TOUR CODE

RO2

ADVENTURESABROAD

ROMANIA & BULGARIA

Castles, Palaces & Monasteries

15 days

Updated 01/11/2013

Day 1 ***Arrive in Bucharest***

Arrive in Bucharest, the capital of Romania.

Overnight in Bucharest. Meal plan: Dinner, if required.

Day 2 ***Bucharest: City Tour - Suceava***

Bucharest, the capital of Romania and the nation's powerhouse of cultural and economic life, was founded 500 years ago and it is a natural starting point for our visit to the country. During the 1930's its tree-lined boulevards and fin de siecle architecture earned it the nickname "The Little Paris of the East". There is even an Arc de Triomphe on the handsome Soseaua Kiseleff, itself longer than the Champs Elysees and alive with blossoms in the spring.

Despite the massive reconstructions of the 1980's, Bucharest remains a 'Garden City', leafy and pleasant, with many sidewalk cafes. Our tour today will include the Cotroceni Palace and Museum where we see the 6,000 room Parliament Palace. We will also see the Triumphal Arch, the Romanian Athenaeum, and University Square.

After lunch we will drive out to visit the Bucharest Village Museum. Situated in a picturesque environment on a lakeshore, this is one of the largest and oldest outdoors museums in Europe. Its exhibits, including houses, churches, water and windmills are of great historic and artistic value.

We will have an early dinner in Bucharest today before heading to the airport for our evening flight to Suceava* in the northeastern province of Romania. This is the heart of an area renowned for its 'painted' monasteries.

* Occasionally, due to irregular flight schedules, we may have to fly to a town called Iasi and transfer by road (150 km) to Suceava.

Overnight in Suceava. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 3 ***Suceava - Bucovina Monasteries - Piatra Neamt***

Today is spent visiting some of the most impressive Bucovina monasteries. These triumphs of Byzantine-influenced art reflect a flowering of Moldavian civilization in the 15th and 16th centuries. The "Painted" Monasteries are a major Moldavian destination, because of the vivid and animated frescoes on their church walls. In acknowledgement of their value, the monasteries in Becoming have been declared as UNESCO protected cultural sites. The art historians compare their artistic value with the mural paintings of the San Marco church of Venice. The secrets of the Moldavian painters who prepared the colors and the techniques that made the paintings incredibly resistant are still a mystery.

We will visit Voronet, a nun monastery consecrated to St George, within walking distance from Guar Humorous town. Voronet is probably the most accomplished sample of artistic achievement in Moldavian architecture and painting. The

monastery was built at a time of peace with the Turks, when Stephen had centralized the state, giving a new impetus to its economy and culture. We will also visit Humor Monastery, founded in 1530.

After a visit to the famous Marginea black ceramics centre, we visit the Sucevita Monastery, the largest and arguably the finest of the Bukovina monasteries. The church inside the fortified monastic enclosure (1586) is almost completely covered in frescoes inside and out.

After spending the balance of our day exploring this region we depart for Piatra Neamt, the capital city of Neamt County, in the historical region of Moldavia. Because of its location in the Eastern Carpathian Mountains, it is considered one of the most picturesque cities in Romania.

Overnight in Piatra Neamt. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 4 *Piatra Neamt - Bicaz Gorges - Sighisoara*

Today we depart for Sighisoara via the Bicaz Gorges. The road that slices through the Bicaz Gorges is among Romania's most spectacular. The gorge twists and turns steeply uphill for 5km, cutting through sheer, 300-meter high limestone rocks. At one point, the narrow mountain road runs beneath the overhanging rocks in a section known as the 'neck of hell'. This stretch of road is protected as part of the Hasmas-Bicaz Gorges National Park.

A few kilometers west we will cross into Transylvania's Harghita County and immediately come to the resort area of Lacu Rosu or Red Lake. The alpine resort in this region sprang up in the 1970's and is still a magnet for hikers from both Transylvania and Moldavia. From the lake region, the main road continues via further mountain passed and beautiful scenery.

We will stop for lunch today in Praid, and will also visit the spectacular Praid Salt Mine. Praid is the natural centre of he Salt Region, and one of the most important salt mines of Transylvania can be found here. The underground salt mountain once supplied the whole Seckler and Saxon lands with this indispensable mineral. The history of the village is inked to the salt. The salt mine and salt baths of Praid are well known all over the country. Our tour into the mine is by bus and is not strenuous. We travel about 1500 m into the salt dome, dropping about 25 m. Inside we visit the underground mining museum, which shows salt minerals, mining tools, and folk art objects.

Our journey will end today with our arrival in Sighisoara. Sighisoara -- Schassburg in German, or Segesvar in Hungarian, the only inhabited Middle Ages city in Europe. Mentioned by historians as far back as 1191, Sighisoara has a long tradition in craftsmanship and trade and its fortifications and defense towers still witness for guilds as those of tinsmiths, butchers, hatters, and blacksmiths. Narrow winding streets, houses with thick walls and huge portals painted in vivid colours, towers, and churches, all old and very old (13th-16th centuries) enhance the charm of the place.

Overnight in Sighisoara. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 5 *Sighisoara - Biertan - Sibiu*

This morning we will start with a walking tour of Sighisoara. We will visit to the History Museum located in the former Town Hall. The Clock Tower, dated from the 14th Century, reveals a marvelous view over Sighisoara. We will also see the house where Vlad Tepes once lived.

We continue on to Biertan, a former Saxon village south of Sighisoara. Here in Biertan we find a fortified church from 15th century, listed as a UNESCO World Heritage, representative of the unique Transylvanian phenomenon of building rural fortified churches. Surrounded by three lines of defense walls of 12m high and towers, the church was never

breached by invaders.

The next visit on our journey today brings us to Sibiu. Called Hermannstadt in German, Sibiu was the most important of the 12th century Saxon settlements in Transylvania and its industrious emigres, primarily from the Rhineland, the Moselle Valley, Flanders and Saxony, erected walls around it for protection. The first wall destroyed by invaders not long after its construction, but remains of a 15th century brick wall still stand. Because of the blood shed at its walls, the Turks, after an unsuccessful onslaught, called Sibiu the "Red City." Built into the walls are defense towers that were assigned to particular guilds and medieval houses.

Upon arrival we will enjoy a sightseeing tour of Sibiu, one of the oldest towns on the Transylvanian Plateau. We will wander its old quarter, where houses with immense roofs have been built within the fortifications, giving Sibiu its powerful medieval aspect. The Tartans destroyed the town's first Citadel in the 13th century and the massive Evangelical Church now occupies the site. It took 200 years to build the church in the 14th and 15th centuries.

Overnight in Sibiu. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 6 *Sibiu - Brasov - Bran Castle - Sinaia*

This morning we will depart for Brasov, stopping en-route in Fagaras town for a short visit.

Upon arrival in Brasov we will enjoy a sightseeing tour. Kronstadt in German, Brasso in Hungarian, Brasov ranks second in size after Bucharest. The Old Town lies between two mountains, surrounded like a halo by the Carpathians, and the city of Brasov benefits from the influence of an ancient history.

We will then continue on towards Bran for a visit to Bran Castle, erroneously claimed by some to be that of Count Dracula, the world's most famous vampire. Perched atop a rocky outcrop, this strategically located castle was built in 1377 to protect nearby Brasov from invaders. It also served as a customs station. The castle's rooms and towers surround an inner courtyard. Some rooms are connected through underground passages to the inner court. Bran is home to a rich collection of Romanian and foreign furniture and art items from the 14th-19th centuries.

We also visit Sinaia, the "Pearl of the Carpathian Mountains". We visit the former royal summer residence built by Carol I Hohenzolern Sigmaringen of Romania (1881-1914). We will take a leisurely STROLL up to the 17th century Sinaia Monastery, an interesting cluster of churches and courtyards which take their name from the ancient Egyptian monastery on Mount Sinai.

Overnight in Sinaia. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 7 *Sibiu - Peles & Pelisor Castles - Bucharest, Romania - Overnight train - Sofia, Bulgaria*

This morning we will visit the nearby Peles and Pelisor Castles. Considered by many one of the most beautiful castles in all Europe, Peles Castle is a masterpiece of German new-Renaissance architecture. This castle was built in the final quarter of the last century for Romania's 'imported ruler' King Carol. Designed mainly in German Renaissance style, this summer residence was decorated throughout by Carol's eccentric wife Carmen Sylvan. Many valuable objects are contained within the castles 160 rooms.

Almost adjacent to Peles Castle is Pelisor ("Little Peles"). King Ferdinand, who succeeded Carol I, intended to use Peles Castle as a summer residence. Pelisor's 70 rooms feature a unique collection of turn-of-the century Viennese furniture and Tiffany and Lalique glassware, and were mostly decorated in the Art-Nouveau style by Queen Maria.

We then continue on to Bucharest. Our journey south takes us via Targoviste where we visit the Princely Court and Sunset Tower. The Princely Court in Targoviste was the capital of Wallachia, where Vlad the Impaler (Dracula) ruled. Vlad took the throne at the Princely Court in 1456. To repay boyars for taking he and his brother hostages, it was here that Vlad impaled a great many of his enemies after inviting them to a feast on Easter Sunday.

After dinner we board our overnight train for Sofia, Bulgaria (single compartments NOT available; single supplements reflect sharing for this one night).

Accommodation in First Class Sleepers. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 8 *Sofia: At Leisure*

Today is free to enjoy Sofia, capital city of Bulgaria.* Surrounded by mountains, Sofia is roughly the central axis of Bulgaria, and most of the sights in this city are located within walking distance of each other.

Above the city rises wooded Mount Vitosha with its rivers, waterfalls, and soaring peaks. More than 3,000 different plants grow in the mountain forests. The air here is crisp and clear. In less than an hour, you can be far outside the city surrounded by beech woods, beside a bubbling stream, in a 13th century monastery garden, or schussing on a pristine ski slope.

Sofia itself is largely a city of wide boulevards and squares, pleasant parks, and enormous Socialist Realism-style buildings. In the 5th century BC, Sofia was the Thracian city of Serdika. When the Romans conquered Thrace, they made it the capital. Then the hordes of Attila the Hun set it on fire in the 5th century AD and Justinian rebuilt it.

* Due to our early arrival by train, and the fact that some travellers may be joining the tour at this point, this day is intended to be one of rest and some well-deserved independent time.

Overnight in Sofia. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 9 *Sofia: City Tour*

Today we have a sightseeing WALKING tour of Sofia. The motto of the city is "Sofia Grows but Never Ages"; founded over 7,000 years ago, Sofia today is an exciting meeting place of history and the present. Traces of the lives of Thracians and Romans, Proto-Bulgarians and Slavs can be seen here. More than 250 historic, archaeological and architectural monuments have been preserved in Sofia, the center of the country’s political and cultural life.

We'll see some of the most famous landmarks: The magnificent St Alexander Nevsky Cathedral, one of the most spectacular buildings in Sofia. In addition to the splendor of the building itself, the cathedral is also remarkable for its icons and murals, painted by the time's foremost artists. Its crypt contains the most valuable collection of Bulgarian icons.

St Sofia's Church (5C) is the second oldest, but most significant building, which gave the city its name. Specialists highly value this remarkable archaeological monument, witness of Serdica's golden age during the 6th century.

The large archaeological complex of Roman and medieval ruins, dominated by St George Rotunda (4C) is the oldest building in Sofia. Repeatedly destroyed and rebuilt, the St George Rotunda has been restored to its original 5th century appearance when it was used as a Christian church.

The remainder of the afternoon is at your leisure.

Overnight in Sofia. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 10 *Sofia - Plovdiv*

Today we travel to the ancient city of Plovdiv, situated in the Plain of Thrace. Plovdiv was formerly known as Pulpudeva until Philip II of Macedon's weary horse collapsed under him here at the edge of the Thracian plain in AD 342. Since that was surely an omen, he built Philippolis on the site in the horse's honour. Later the Romans renamed it Trimontium -- the City on Three Hills. For five centuries, under Turkish rule when it was known as Philibe, it suffered much devastation. Today it is a city of great charm, with legacies of a hectic past.

Plovdiv has a lovely "stariyat grad," or old town, with Turkish influences and a charming character. Our tour includes the Old Quarter, the Ethnographical Museum, and the Roman Amphitheatre. Within Trimontium, the historic heart of Plovdiv, typical 19th century Bulgarian homes line the streets.

Overnight in Plovdiv. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 11 *Plovdiv - Valley of the Roses - Veliko Turnovo*

This morning we depart Plovdiv for the world famous Valley of the Roses.

In this valley, 70 percent of the world's "attar", or extract from roses, is produced. Nimble- fingered women and girls do most of the picking, while donkeys are used to carry the petals away.

In the town of Kazanlak we visit the Thracian Tomb (fourth and third centuries BC). The Thracians are regarded as the original Bulgarians, a people closely linked with the ancient Greeks. Before our climb over the Shipka Pass we will visit the Shipka Memorial Church. The golden Domes of this Russian-style church rise out of the hillside. After crossing the spectacular Shipka with its majestic vistas and momentous history we visit the open-air Ethnographical Museum of Etura, a recreation of a typical 19th century village.

After a tour of the museum we continue on to Veliko Turnovo, once the capital of Bulgaria (1185-1396) and still showing the remains of its past glory -- fortress walls and palaces perched among the steep cliffs of the Yantra Gorge. Clinging to the crags that rise above the River Yantra, this capital of the second Bulgarian Kingdom of the Middle Ages is one of the country's most picturesque sites. It rises on three main hills: fortified Tsarevets; Trapezitsa, where boyars lived; and Sveta Gora, then the centre of a scholarly monastery, now a university site.

Overnight in Veliko Turnovo. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 12 *Veliko Turnovo: Town Tour*

Today we have a tour of this town laced with history. We will admire the breathtaking views of this picturesque region during our tour of the Tsarevets Citadel (Castle of the Czar). This commanding position was first fortified in the 6th century and had become the royal centre of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom by the end of the 12th century. A short drive away is the hilltop village of Arbanassi, first settled by Albanian immigrants in the 15th century. We will have the opportunity to visit several of the houses in the region dating back to the 16th and 17th centuries.

Balance of the day at leisure.

Overnight in Veliko Turnovo. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 13 *Veliko Turnovo - Sofia*

Today we travel to Sofia via the beautiful Danube Plain. En-route we will cross over the Troyan Pass and visit the nearby Troyan Monastery, Bulgaria's third largest. After a lunch break we will continue on the well-preserved 'museum-town' of Koprivshtitsa. It was here that the revolt against the Ottoman occupation began in 1876. A visit here gives us an insight as to how Bulgarians lived a century ago. Our WALK throughout the enchanting town will bring us to many unique houses with wooden columns, painted facades, richly decorated interiors, and lovely gardens.

Overnight in Sofia. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 14 *Sofia - Rila Monastery - Sofia*

This morning we depart for the 10th century Rila Monastery, 121 km (75 miles) south of Sofia at the end of a winding road through high rock walls with formations like giant animals waiting to pounce. This most-revered of all Bulgarian monasteries lies nestled in a soft, green wood. Mountains rise all around it; below it the Rilska River races over a stony bed.

In the 9th century, twenty-year old Ivan Rilski (John of Rila) fled to this peaceful place seeking escape from the sordidness of the world. Finding a cave in the woods above this present monastery site, he took up the hermit life. Here he fed the animals and the birds and prayed in the stillness to God. In time, like-minded men joined him and they built the first monastery here about a 2.4 km (1.5 mile) from the present site, where, today, you will find his tomb, the little Church of St. Luke, and the cave he inhabited. In the past, pilgrims were not deemed sinless enough to enter the monastery.

The Rila Monastery is one of Europe's largest monasteries, located in some of Bulgaria's most beautiful terrain. Sightseeing of the monastery features the unsurpassed frescoes of the Church of the Blessed Virgin. Monks still practice within this five-domed treasure. Also contained within the exquisite fortress-like walls of the monastery is the Historical Museum featuring a collection of objects connected with the monastery's thousand-year history. After lunch we will return to Sofia.

Overnight in Sofia. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 15 *Departure*

Departure from Sofia.

PRIJATNO PATUVANE!! Meal plan: Breakfast.