

Go Romania

GO
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SANDRA O'CONNELL

A trip to the light fantastic

NOBODY BELIEVES me when I say it but I saw the Aurora Borealis from my front door in Wicklow once.

The only problem was that every time I called the rest of the family out to see it, they kept tripping the outdoor security light, instantly obscuring the wondrously shifting green lights in the sky. Oh, how they laughed.

Ever since, at the top of my travel quest list has been a trip to see a full display of the Northern Lights in all their glory, in such an obviously dramatic fashion – and appropriate setting – that nobody could tell me I was imagining things.

Well, it looks like this could be my year. This amazing natural phenomenon



apparently builds to a crescendo of activity every 11 years, and, after a couple of quiet years – visually speaking – this winter the skies look set for peak viewing.

Now, obviously, no one can predict precisely when and where such a light show will take place, but Project Travel is laying on extra trips to Norway, one of the best places to see the Lights, this winter to take advantage of the favourable conditions.

It is running three different Arctic Adventure packages between January and March 2012, including a four-night Tromsø package with flights and accommodation in a three-star hotel from €1,275, with an evening's dog sledding and a dinner cruise.

There's a five-night Husky Tour from €2,185 or a five-night Arctic Highlights Voyage combining three nights on a Hurtigruten ship with two nights in a hotel from €1,495.

Just remember to bring a camera to prove you saw it.

■ project-travel.ie

There will be blood

With Halloween upon us, Romania is a natural home for spooky adventures featuring witches from Wallachia, vampires from Transylvania and many terrifying things that go bump in the night, writes **Sean Hillen**

IF THEY WANT hands coming out of coffins, we'll give it to them." Such were the comforting words of a former Romanian minister of tourism to me as I travelled around the country conducting interviews about changes in post-Communist society in the early 1990s.

And thus vampires, witches and things that go bump in the night were proclaimed pivotal platforms in the campaign to help a struggling Romanian tourism sector rise from the grave into which it had fallen – and to an extent it has succeeded.

Now, particularly with Halloween upon us, this eastern European country promises more in the way of spooky adventures than any place in the region, from vampires in Transylvania to witches in neighbouring Wallachia. And plenty of tour operators to deliver on your every nocturnal whim.

My own experiences, which began with a strange foreign desk request to report on the first-ever "World Congress of Dracula" in 1995, ended with my writing a book, *Digging for Dracula* (diggingfordracula.com), for those wanting to ride the coat-tails of the immortal character from Romania to England, Ireland to America. Now travel is much easier with Aer Lingus and Blue Air offering direct Dublin-Bucharest flights.

First stop on the tour is the capital, known in the 1920s and 1930s as the "Little Paris of the East" due to its broad boulevards and lively nightlife. Not the prettiest of cities, Bucharest still offers diverse activities, from theatre to opera, from classical to jazz.

Several interesting museums are worth a visit – the Grigore Antipa Natural History Museum reopened last month after a €10 million renovation; the National Museum of Art hosted in a 19th-century palace; and Old Princely Court, the ruins of the first Bucharest citadel built by Vlad the Impaler. A sprawling outdoor village version and the Peasant Museum offers insights into changing lifestyles over the centuries.

The hypnotic power of Dracula, of course, has not been overlooked and you can eat in underground caverns amidst candles, grilles, "severed heads" and a so-called tortured chamber at the Count Dracula Club. Not gourmet dining by any means, and the cost is a bit extra due to its touristy nature, but a fun experience all the same, especially for kids. "Van Helsing's dish" and "Outlaw chicken" are among quirky items on the menu.

More interesting on the vampire trail is a short trip out of the capital to the island of



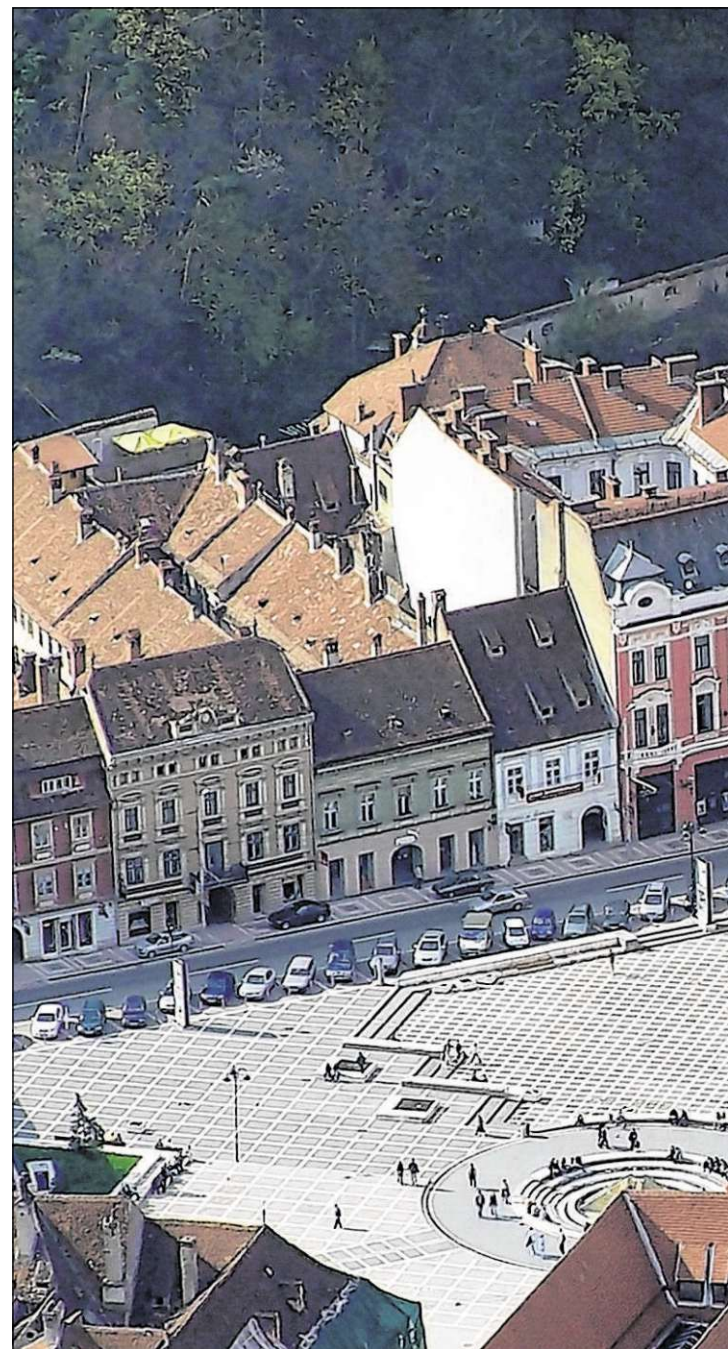
Snagov, a 30-minute car journey north of the city. My first trip there was in 1990, shortly after the downfall of dictator Nicolae Ceausescu. Then a handful of lei (the national currency) persuaded an elderly fisherman to row myself and an English friend, Benny, on an even more elderly boat across murky waters and thick layers of sickly-green moss to a tiny monastery on the other side. Nowadays, there are plenty of floating vessels available, including motorboats, to make the journey. Some of the romance of adventure may have gone during the intervening decades, but the sense of intrigue the island offers still remains.

Snagov was one of the principal hangouts for Vlad the Impaler, a medieval warlord, who built a prison there. He ruled the region in the mid-1400s, and, it is said this is his final resting place. Some literary critics say Vlad's life influenced Bram Stoker when the Dublin-born author was developing the character of his infamous Count.

Contrary to popular opinion, however, the aforesaid gentleman did not keep bats as pets. And while a rather blood-thirsty individual – in keeping with the prevalent mood of the times where it was an effective way of maintaining civic order – Vlad wasn't in the habit of drinking blood. In fact, he is looked upon as a brave Romanian hero. Impaling was his thing, one of the main reasons he managed to keep marauding Turks – from whom he learned the delicate killing art in the first place – away from the doors of his kingdom.

The island's keepers are a nun and a monk and while you can visit Vlad's grave, there is little in the way of food except, if you're lucky, a few low-hanging apples and pears from fruit trees scattered around, so bring a packed lunch, enjoy an island picnic and make a day of it. It is said that the "voivode" had some of his treasure buried on the island, so with luck and a good metal detector...

THE MAIN ROUTE into the heart of Transylvania is through the Prahova valley, a ribbon of tarmac road that winds its way 170km northwards and upwards through the Carpathian Mountains to the olde worlde town of Brasov. It is probably the town most known to travellers to Romania, attracting many for skiing and hiking. A checkerboard of narrow cobblestone streets leads to and around an ornate central 14th-century Black Church in the old



Transylvanian tales (clockwise from above): Brasov, in Romania; street scene in Sighisoara; Dracula's castle in Bran; and street performers in Bucharest. **Left:** actors in period costume stage a mock medieval witch trial in Sighisoara as part of a three-day Dracula symposium in the city. Photographs: Daniel Mihailescu/AFP/Getty Images, Romanian National Tourist Office and David Greedy/Getty Images



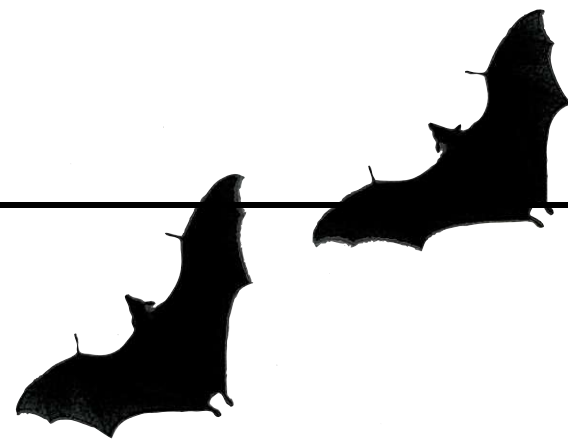
Get there

Aer Lingus (aerlingus.com) and Blue Air (blueairweb.com) fly from Dublin to Bucharest



Gone charter fishing off the Galway coast: P10

... and vampires



part of town, with a Buchholz organ of rare beauty inside.

Plenty of restaurants and cafes offer traditional repasts of polenta (cornmeal), ciorba de burta (pig belly soup) and mici (rolled grilled hamburgers), with a generous glass of potent palinka to wash it down (made mainly from plums, Romania's equivalent of poteen, has a softer, sweeter taste). Outdoor activities take place mainly in Poina Brasov, a 20-minute car or bus drive up a steep mountain road with majestic views along the way.

A few kilometres away, Bran Castle, a bare, atmospheric medieval castle atop a knoll overlooking the road far below, is where most visitors end up when searching for vampirish activity. Though unrelated to Dracula or indeed to Vlad the Impaler, it is still worth seeing, mainly for historical reasons, as a key crossing point during tumultuous times when one kingdom vied with another for dominance.

I became intimately acquainted with the atmospheric castle, not just from frequent visits there, but also from renting the entire building and grounds for shooting after-dark scenes for a

Discovery channel series thrillingly entitled *Mad Kings of Europe*.

The area around Bran is also noted for its traditional dairy produce. Known as "the cheese valley", farming families line the road beside roughhewn wooden tables upon which are displayed delicious varieties, including "branza de burduf", which is carefully wrapped in the bark of a pine tree. It is also the site for filming of the Hollywood American Civil War blockbuster, *Cold Mountain*, starring Nicole Kidman, Jude Law and Renee Zellweger.

FOR AN AUTHENTIC slice of rustic life and to learn how some traditions haven't changed for centuries, there's no better place than Arefu, a village in northern Wallachia. Here in the shadow of Vlad the Impaler's ruined central citadel, Poienari, one can sleep in homes made of wood and clay, partake copiously of homemade palinka and hear how the locals dig up the bodies of their dead relatives every seven years and wash their bones in the sink before reburying them.

Founded by Transylvanian Saxons in the 12th century,

Sighisoara (Schassburg in German), 200km north of Arefu, has made much of its fortuitous historical pedigree as the verified birthplace of Vlad. With its nine towers, cobbled streets, burgher houses and ornate churches, it is a Unesco World Heritage Site.

So taken was he by the area, Prince Charles bought himself a chateau and some land there. In response to widespread media suggestions, his office says this development had nothing to do with fox hunting following its ban in England, but to protect Saxon heritage.

Other attractions include the church-on-the-hill with its 500-year-old frescoes, the 13th-century Venetian House and the Church of the Dominican Monastery, known for its Transylvanian renaissance carved altarpiece, baroque pulpit, Oriental carpets and 17th-century organ.

Sighisoara also hosts an annual summer medieval festival, a highlight of which is the public trial of a selected "local witch". Hundreds of witches were tortured and tried in the region over the years. I had the honour of offering to save the life of said lady, the payment of which is made only through a promise of marriage.

Then, it's northwards again to Bistrita, a quiet, picturesque town nestled in the eastern Carpathian Mountains, and the rugged, rocky Borgo Pass beyond, where in the novel the hapless London clerk, Jonathan Harker, first meets the never-say-die regal count.

Harker stays in the Golden Crown Hotel before going to Dracula's castle, so it's worth stopping in. A more eerie atmosphere, however, is provided by Castle Dracula Hotel. You just never know what could happen!

Romania where to...

Stay

- **Bucharest:** Hotel Arc de Triomphe, 19 Clucerului Street, residencehotels.com.ro.
- **Brasov:** Hotel Coroana, 62 Republicii Street, aro-palace.ro.
- **Sighisoara:** The Legend House, 8 bis Bastionului Street, legenda.ro.
- **Bistrita:** Castle Dracula Hotel, Piatra Fantanele, hotelcasteldracula.ro.

Eat

- **Bucharest:** Count Dracula Club, 8a Splaiul Independentei, count-dracula.ro, or Bistro La Taifas, 16 Gh Manu Street, bistrone.ro.
- **Brasov:** Restaurant Cetatate, 5 Str Dealul Cetatii, aro-palace.ro.
- **Sighisoara:** Casa Vlad Dracul Restaurant, 00-40-265-771596.

- **Bistrita:** Castle Dracula Restaurant, Piatra Fantanele, hotelcasteldracula.ro.

Go

- Tour operators in Romania: Transylvania Live, dracula-tour.com.
- Exclusive Romania, exclusiveromania.com.
- Transylvanian Society of Dracula, mysteriousjourneys.com.