

Chasing Dracula Avoiding Tourists During Tourist Season

by Elizabeth Willoughby



I am a fan of adventure. I am not a fan of crowds – tourist crowds in particular. But where to go for some article fodder while avoiding throngs of tourists? I wrack my brain. Suddenly the answer comes to me – it’s so obvious: I should chase down Dracula in Romania.

In preparation, I watch Francis Ford Coppola’s film, *Dracula*, filled with many useful facts because it’s based on Bram Stoker’s 19th-century novel of the same name, and then I contact the Transylvanian Society of Dracula’s travel department, the Company of Mysterious Journeys, to make arrangements.

Wasting no time upon arrival, we head straight from Bucharest’s airport for Dracula’s castle. I cannot wait to drive through the Borgo Pass to get to where “Prince Dracula” returned from torturing and impaling an army of non-Christians only to find that his beloved wife, upon receiving a message that the Prince had been killed, had jumped out of the castle window to her death. Hopefully we’ll get there after dark to make racing along the cliff and through forest extra scary. Too bad we’re not in a horse-drawn carriage.



The Real Dracula



It’s only mid-June, but summer has already reached Romania. The streets are dry, the sky is clear and blue, and my shirt is sticking to me. Driving north we pass long, narrow fields, each swathe growing a different colour: sunflower, wheat, corn, canola. Well into the growing season, farm hands, almost hidden by the produce, hoe and hack at weeds. Wild red poppies dot the roadside grass. We pass factories at the highway’s edge and distant oil pumps slowly bobbing. We pass wagons piled high with grass reaped with scythes, each cart pulled by a horse running along the shoulder; men and boys balance between horse and wagon on pieces of the framework, leaning back against the morning’s labour. Flowery village homes share

fenced front gardens with chickens and goats, plum trees and vegetables, and sometimes a cow or an unsaddled horse waits patiently by a roadside gate, its ties hanging down to the grass.

After 3 ½ hours, we arrive at a place that my guide, Daniela, calls Fortress Poienari, but we are still in Wallachia, Romania’s southern region, and not near Bistrita where Stoker says the Borgo Pass is, hours away. We’re in a canyon cut by the Arges River that winds through steep mountains thick with trees. Poienari sits high on a precipice. Daniela says this is from where the wife of Vlad the Impaler (aka Dracula) jumped to her death, but during a different battle, contrary to my research. I am dubious, but it is certainly high enough – I have to climb almost 1500 steps through mixed forest to get there. There’s not much left of the fortress that guards the entrance from Transylvania into the Arges Valley, but I try to imagine from where his bride jumped and where the arrow carrying the news of Dracula’s death came in as evidenced in the movie.



Then we visit Arefu, a nearby village of historical significance. When Vlad was escaping from the Turks in the other 15th-century siege, when his wife might have made the jump, the Arefians led him to safety through the Transylvanian mountains with his horse’s shoes on backwards to appear that he was coming instead of going. It worked. In appreciation, Vlad gave the villagers 16 mountains, of which there are still ten. I’m not clear where the other six went.

The Arefians stand before us now in traditional dress. The men each don white linen trousers



under a white chemise trimmed with fine, colourful embroidery around the cuffs and hem, and a black woollen vest with collar. The women are far more colourful with embroidery over a long white chemise worn under a black wraparound skirt, belt and vest that are even more richly decorated. They play traditional music – accordion, recorder and a fish scale-like mouth piece that makes sounds like a kazoo, unique to Arefu. They sing and dance around a bonfire and feed us homemade plum brandy and popcorn while Daniela tells me about the *moroi* – bad spirits that haunt the living. It

sounds just like the description of the vampire we're tracking down as given by Professor Van Helsing (played by Anthony Hopkins): "It can take on many forms. He's both young and old. He can appear as mist, as vapour, as the fog. And he can vanish at will. The power of his evil desire has no end."



But then Daniela tells me there are two Draculas. She says that the real Vlad Dracula the Impaler who ruled Wallachia in the mid-1400s is historical, and Stoker's Count Dracula is fictional. I am again sceptical, and I insist we continue the search.

Discovering Romania



Over the next days we crisscross mountain ranges and changing altitudes. We head to the burial place of Dracula, through forested country until we reach Snagov Lake. Snagov Monastery and its church, a UNESCO heritage building, lie on a small island in the lake, mostly hidden from view by weeping willows, pines and alders, and the tall grasses along the shoreline. From a wooden dock we take a boat ride a few metres across the water. Two people live on this island – the abbot and an old nun who care for the property. We disembark and walk up the lawn between two lines of trees. An old man sits on a chair under the last one and begins to play his harmonica as we approach. There are storage buildings, modest houses and a working well; laundry hangs on a line. It is quiet and quaint. The small, stone Orthodox church with three towers is swept and tidy on the outside. Inside is dark, musty and slightly echoes. The walls are heavy-laden with religious frescos from 1563, under restoration, and Vlad's supposed grave is marked by his picture. Although the host in black clothing is intimidating in an unsmiling way, and a snake in the boat slithers around our ankles, which is creepy, there are no vampires here.

We tour Bran Castle, a fortress built at the top of a peak that looks like it should be the Count's due to its odd construct of towers that jut out above the treetops, and because it was built by the Saxons in the 1300s to protect the Bran mountain pass from the Turks. It turns out not to have ever been Dracula's castle, but rather Queen Marie's royal summer residence from the 1920s, and today its thick whitewashed walls and timber ceiling beams, secret stone passages and spiral wooden staircases house period furnishings from Vienna. It still has the elevator that allowed the Queen easy access to her evening tea house 60 metres below by a pond.



On to the birthplace of Dracula, a preserved medieval town in the centre of Transylvania called Sighisoara, also a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Settled by Saxons to defend the Hungarian frontier in the 12th century, German craftsmen and artisans built what is today a densely-packed village along tight, curving, cobblestone streets lined with lofty, pastel-coloured homes. The historic town is still surrounded by the old wall, and it tells stories of the Inquisition trials and executions. Besides the time, the old clock tower that has guarded the main entrance for centuries has a



Glockenspiel that displays the days of the week. Underneath is the old prison cell filled with instruments of torture. Carved in German into the cell's window jamb: "*Morgen werde ich*" ("Tomorrow I will...") – maybe the prisoner hadn't the time or strength to add "die". A few buildings away is the house where Dracula spent his earliest years. The pictures of Vlad that hang within, however, look nothing like Gary Oldman (Coppola's Count). The remaining frescos of his father, Vlad Dracul, don't appear vampire-ish either.

We visit resort town Sinaia in search of further noble history, and find the beautiful royal summer home of King Carol I, Peles Castle. Lying in the Pearl of the Carpathians, the palace's grand rooms took 400 meticulous craftsmen 39 years from 1878 to complete. The German Renaissance castle was the first in Europe to have central heating and electricity, and is impressive throughout. It displays a three-story-high reception hall of wooden panelled walls with inlays and a stained glass skylight; a vast collection of 14th- to 18th-century arms; a Turkish Salon with low, red upholstered chairs and ottomans, and walls and ceiling covered in hand-made embroidery; hidden exits and grand stairways. There's no Dracula here and I'm beginning to think Daniela is right – maybe vampires do not really exist. I've been duped. We head back to Bucharest.

Finding the Count



On my last day in Romania, I tour the capital's historical centre. I wander the streets that are a mix of architectural styles. Sadly,





much of the “Paris of the East” was destroyed during communist leader Ceausescu’s makeover years, but much still remains, even some bullet holes from the 1989 revolution in which he and his wife were executed. I have a cappuccino at one of the outdoor cafes that line both sides of a curved passageway protected from the weather by a yellow glass ceiling. It is welcome relief from a withering sun. I peek into the antique candy store; the old Odeon theatre’s doors are locked; art nouveau leftovers thrust out of building facades. I enter a monastery from 1724 and step inside its Orthodox church. Frescoes of the founders and their families with glittering gold crowns fill the antechamber walls, and a concentration of golden iconostasis fills the far side of the apse. Martyred female saints are depicted in the window jambs, the second coming, resurrection and hell in the nave. No nook is bare. It’s so engulfed with ornamentation that it’s difficult to scrutinise, yet it is



stirring. Out on the street, a shiny new hotel retains the more classic facade of the previous building as its foyer. The juxtaposition is interesting, but I can’t decide if I like it. I wander for hours.

By evening I find myself in unknown territory – a stroke of luck. A sign on a building reads *Count Dracula Club*, reminding me why I came to Romania in the first place. I’ve found Count Dracula’s dwelling at last, concealed as a restaurant. Clever. Inside it is dimly lit. Small screens in each room play scenes from various Dracula movies, from Murnau’s 1922 *Nosferatu* to Coppola’s 1992 *Dracula*. They’re barely loud enough to hear.

The maitre d’ sees me looking around and offers to give me a tour. I accept. A wolf’s head above the door looks straight down at the threshold that I walk through into the “hunting room”. The walls are loaded with stuffed animal heads and skins. “Sometimes the Count grows tired of human blood and wants something a bit wilder,” explains the maitre d’.

He takes me down a dark, steep, curving staircase – bodiless hands reach out from the walls – and then up a passage where we find a bookshelf that’s really a secret door leading to the laboratory – “This is where the Count created the werewolf.” He sends me along a narrow overpass and around other restaurant patrons to the far wall where Dracula’s coffin stands. The maitre d’ tells me to open it. It’s suspicious that he does not come with me, but I open it nevertheless. The Count isn’t there. This means only one thing: he is somewhere else.

Since I *am* in a restaurant, I decide to have dinner while I wait for the vampire’s inevitable return. The waitress delivers a tray of tomato and smoked meat slices, announcing it as “raw human flesh.” The main course is chicken, announced as “baked rat, with tail.” By mid-dinner, Dracula arrives. He looks like the real thing if you ignore that his white facial make-up ends at his jaw line. He pays homage to Vlad the Impaler’s Order of the Dragon flag hanging on the wall, and then “bites” the neck of my travel mate who is sitting across from me. Then he takes her away with him to bite her again in front of the other patrons. The screaming coming from the other rooms is a bit noisy. I finish my dinner and drink the rest of the “blood” wine while I wait for her. Who knew that baked rat could be so moist and yummy? I wonder what’s for dessert.



Note to Daniela: Maybe the Count isn’t just fictional after all.

How to



The Transylvanian Society of Dracula is a non-profit, non-governmental foundation, established in 1991 to shed light on all things Dracula, historical and fantastical. Members include scholars, writers, historians, folklorists and even some Dracula fans.

The Company of Mysterious Journeys, the TSD’s official travel agency, was established in 1997. It runs various Dracula-themed tours that are fun and entertaining, and put Romania’s culture, landscape and beauty on the tourist map. Come for Dracula, discover Romania. www.mysteriousjourneys.com

And now I’m thinking, Romania at Halloween. Fun.