesti, the train speeds its way across the fertile plains of Walachia to Bucharest.

After arrival in Bucharest I get to see much of the city during the taxi trip from the railway station to the hostel. Although the hostel is not far away as the crow flies, the taxi driver obviously decides to take the "scenic route". Bucharest appears somewhat like a rundown version of Paris, only with more charm. The delightful architecture of the buildings, cobblestone streets and plentiful trees give the city a



Dracula drawcard: Bran Castle, a Romanian medieval fortress near the city of Brasov, has embraced the Dracula story and is a drawcard for tourists.

Photo: Washington Post

very liveable atmosphere. Besides the sightseeing, the extra cost of the extended taxi trip is worthwhile for the world-class display of gear crunching and road theatrics alone.

Exploring Bucharest is fun and easy, using the modern metro system and walking — no taxis here. Key sights include communist dictator Ceausescu's Palace of the People, the world's second largest building (after the Pentagon). The next three grandest buildings belong to the Ministry for Economic Development (Romania has one of the sickest economies in Europe), the Ministry for Anti-corruption (Romania is one of the most corrupt countries in Europe), and the Ministry for European Union Integration (Romania has the same chance as the proverbial snowball in hell of joining the EU in the near future). Walking around the city, I am amazed by the number of unfinished large buildings. Judging by the quantity and variety of vegetation sprouting from unusual places, construction clearly stopped some years ago.

Museums in Bucharest can be hard to find, and even when you do, it is not plain sailing. For instance, after eventually tracking down the National History Museum it takes me more than 10 minutes to find a cunningly disguised entrance. On making inquiries I am informed by a person, with a gentle smile, that the museum is closed and will open again in three years after its renovations.

The Romanian military museum is

almost as difficult to find, and perhaps that accounts for the lack of patrons.

Whatever, I create a stir by entering the building — a visitor already and it is only 11.30am. All three people at the front desk spring into action to process my ticket. When I walking around the exhibits, the lighting turns on as I approach and off as I leave. I think it is a sophisticated electronic setup until I hear a cough from behind one of the curtains. The displays themselves are very good and give excellent accounts of the numerous armies that have marched through the country since Roman times. It makes one pleased to live in New Zealand.

The Romanian history of World War 2 is treated delicately with a seamless transition from depicting the victories with the Germans to victories with the Russians.

Travelling through Romania can be

extremely easy on the pocket. By staying in a backpacker's hostel (Elvis's Villa) and eating in local restaurants I can easily get by on less than \$NZ50 a day.

Sleeping in a bunk room with five other people has its own charms after earlier feeling defensive about being twice as old as the rest of the occupants. The age gap does not seem to bother the other guests, and I end up enjoying their company. This is, perhaps, helped by the fact that I am tucked up asleep in bed hours before they come home, while in the morning, I am up and out long before they stir.

I find Romanian food wonderful — possibly because I had just come from Hungary where the food was boringly bland. In Bucharest there is a restaurant just around the corner from Elvis's Villa that specialises in Romanian country cuisine. Here you can dine on superb spicy meatballs, mashed potatoes and pickled salad followed by a high-octane double-chocolate sundae, all for less than \$NZ10.

The Villa is a great place to gather information from fellow travellers on conditions ahead, potentially interesting side trips, and the best deals in Bucharest. After breakfasting with some German university students and listening to their experiences, tramping in the Carpathians followed by rest and relaxation at a Black Sea resort seems an attractive idea. The noticeboards in the Villa are also a mine of information, including the manager's plea for guests to ensure they are registered correctly as he is "already paying too much in bribes to officials and the business cannot afford any more".

Of all the countries I visit on the trip, Romania is top of my return list. Bucharest would be reason enough but the variety and the beauty of the countryside and villages is also compelling. And next time I will take my own washbasin plug, guarding it jealously as it will probably be one of the two or three in Eastern Europe.

TRAINS AND HOSTELS GOOD OPTIONS

Membership to the Youth Hostels Association is worthwhile when considering a trip to Romania. Buy a one-year membership for \$40 or two years for \$60.

House of Travel (phone 0800 838-747) has hostels information and can also provide you with rail passes.

Eurail Romania-Hungary pass: this offers unlimited travel on the national rail networks of Romania and Hungary. Pass options available include five, six, eight or

10 days travel in a two-month period. The price for any five days in a two-month period for a Romania-Hungary pass starts from \$328 per adult.

Balkan Flexipass: for even more variation, this pass offers unlimited the rail networks of Bulgaria, Greece, former Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia, Federation of Serbia and Montenegro, Romania and Turkey.

Discounts are available for persons under 26 or if two or more people are travelling together at all times.