

# Moldova

For a country that's only vaguely known in Europe and all but anonymous to the rest of the world, Moldova has a cultural, political and economic, erm, 'liveliness' equalled by few. News briefs that emerge from the region are punctuated by tales of civil war, breakaway republics, organised crime, arms dealing, human trafficking and a curious return to communism.

Rarely mentioned is the country's first-rate, and bargain-priced, wine industry. The beguiling attractions between the vineyards get no press at all; remote monasteries cut into limestone cliffs, sunflower fields, enormous watermelons, bucolic pastoral lands, amazingly friendly people and one of Europe's most party-bent capitals. The tiny breakaway regions of Transdnistr and Gagauzia are exquisite idiosyncratic wonders, with the former arguably ranking as one of Europe's top curiosities. Chişinău's grossly inflated accommodation prices notwithstanding, this is one of Europe's best travel bargains and far and away the best wine (ad)venture on the planet.

## FAST FACTS

- **Area** 33,700 sq km
- **Capital** Chişinău
- **Currency** leu; €1 = 15.48 lei; US\$1 = 12.37 lei; UK£1 = 22.30 lei; A\$1 = 9.01 lei; ¥100 = 11.41 lei; NZ\$1 = 8.48 lei
- **Famous for** wine, folk art
- **Official Languages** Moldovan, Russian
- **Phrases** *bună* (hello); *merci* (thank you); *cum vă numiți?* (what's your name?)
- **Population** 4.43 million
- **Telephone Codes** country code ☎ 373; international access code ☎ 22
- **Visas** required for Australian and New Zealand passport holders; see p523 for details



## HIGHLIGHTS

- Stroll **Chişinău's** (p506) tree-studded avenues and experience its kick-ass nightlife
- Visit the fantastic cave monastery of 13th-century monks at **Orheiul Vechi** (p514)
- Take an organised or improvised wine tour at the country's world-famous cellars in **Cricova** (p513) and sip from the fruit of the gods
- Visit the self-styled republic, **Transdniestr** (p515), a surreal, living museum of the Soviet Union, for an off-the-beaten-track experience

## ITINERARIES

- **One week** Arrive in Chişinău – buy and uncork several bottles of wine to fuel a couple of days' partying. Use Chişinău as your base, making a trip out to the cave monasteries at Orheiul Vechi. Tour a big-name vineyard.
- **Two weeks** Follow the one-week itinerary, plus add on a few days travelling back in time in Transdniestr, the country that doesn't officially exist, then tack on a few smaller vineyard tours around Chişinău, purchasing your customs limit, before returning home.

## CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Moldova has moderate winters and warm summers. Hikers and wine enthusiasts would do well to travel between May and September, when you have more guarantees that camping grounds and attractions will be open. As there is little tourism in Moldova, there's no real low or high season.

## HISTORY

Moldova today straddles two historic regions divided by the Nistru (Dniestr) River. Historic Romanian Bessarabia incorporated the region west of the Nistru, while tsarist Russia governed the territory east of the river (Transdniestr).

Bessarabia, part of the Romanian principality of Moldavia, was annexed in 1812 by the Russian empire. In 1918, after the October Revolution, Bessarabia declared its independence. Two months later the newly formed Democratic Moldavian Republic united with Romania. Russia never recognised this union.

Then in 1924 the Soviet Union created the Moldavian Autonomous Oblast on the eastern banks of the Nistru River, and incorporated

## HOW MUCH?

- **Bottle of Cricova table wine** \$1 to \$3
- **Museum admission (adult)** \$0.20 to \$1
- **Short taxi ride** \$2
- **Local bus ticket** \$0.15
- **Internet access** \$0.25 per hr

## LONELY PLANET INDEX

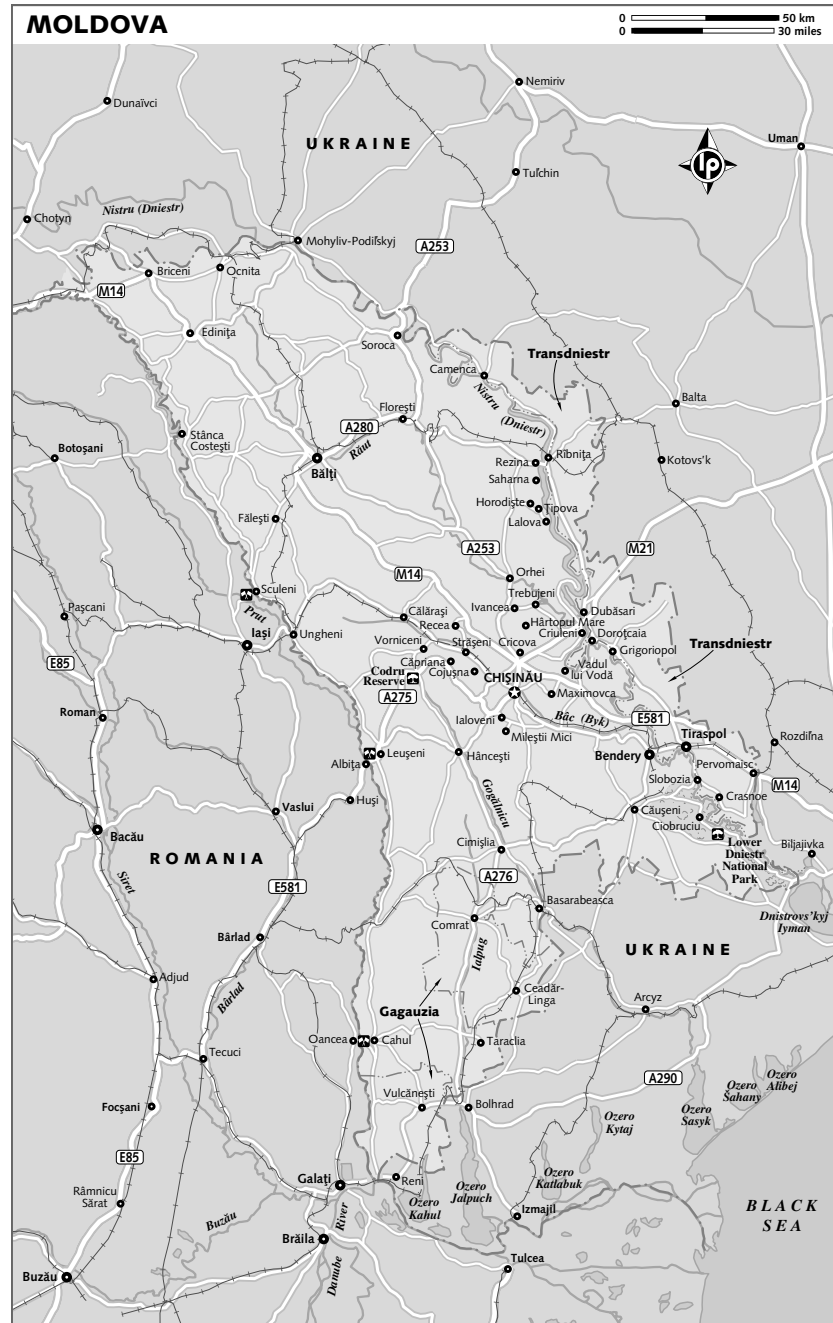
- **Litre of petrol** \$0.50
- **Litre of water** \$0.35
- **Beer (Chişinău in a bar)** \$0.45 to \$1
- **Souvenir T-shirt** \$3 to \$5
- **Pizza slice from street kiosk** \$0.50

Transdniestr into the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR). A few months later the Soviet government renamed the oblast the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (Moldavian ASSR). During 1929 the capital was moved to Tiraspol from Balta (in present-day Ukraine).

In June 1940 the Soviet army, in accordance with the terms of the secret protocol associated with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, occupied Romanian Bessarabia. The Soviet government immediately joined Bessarabia with the southern part of the Moldavian ASSR – specifically, Transdniestr – naming it the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (Moldavian SSR). The remaining northern part of the Moldavian ASSR was returned to the Ukrainian SSR (present-day Ukraine). Bessarabia suffered terrifying Sovietisation, marked by the deportation of 300,000 Romanians.

During 1941 allied Romanian and German troops attacked the Soviet Union, and Bessarabia and Transdniestr fell into Romanian hands. Consequently, thousands of Bessarabian Jews were sent to labour camps and then deported to Auschwitz. In August 1944 the Soviet army reoccupied Transdniestr and Bessarabia. Under the terms of the Paris Peace Treaty of 1947, Romania had to relinquish the region and Soviet power was restored in the Moldavian SSR.

Once in control again the Soviets immediately enforced a Sovietisation programme on the Moldavian SSR. The Cyrillic alphabet was imposed on the Moldovan language (a dialect of Romanian) and Russian became



the official state language. Street names were changed to honour Soviet communist heroes, and Russian-style patronymics were included in people's names.

In July 1949, 25,000 Moldovans were deported to Siberia and Kazakhstan. And in 1950–52 Leonid Brezhnev, then first secretary of the central committee of the Moldovan Communist Party, is said to have personally supervised the deportation of a quarter of a million Moldovans.

Mikhail Gorbachev's policies of *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring) from 1986 paved the way for the creation of the nationalist Moldovan Popular Front in 1989. Moldovan written in the Latin alphabet was reintroduced as the official language in August 1989. In February–March 1990 the first democratic elections to the Supreme Soviet (parliament) were won by the Popular Front. Then in April 1990 the Moldovan national flag (the Romanian tricolour with the Moldavian coat of arms in its centre) was reinstated. Transdnistr, however, refused to adopt the new state symbols and stuck to the red banner.

In June 1990 the Moldovan Supreme Soviet passed a declaration of sovereignty. After the failed coup attempt against Gorbachev in Moscow in August 1991, Moldova declared its full independence and Mircea Snegur became the democratically elected president in December 1991. Moldova was granted 'most-favoured nation' status by the USA in 1992, qualifying for International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank loans the same year.

Counteracting these nationalist sentiments was an emerging desire for autonomy among ethnic minority groups. In Transdnistr, the Yedinstvo-Unitatea (Unity) movement was formed in 1988 to represent the interests of the Slavic minorities. This was followed in November 1989 by the creation of the Gagauz Halki political party in the south of Moldova, where the Turkic-speaking Gagauz minority was centred. Both ethnic groups' major fear was that an independent Moldova would reunite with Romania.

The Gagauz went on to declare the Gagauz Soviet Socialist Republic in August 1990. A month later the Transdnistrs declared independence, establishing the Dniestr Moldovan Republic. In presidential elections, Igor Smirnov came out as head of Transdnistr, Stepan Topal head of Gagauzia.

Whereas Gagauzia didn't press for more than autonomy within Moldova, Transdnistr settled for nothing less than outright independence. In March 1992 Moldovan president Mircea Snegur declared a state of emergency. Two months later full-scale civil war broke out in Transdnistr when Moldovan police clashed with Transdnistran militia in Bendery (then called Tighina), who were backed by troops from Russia. An estimated 500 to 700 people were killed and thousands wounded in events that shocked the former Soviet Union.

A ceasefire was signed by the Moldovan and Russian presidents, Snegur and Boris Yeltsin, in July 1992. Provisions were made for a Russian-led, tripartite peacekeeping force comprising Russian, Moldovan and Transdnistran troops to be stationed in the region. Troops remain here today, maintaining an uneasy peace.

Moldova took a step forward in its bid for a place in the EU when Deputy Prime Minister Ion Sturza signed a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the EU in May 1999. But while Moldova is keen to join the ranks of the EU, two major obstacles still block its path: the country's mounting foreign debt and its inadequate economic growth.

Widely regarded as the poorest nation in Europe and one of the most corrupt countries in the world, Moldova is endeavouring to shake these stigmas. In late 2005 the country signed agreements committing itself to combat corruption and lock down people-trafficking. Average household income remains low, and with roughly one-third of the country's GDP comprised of monies sent home from emigrants working abroad, an unproductive economic dependency is developing, which will require long-term domestic cultivation to counteract.

## PEOPLE

With 4.5 million inhabitants, Moldova is the most densely populated region of the former Soviet Union. Moldovans make up 78.2% of the total population, Ukrainians constitute 8.4%, Russians 5.8%, Gagauz 4.4%, Bulgarians 1.9%, 'other' 1.5%, and other nationalities such as Belarusians, Poles and Roma compose 1.3%.

Most Gagauz and Bulgarians inhabit southern Moldova. In Transdnistr, Ukrainians and Russians make up 58% of the region's population; Moldovans make up 34%. It is one of the least urbanised countries in Europe.

## NOT EXACTLY A NATIONAL SPORT

Did you know that Moldova is world famous for its underwater hockey teams? Well, OK, *infamous* then.

You wouldn't normally associate such a sport as underwater hockey with Moldova (come to think of it, there aren't any countries you'd associate it with, but that's another story...). However, in the 2000 Underwater Hockey Championships held in the world-renowned underwater-hockey metropolis of Hobart, in Tasmania, Australia, the Moldovan men's team puzzled referees and judges by not even knowing how to put their fins and flippers on properly. After being trounced by such stalwarts as Columbia 30-0 and Argentina 23-0, it was revealed that the entire team had filed for (and eventually received) refugee status with the Australian government.

It's a good thing for Moldovans that Canadians aren't known for their good memories or efficient bureaucracy. Two years later, after much hounding from a so-called Moldovan Underwater Hockey Federation based in Tiraspol (in probably the only time Transdnistran officials called themselves 'Moldovan'), the Canadian embassy in Bucharest granted the women's team visas to participate in the world championships in Calgary.

There was much head scratching as the Moldovan national anthem was played – and no team came out to play. But how could they? They were in Toronto, filing for refugee status. In this elaborate visa scam, each woman on the team (who no doubt wouldn't know what to do with an underwater puck even if it bit her) had paid organisers some \$1200 – not bad for refugee status in Canada.

While this incident sadly spells out an uncertain future for the world of underwater hockey in Moldova, it does speak volumes about the creativity and persistence of Moldovans!

## RELIGION

Moldova stays on course with the region's religious leanings; the vast majority being Eastern Orthodox (98%), with the recovering Jewish community (1.5%) at a distant second. Baptists and 'other' make up the remaining 0.5%.

## ARTS

There is a wealth of traditional folk art in Moldova, with carpet making, pottery, weaving and carving predominating.

Traditional dancing in Moldova is similar to the traditional dances of other Eastern European countries. Couples dance in a circle, a semicircle or a line to the sounds of bagpipes, flutes, panpipes and violins.

Two of Moldova's most prolific modern composers are Arkady Luxemburg and Evgeny Doga, who have both scored films and multimedia projects, as well as written songs, concertos, suites and symphonies. Dimitrie Gagauz has for over three decades been the foremost composer of songs reflecting the folklore of the Turkic-influenced Gagauz population of southern Moldova.

The biggest name in Moldovan painting is Mihai Greuc (1916–98), who cofounded the National School of Painting and was also a poet and free love advocate. In sculpture, Anatol Coseac today produces some highly original woodworks.

## ENVIRONMENT Land

Moldova is tiny and landlocked. It's a country of gently rolling steppes, with a gradual sloping towards the Black Sea. With one of the highest percentages of arable land in the world, Moldova is blessed with rich soil. Fields of grains, fruits and sunflowers are characteristic of the countryside. Moldova counts some 16,500 species of animals (460 of which are vertebrates) as its citizens.

## National Parks

There are five scientific reserves (totalling 19,378 hectares) and 30 protected natural sites (covering 22,278 hectares). The reserves protect areas of bird migration, old beech and oak forests, and important waterways. The Codru reserve, Moldova's oldest, boasts 924 plant species, 138 kinds of birds and 45 mammals; this is the most frequently visited reserve.

## Environmental Issues

A great effort has been made by environmental groups to protect Moldova's wetland regions along the lower Prut and Nistru Rivers.

Never heavily industrial, Moldova faces more issues of protection and conservation than pollution. The majority of its 3600 rivers and rivulets were drained, diverted or dammed, threatening ecosystems.

## FOOD & DRINK

Hearty meals fit for an explorer are the name of the game here. No point in fussing about calories and arteries – food, as with life itself, is meant to be enjoyed to the full. It's easier to give in and enjoy.

In Moldova, some Russian influences have seen that pickled fruits and vegetables are popular, as are Russian meals like *pelmeni* (similar to ravioli). A Turkic influence has arguably been strong here; in the south you may find the delicious Gagauz *sorpa*, a spicy ram soup.

There's no beating about the bush – vegetarians will find their meals limited. Locally grown fresh fruit and veg is always a bonus, but expect to find few vegetarian choices. We've pointed them out when we've found them.

In Moldova, outside of Chișinău, where the choice of eateries is astounding, you'll be lucky to find a decent restaurant and will be stuck with hotel dining rooms, bars or cafeterias.

Moldova produces excellent wines and brands. Red wines are called *negru* and *roșu*, white wine is *vin alb*, while *sec* means dry, *dulce* is sweet and *șpumoz* translates as sparkling.

## CHIȘINĂU

☎ 22 / pop 664,325

In Chișinău (kish-i-now in Moldovan, kish-i-nyov in Russian) fleets of BMWs and Mercedes dominate traffic, while fashionably dressed youth strut down boutique-lined avenues and dine in fancy restaurants. How did this excessive wealth find its way to the capital of one of Europe's poorest countries? Answer: you don't wanna know and we ain't asking. The stunning contrast between rich and poor is only overshadowed by certain individuals who are clearly above the law and shamelessly conduct themselves as such. While this dodginess may be inordinately distracting for visitors, citizens of this vibrant, good-natured city have long since dismissed these oddities in favour of what really counts: having a good time.

First chronicled in 1420, Chișinău became a hotbed of anti-Semitism in the early 20th century; in 1903 the murder of 49 Jews sparked protests from Jewish communities worldwide. In 1941 a Nazi-driven deportation scheme and massacre was launched in Chișinău by the same group that had instigated the Iasi pogrom.

### CHIȘINĂU IN TWO DAYS

Sightseeing options are engaging but thin and easily covered in a half-day amble. Spend both nights ensconced in Chișinău's legendary nightlife. On your first day eat at the **Beer House** (p510), then sample its home-brew before moving on to cocktails at **Déja Vu** (p511). Dance the night away at **People** (p512).

On your second day get a hearty breakfast at **Cactus Café** (p510). Wander through the **National Archaeology and History Museum** (p509) and **National Museum of Fine Arts** (p509) until recovered. Then do it all again until 6am at **City Club** (p512).

Chișinău was the headquarters of the USSR's southwestern military operations during Soviet rule. Between 1944 and 1990 the city was called Kishinev, its Russian name, which is still used by some of the few travel agencies abroad who actually know where it is.

### ORIENTATION

Chișinău's street layout is a typically Soviet grid system of straight streets.

The train station is a five-minute walk from the city centre on Aleea Gării. Exit the train station, turn right along Aleea Gării to Piața Negruzzi, then walk up the hill to Piața Libertății. From here the main street, B-dul Ștefan cel Mare, crosses the city from southeast to northwest. The city's main sights and parks radiate off this street.

### INFORMATION

#### Bookshops

**Cartea Academica** (B-dul Ștefan cel Mare 148; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat) Your best bet for English-language titles.

**Librărie Eminescu** (B-dul Ștefan cel Mare 180; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat) Much larger, but devoid of English.

#### Cultural Centres

**Alliance Française** (☎ 234 510; Str Sfatul Țării 18; ☎ 9am-6.30pm Tue-Sat) Has a well-equipped *media-thèque* (media centre) and hosts regular cultural events.

#### Internet Access

**Central Telephone Office** (B-dul Ștefan cel Mare 65; per hr \$0.60; ☎ 24hr)

**Internet** (☎ 540 305; Hotel National, B-dul Ștefan cel Mare 4; per hr \$0.50; ☎ 24hr)

### Left Luggage

The **train station** (☎ 252 737; Aleea Gării; ☎ 24hr) has a 24-hour left-luggage service, 100m north of the main entrance alongside the platform.

### Medical Services

Contact the US embassy (p522) for a list of English-speaking doctors.

**Felicia** (☎ 223 725; B-dul Ștefan cel Mare 62; ☎ 24hr) Well-stocked pharmacy.

**Hotel National** (☎ 540 305; 4th fl, B-dul Ștefan cel Mare 4) Has a medical-care room.

**Municipal Clinical Emergency Hospital** (☎ 248 435; www.ournet.md/~scmu; Str Toma Ciorba 1; ☎ 24hr) Provides a variety of emergency services, and a good likelihood of finding English-speaking staff.

### Money

There are ATMs all over the city centre, in all the hotels and in shopping centres. Currency exchanges are concentrated around the bus and train stations, and also along B-dul Ștefan cel Mare.

**Eximbank** (☎ 272 583; B-dul Ștefan cel Mare 6; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) Can give you cash advances in foreign currency.

**Victoriabank** (☎ 233 065; Str 31 August 1989, 141; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri) Amex's representative in Moldova.

### Post

**Central post office** (☎ 227 737; B-dul Ștefan cel Mare 134; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Sat, to 6pm Sun) There is also a post office on Aleea Gării (open to 8pm).

### Telephone

**Central telephone office** (B-dul Ștefan cel Mare 65; ☎ 24hr) Book international calls inside the hall marked 'Convorbiri Telefonice Internaționale'. Faxes and telegrams can also be sent from here. Receive faxes at ☎ 549 155.

### Travel Agencies

There's no tourist information centre in Moldova, but there are plenty of agencies where you can get information. Most offer discounted rates in some hotels.

**Moldovar Tur** (☎ 270 488; moldovatur@travels.md; B-dul Ștefan cel Mare 4; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) The official state tourist agency can arrange Cricova and other vineyard tours. It can also find you chauffeured cars.

**Soleil Tours** (☎ 271 314; B-dul Negruzzi 5; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-5pm Sun) A very efficient organisation, it can book accommodation and transport tickets, but is known for its multiday excursions into remote Moldova, taking in monasteries, places of interests and incorporating rural homestays.

Sometimes travel agencies take a while to reply to emails (if ever). A better bet for pre-trip contact would be **Marina Vozian** (☎ 488 258, 0691-557 53; www.marisha.net), an independent guide and authority on all things Moldovan, or **Radu Sargu** (☎ in Moldova 0691-389 53, in US 432-224 7377; www.moldova-travel.com), who arranges apartment rentals and provides local information and assistance.

### DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Bucharest-style restaurant pricing scams are emerging, particularly in tourist-friendly basement joints. Never order anything, particularly wine, without confirming the price *in writing* (eg menu) to avoid surprises on the bill. If you've been victimised, keep all receipts and report it to the police.

Travellers are required to have their passports with them *at all times*. Cheeky police are prone to random checks.

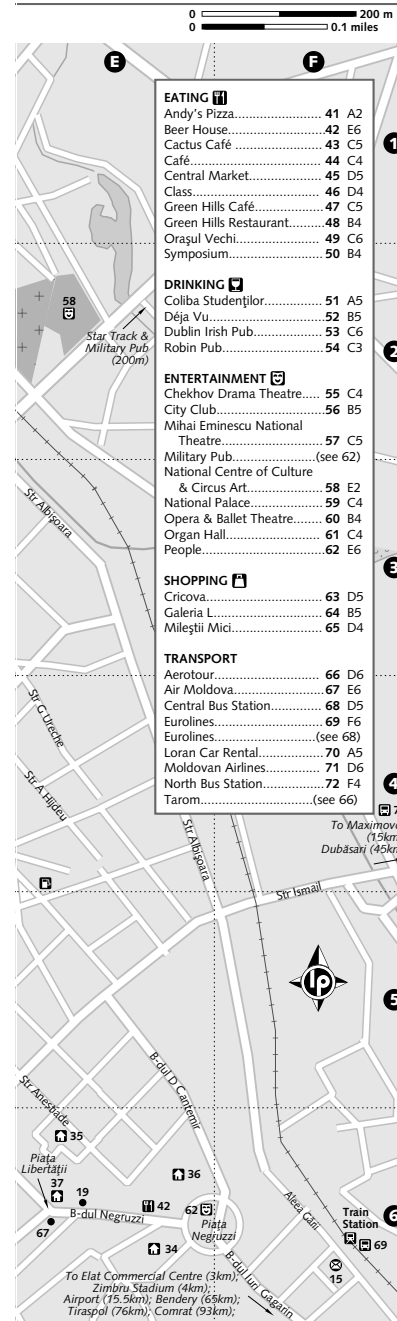
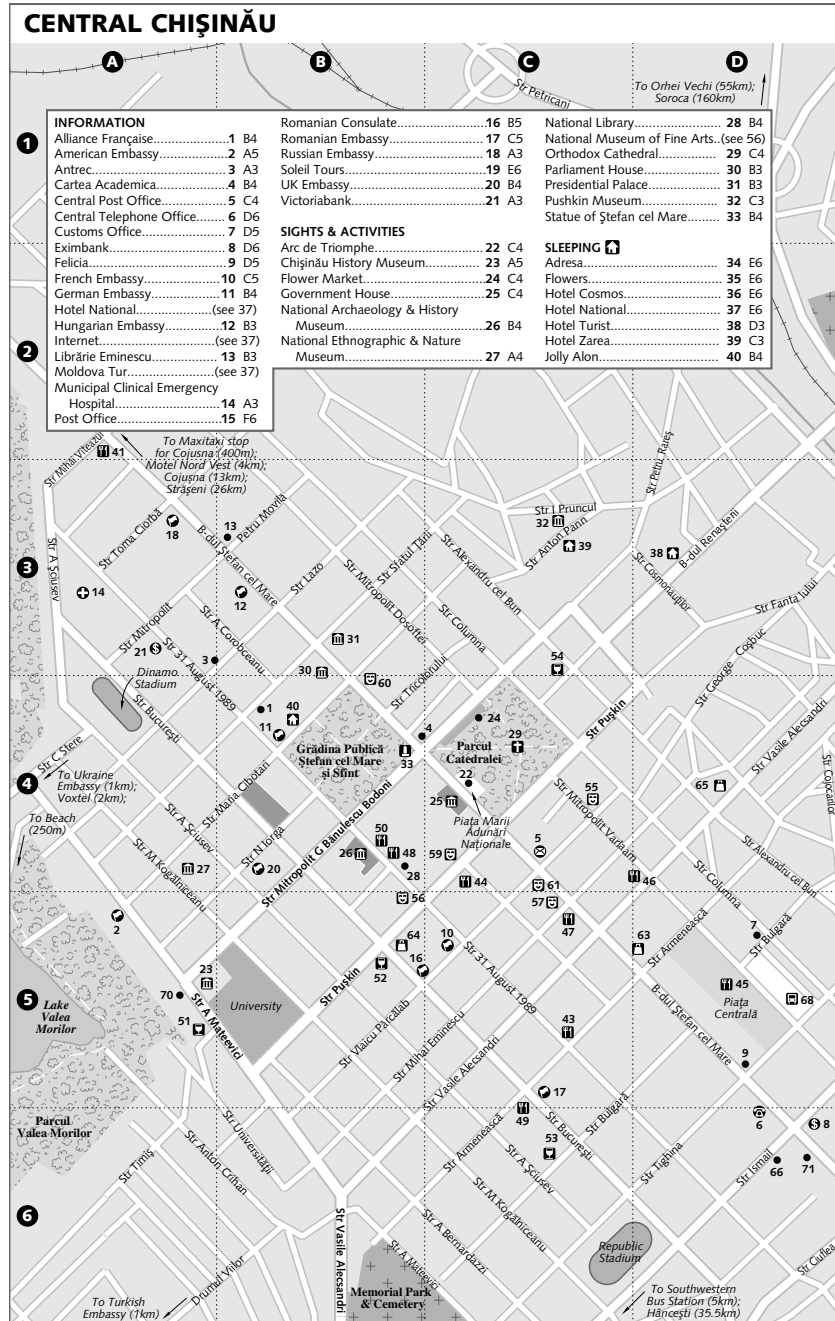
### SIGHTS

No one can accuse Chișinău of being overburdened with tourist sights. Lacking in 'must-sees', it's more a pleasant city to wander about in and discover as you go. As it was heavily bombed during WWII, little remains of its historic heart. Still, there are some great museums and parks, and it's fun to see how communist iconography merges with symbols of Moldovan nationalism.

A good place to begin is smack in the city centre, where Chișinău's best-known parks diagonally oppose each other, forming two diamonds at the city's core. The highlights here are the Holy Gates (1841), more commonly known as Chișinău's own **Arc de Triomphe**. To its east sprawls **Parcul Catedralei** (Cathedral Park), dominated by the city's main **Orthodox Cathedral**, with its lovely bell tower (1836). On the northwestern side of the park is a colourful 24-hour **flower market**.

**Government House**, where cabinet meets, is the gargantuan building opposite the Holy Gates. The parliament convenes in **Parliament House** (B-dul Ștefan cel Mare 123) further north. Opposite this is the **Presidential Palace**.

**Grădina Publică Ștefan cel Mare și Sfânt** (Ștefan cel Mare Park) is the city's main strolling, cruising area. The park entrance is guarded by a **statue** (1928) of Ștefan himself; this medieval prince of Moldavia is the greatest symbol of Moldova's strong, brave past.



## Museums

The very worthwhile **National Archaeology & History Museum** (☎ 242 194; muzeum@mac.md; Str 31 August 1989, 121A; admission/photo \$1.15/0.75; ☎ 9am-6pm Tue-Sat) is the granddaddy of Chișinău's museums. There are archaeological artefacts from Orheiul Vechi, including Golden Horde coins, Soviet-era weaponry and a huge WWII diorama on the 1st floor, where you can speak to a man who spent 12 years as a political prisoner at a worker's camp in desolate Vorkuta. A **statue** of Lupoaca Romei (the wolf of Rome) and the abandoned children Romulus and Remus stands in front of the museum. To Moldovans, this is a symbol of their Latin ancestry.

Opposite the **National Library is the National Museum of Fine Arts** (Muzeul de Arte Plastică; ☎ 241 730; Str 31 August 1989, 115; admission \$0.75; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun), which has an interesting collection of contemporary European (mostly Romanian and Moldovan) art, folk art, icons and medieval knick-knacks.

The highlight of the **National Ethnographic & Nature Museum** (☎ 244 002; Str M Kogălniceanu 82; adult/child \$1/0.50; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) is a life-size reconstruction of a mammal skeleton, which was discovered in the Rezine region in 1966. The museum has some pop art, lots of stuffed animals, and exhibits covering the sciences of geology, botany and zoology. An English-language tour costs \$5.

The **Chișinău History Museum** (☎ 241 584; Str Mateevici 60A; admission \$0.40; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) surveys the city's history from its founding onwards, with archaeological exhibits and photographs; it's a treat mainly to visit the old water tower (1892) it's housed in. The museum was mysteriously closed at the time of writing.

Several blocks northeast of the central parks is the **Pushkin Museum** (☎ 292 685; Str Anton Pann 19; admission \$1.15; ☎ 10am-4pm Tue-Sun), housed in a cottage where Russian poet Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837) spent an exiled three years between 1820 and 1823. It was here that he wrote *The Prisoner of the Caucasus* and other classics. An English-language tour costs \$7.

## SLEEPING Budget

Check out **Marisha** (www.marisha.net) for cheap hostels in Chișinău

**Hotel Turist** (☎ 220 637; B-dul Renașterii 13; s \$26-50, d \$25) For a kitsch blast of the Soviet past, try this friendly place: it overlooks a giant Soviet memorial to communist youth and sports a

**AUTHOR'S CHOICE**

**Adresa** (☎ 544 392; www.adresa.md; B-dul Negruzzii 1; apt from \$20; 🕒 24hr) For short- or long-term stays, this reliable agency offers great alternatives to hotels, renting out one- to three-room apartments throughout the city. Although often in large concrete buildings, they are completely private, comfortable and have kitchens. It's also a great way to live as the locals do, using rusty lifts (elevators) or climbing staircases somewhat less than sparkling. Still, they're all safe and clean. Check out the photo album of its options before you agree on one; most aren't right in the city centre but are a short taxi ride away.

snazzy socialist mural on its façade. The low-end singles are in tatty condition.

**Hotel Zarea** (☎ 227 625; Str Anton Pann 4; d 'deluxe' \$30, s/d with shared bathroom \$10/20) This drab high-rise has dour, smoky rooms that are appropriately priced. There's a bar and billiard club. Breakfast isn't included.

**Midrange**

**Motel Nord Vest** (☎ 759 828; Calea Eșilor 30; s/d \$38/51) This pleasant 100-bed motel is 4km north-west of the city centre on the main Chișinău-Cojușna highway. The motel has a tennis court, sauna, restaurant and bar. Maxitaxis 135 and 136, as well as all buses to Cojușna, stop right at the front.

**Hotel National** (☎ 540 305; www.moldovatur.travels.md; B-dul Ștefan cel Mare 4; s/d \$47/60; 🕒 📺 📺) This 17-floor giant, with 319 ho-hum, mildly overpriced rooms, is run by Moldova Tur. It has good services, like a small post office, a medical-care room, shops, bar, restaurant and internet café.

**Hotel Cosmos** (☎ 542 757; cosmos@moldova.net; Piața Negruzzii 2; s/d from \$63/74; 🕒 📺) There's no good reason to stay in this concrete tower with dull, plasticised, overpriced rooms, save for access to the shopping centre downstairs, its full-service desk and central location.

**Top End**

**Flowers** (☎ 277 262; hotelflowers@hotmail.ru; Str Anestide 7; s/d/ste \$120/140/160; 🕒 📺 📺) If your credit limit's in good standing, this is the place for a splurge. Enormous rooms with high ceilings are exquisitely decorated with tasteful restraint,

incorporating paintings by local artists and, of course, a jungle's worth of plants and flowers.

**Jolly Alon** (☎ 232 233; www.jollyalon.com; Str Maria Cibotari 37; s/d/ste \$172/204/249; 🕒) The enticing sofas in reception are enough to make you want to check-in immediately. Though the rooms aren't quite as luxurious, they are very spacious. Be sure to ask for one with a view of the park.

**EATING**

The assortment of great places to eat in Chișinău deserves a separate chapter; these are some of the best, but we encourage you to explore others that look interesting.

**Restaurants**

**Class** (☎ 227 774; Str Vasile Alecsandri 121; mains \$4; 🕒 11am-midnight) One of the country's rare Lebanese restaurants, Class doesn't disappoint, with excellent entrées, falafel and egg-plant dishes. There are waterpipes (\$2.50), live music nightly and exotic dancing on Friday and Saturday.

**Cactus Café** (☎ 504 094; www.cactus.md; Str Armenească 41; mains \$4-8; 🕒 9am-10pm) This is a true winner. The eclectic interior décor (it's the Wild West meets urban bohemian, but with grace and humour) is matched with the city's most creative menu. There are incredible breakfasts, lots of vegetarian meals and wild plates, like turkey with bananas.

**Green Hills Restaurant** (☎ 220 451; Str 31 August 1989, 76; mains \$4-10; 🕒 9am-midnight) What it saved on décor, it's passed on to you with reasonably priced, excellent food. There's a large, extremely pleasant terrace (where it sells a good selection of foreign-language newspapers!) that's perfect for a sit-down meal of a large selection of meat and vegetable dishes.

**Orașul Vechi** (Old City; ☎ 225 063; Str Armenească 24; mains \$4-10; 🕒 noon-midnight) One of your best bets is this stylish folk restaurant, which doesn't overdo the folk theme. Its speciality is the fish.

**Beer House** (☎ 756 127; B-dul Negruzzii 6/2; mains \$4-14; 🕒 11am-11pm) Of all Chișinău's hot dining places, you'll be returning to this brewery-cum-restaurant again and again – most likely for its four delicious home-brewed beers, but also for its excellent menu, which ranges from chicken wings and soups to rabbit and chicken grilled in cognac. Its relaxed ambience and impeccable service add to the charm.

**Symposium** (☎ 211 318; Str 31 August 1989, 78; mains \$5-10; 🕒 11am-midnight) Though not as expensive

as some top-class restaurants in Chișinău, this is regarded as one of the city's top dining experiences in terms of elegance and refinery. The French-style cuisine is succulent, with lamb dishes its speciality.

**Cafés**

When the sun shines, outdoor cafés sprout like mushrooms. There is a popular terrace outside the Opera & Ballet Theatre (p512). There are also some good outside cafés opposite the main entrance to the university on Str A Mateevici and in the courtyard leading to Parcul Valea Morilor.

**Café** (Str Pușkin 22; mains \$1-2; 🕒 11am-11pm) This non-name cafeteria serves surprisingly succulent food priced for the university crowd.

**Green Hills Café** (☎ 220 451; B-dul Ștefan cel Mare 77; mains \$4-10; 🕒 8.30am-10pm Mon-Sat, 10am-10pm Sun) Though the meals are delicious here, most come for a quick fix – great coffee, cocktails or beer, and, of course, to people-watch while sitting on the city's main drag. This is run by the same bunch that operates the Green Hills Restaurant (opposite), featuring the same menu.

**Quick Eats**

For the cheapest of cheap eats, there are some kiosks and small 'cafés' around the bus station and central market, where a dish of mystery meat or meat-filled pastries cost less than \$1. Most go there for beer and vodka shots.

**Andy's Pizza** (☎ 210 210; B-dul Ștefan cel Mare 169; mains \$2-4; 🕒 7.30am-11pm) This popular chain has locations all around Chișinău, but this branch is a slick, almost techno-looking pizzeria, and is packed constantly. The thick and gooey

pizzas, spaghetti and chicken wings keep clients happily purring.

**Self-Catering**

**Central market** (Piața Centrală; 🕒 7am-5pm) Since 1825 this market has been the place where Moldovans haggle over prices for fresh produce. It's well worth a visit for its choice of fresh food and lively ambience. It sprawls out around the central bus station on Str Tighina and Str Armeneasca.

**DRINKING**

**Coliba Studenților** (Str A Mateevici; 🕒 8am-11pm) This student hangout is opposite the university, just above the park. The terrace is a good place to bump into eager English speakers.

**Déja Vu** (☎ 227 693; Str București 67; 🕒 11am-2am) This is a true cocktail bar, where the drinks menu is tantalising and bartenders twirl glasses with aplomb. There's also a small dining hall serving meals, but most come here to lounge about being fabulous with multicoloured cocktails perched in their hands.

**Robin Pub** (Str Alexandru cel Bun 83; mains \$5-11; 🕒 11am-1am) A friendly local-pub feel reigns supreme in this relaxed, tastefully decorated hang-out with an extravagant menu. An ideal place to forget about the world for hours in a down-to-earth, unpretentious atmosphere.

**Dublin Irish Pub** (☎ 245 855; Str Bulgară 27; mains \$2.50-12; 🕒 noon-11pm) The atmosphere is always lively at this relatively expensive but popular Celtic-cum-Moldovan Irish pub. While the bar is the highlight, the pricey restaurant is a temptation as well. A pint of the good stuff runs to about \$5.50.

**MAKE NEW FRIENDS**

What with their friendly, outgoing disposition, you shouldn't have any trouble winning acquaintances in Moldova. However, if you want to be instantly embraced, and possibly kissed, steer the conversation towards music, then casually drop these names: 'Zdob și Zdub' and 'Gândul Măței'.

Zdob și Zdub (zdob-shee-zdoob; www.zdob-si-zdub.com) have been together since 1995, working Moldovan audiences into a lather with their Romanian-folk-meets-the-Red-Hot-Chili-Peppers sound fusion. In 2005 the group achieved a stunning sixth place finish in the Eurovision Song Contest. They are now touring so ferociously that poor Moldova hardly hears from them. Your best chance is to catch a show in Romania.

Gândul Măței (gun-dool muts-eh-ee; www.gm.md) nimbly run the gamut from lounge music to Coldplay-esque ballads to rocking *hard*. They're starting to break out of the Moldovan market, but still gig regularly in Chișinău.

Both bands have a very strong following in Moldova, and locals between the ages of 15 and 35 are guaranteed to become unwound with breathless reverence at the mere mention of their names. Moreover, their shows are nothing short of fabulous and are a highly recommended experience.

## ENTERTAINMENT

Posters listing 'what's on' are displayed on boards outside the city's various theatres.

### Nightclubs

Chișinău rocks in all directions throughout the night, but in some of the larger clubs be prepared to walk through metal detectors and deal with tough-guy posturing from goonish doormen.

**City Club** (Str 31 August 1989, 121; ☎ 10pm-6am) In the alley next to the Licurici Puppet Theatre, this 2nd-floor club is vying for the title of 'Hippest Place in Town'. You be the judge.

**People** (☎ 275 800; B-dul Negruzzi 2/4; ☎ 10pm-4am Thu-Sat) The best disco in town has lots of theme nights and special DJs. The doormen might try to lead male customers into their next-door strip club.

**Star Track** (☎ 496 207; Str Kiev 7; ☎ 10pm-4am Tue-Sun) The centrepiece of the Rîșcani district nightlife, the dark interior sports comfortable sofas and intimate booths where love-struck couples can smooch while keeping one eye open to catch the lacy dance performances in which scantily clad men and women prance around to techno tunes. Under Star Track is the less titillating but equally popular Military Pub.

### Theatre, Opera & Ballet

**Opera & Ballet Theatre** (☎ 244 163; B-dul Ștefan cel Mare 152; ☎ box office 10am-2pm & 5-7pm) This venue is home to the esteemed national opera and ballet company.

**Mihai Eminescu National Theatre** (☎ 221 177; B-dul Ștefan cel Mare 79; ☎ box office 11am-6.30pm) Contemporary Romanian productions can be seen at this theatre, founded in 1933.

**Chekhov Drama Theatre** (Teatrul Dramatic A Cehov; ☎ 223 362; Str Părcălab 75) Plays in Russian are performed at the Chekhov Drama Theatre, situated where Chișinău's choral synagogue was located until WWII.

**National Palace** (Palatul Național; ☎ 213 544; Str Pușkin 21; ☎ box office 11am-5pm) Various cabarets, musicals and local theatre group productions are performed here.

### Circus

**National Centre of Culture and Circus Art** (☎ 496 803; B-dul Renașterii 33; ☎ box office 9am-6pm) Itching for the man on the flying trapeze? Head to this loftily titled circus across the river. Performances are held at 6.30pm Friday, and noon,

3pm and 6.30pm Saturday and Sunday. Bus 27 from B-dul Ștefan cel Mare travels here. Renovations were under way at the time of writing and were expected to be completed by December 2007.

### Sport

Moldovans are big football fans and Chișinău has three stadiums to prove it. The new **Zimbru Stadium** is the city's first European regulation football stadium, located in Botanica. The **Republic Stadium** (Stadionul Republican), south of the city centre, has floodlighting. **Dinamo Stadium** (Stadionul Dinamo) is north of the city centre on Str București. Moldovans like football so much, in fact, there's an American football team called the Chișinău Barbarians, who hold occasional matches, in full gear.

### Live Music

**Organ Hall** (Sala cu Orgă; ☎ 225 404; B-dul Ștefan cel Mare 79) Classical concerts and organ recitals are held at this hall, next to the Mihai Eminescu National Theatre. Performances start at 6pm; tickets are sold at the door.

**Philharmonic Concert Hall** (☎ 224 505; Str Mitropolit Varlaam 78) Moldova's National Philharmonic is based here.

### SHOPPING

**Cricova** (☎ 222 775; B-dul Ștefan cel Mare 126; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Fri, to 6pm Sat, to 4pm Sun) The commercial outlet of the Cricova wine factory. It stocks many types of affordable wines and champagnes (only \$2 to \$5 each), plus the crystal glasses to drink them in.

**Mileștii Mici** (☎ 211 229; www.milestii-mici.md; Str Vasile Alecsandri 137; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Sat) This is the outlet store for the Mileștii Mici wine cellars. They also have outlets on the 1st floor of the Elat Commercial Centre (4km southeast of the city centre) and the airport.

**Galeria L** (☎ 221 975; Str București 64; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Fri, to 5pm Sat) Holds temporary art exhibitions, and sells small works of art and souvenirs crafted by local artists.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

#### Air

Moldova's only airport of significance is in Chișinău, **Chișinău international airport** (KIV; ☎ 526 060), 14.5km southeast of the city centre. Obviously, it has only international flights. For more information on airlines servicing Chișinău, see p523.

### Bus

Chișinău now has three bus stations. The **North Bus Station** (Autogară Nord; ☎ 439 489) is where nearly all domestic and international lines depart, except Transdnestr-bound lines (which depart from the Central Bus Station). Services include 12 daily buses to Strășeni, and regular buses to Bălți, Recea, Edinița and Briceni. There are buses half-hourly between 9.15am and 10pm to Orhei.

There are daily buses to Bucharest (\$14, 12 hours), Odesa (\$7, four to five hours), Moscow (\$35, 30 hours), St Petersburg (\$33, 33 to 36 hours), Kiev (\$14, 11 hours) and Minsk (\$24, 26 hours). You can buy advance tickets here or from a tiny office at the train station. The information booth charges 1 leu (\$0.07) per question.

Domestic and international maxitaxis operate from the **Central Bus Station** (Autogară Centrală; ☎ 542 185; Str Mitropolit Varlaam), behind the central market. Maxitaxis go to Tiraspol and Bendery (\$2, 1½ hours, every 20 to 35 minutes) from 6.30am to 6.30pm, with reduced services until 10pm.

Bus services to/from Comrat, Hâncești and other southern destinations use the less crowded **Southwestern Bus Station** (Autogară Sud-vest; ☎ 723 983; cnr Șoseaua Hâncești & Str Spicului), located approximately 2km from the city centre. Daily local services include five buses to Comrat (\$2.95) in Gagauzia and six to Hâncești. A fleet of private maxitaxis to Iași, Romania (\$10, four hours) also departs from here.

**Eurolines** (☎ 549 813, 271 476; www.eurolines.md), with an office at the train station, has regular routes to Italy, Spain and Germany (usually around \$140 return).

### Train

International routes departing from Chișinău's sparkling new **train station** (☎ 252 737; Aleea Gării) include three daily trains to Moscow (\$46, 28 to 33 hours), three daily trains to Kiev (\$20, 12 hours), one each to St Petersburg (\$45, 40 hours), Bucharest (\$29.50, 14 hours), and Lviv (\$15.50, eight hours), and two weekly services to Minsk (\$35, 25 hours). To get to Budapest, you must change in Bucharest.

Due to the train service interruption through Transdnestr, there were no trains to Bendery, Tiraspol or Odesa at the time of writing.

There are five daily trains to Comrat (\$4, three hours) and four to Ungheni (\$4, three hours).

### GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

Bus 65 departs half-hourly between 5am and 10pm from the Central Bus Station to the airport (\$0.15).

Maxitaxi 65 departs every 20 minutes from Str Ismail, near the corner of B-dul Ștefan cel Mare, for the airport and return (\$0.25).

### Bus & Trolleybus

Bus 45 and maxitaxi 45a run from the Central Bus Station to the Southwestern Bus Station. Bus 1 goes from the train station to B-dul Ștefan cel Mare.

Trolleybuses 1, 4, 5, 8, 18 and 22 go to the train station from the city centre. Buses 2, 10 and 16 go to the Southwestern Bus Station. Maxitaxis 176 and 191 go to the North Bus Station from the city centre. Tickets costing \$0.15 for buses and \$0.10 for trolleybuses are sold at kiosks or direct from the driver.

Most bus routes in town and to many outlying villages are served by nippy maxitaxis (\$0.25 per trip, pay the driver). Route numbers, displayed on the front and side windows, are followed by the letter 'a' or 't'. Those with the letter 'a' follow the same route as the bus of the same number. Those with a letter 't' follow the trolleybus routes. Maxitaxis run regularly between 6am and midnight.

### Car & Motorcycle

Hire cars are available from **Loran Car Rental** (☎ 243 710; www.turism.md/loran; Str A Mateevici 79) from €34 per day (Dacia Logan), including insurance. All payments must be made in cash (euros) and a deposit is required.

### Taxi

Taxi-stand drivers often try to rip you off. A **taxi** (☎ 746 565/705/706/707) is cheaper; the official per-kilometre rate is \$0.25.

### AROUND CHIȘINĂU Cricova

The grand duke of Moldovan wineries is **Cricova** (☎ 22-277 378; www.cricova.md; Str Ungureanu 1; ☎ 8am-4pm) – and it knows it.

Its underground wine kingdom, 15km north of Chișinău in the village of Cricova, is one of Europe's biggest. It boasts 120km of

labyrinthine roadways, 60 of which are used for wine storage. These avenues are lined wall-to-wall with bottles. Up to 100m underground, the 'cellars' are kept at a temperature of between 12°C and 14°C, with humidity at 96% to 98%, to best protect the 1.25 million bottles of rare and collectable wine, plus the 30 million litres of wine the factory produces annually (during Soviet times, the output was two to three times this amount!). Tunnels have existed here since the 15th century, when limestone was dug out to help build Chișinău. They were converted into an underground wine emporium in the 1950s.

You must have private transport and advance reservations to get into Cricova. It's most easily done through travel agencies in Chișinău but you can call yourself and book a time. Your two-hour tour (\$62 per person) includes trips down streets with names like Str Cabernet, Str Pinot etc, wine tasting, a light meal and a few 'complimentary' bottles. Though the tour is admittedly worthwhile, Cricova's starch formality and astonishing aversion to customer contact puts off many visitors.

Once you've finished at Cricova, head to the much-awarded **Acorex vineyard** ([www.acorex.net](http://www.acorex.net); ☎ 9am-6pm), just down the hill. There's no tour, but its shop sells limited lines not available in most stores or outside Moldova.

## Cojușna

Cricova's spunky, down-to-earth competitors operate 12km northwest of Chișinău in the village of Cojușna. This is a moribund place in comparison with Cricova, but the tours are first rate and very friendly.

**Cojușna** (☎ 22-744 820, 715 329; Str Lomtatze 4; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri), founded in 1908, is geared for tourists and is therefore very flexible – staff will open the wine cellars and wine-tasting rooms for you at any hour of any day. The cellars comprise six 'alleys', each 100m long. The wine tasting comes with a full meal, served in an impressive and seductively cosy hall decorated with wooden furniture carved by a young local and his father.

It is easy to organise your own tour of Cojușna – you needn't pay exorbitant fees at Chișinău travel agencies – although Cojușna will need advance warning if you require a tour in English (two- to three-hour tour per person \$17). You can buy wines (\$2 to \$12 per bottle) from the Cojușna shop in the complex.

Bus 2 runs every 15 minutes from Str Vasile Alecsandri in Chișinău towards Cricova. Catch one of the frequent maxitaxis leaving from Calea Eșilor (take trolleybus 1, 5 or 11 up Ștefan cel Mare to the Ion Creangă university stop), get off at the Cojușna stop. Ignore the turning on the left marked 'Cojușna' and walk or hitch the remaining 2km along the main road to the vineyard entrance, marked by a tall, totem pole-style pillar.

## Orheiul Vechi

Ten kilometres southeast of Orhei lies Orheiul Vechi ('Old Orhei', marked on maps as the village of Trebujeni), arguably Moldova's most fantastic sight. It's certainly among its most haunting places.

The **Orheiul Vechi Monastery Complex** (Complexul Muzeistic Orheiul Vechi; ☎ 235-34 242; admission \$1.15; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun), carved into a massive limestone cliff in this wild, rocky, remote spot, draws visitors from around the globe.

The **Cave Monastery** (Mănăstire în Peșteră), inside a cliff overlooking the gently meandering Răut River, was dug by Orthodox monks in the 13th century. It remained inhabited until the 18th century, and in 1996 a handful of monks returned to this secluded place of worship and are slowly restoring it. You can enter the cave via an entrance on the cliff's plateau.

Ștefan cel Mare built a fortress here in the 14th century, but it was later destroyed by Tartars. In the 18th century the cave-church was taken over by villagers from neighbouring Butuceni. In 1905 they built a church above ground dedicated to the Ascension of St Mary. The church was shut down by the Soviets in 1944 and remained abandoned throughout the communist regime. Services resumed in 1996, though it still looks abandoned. Archaeologists have uncovered remnants of a defence wall surrounding the monastery complex from the 15th century.

On the main road to the complex you'll find the headquarters where you purchase your entrance tickets, and where you can also arrange guides and get general information. It's forbidden to wear shorts and women must cover their heads while inside the monastery.

## SLEEPING

**Orheiul Vechi Monastery Headquarters** (☎ 235-56 912; d \$23) has five pleasant rooms and a small restaurant. The rooms facing the monastery

have spine-tingling views. Spending the night here is highly recommended.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

From Chișinău daily buses depart every half-hour for Orhei (\$1.50). Unfortunately, there's only a single daily bus from Orhei to Trebujeni at 6am (ask to be dropped off by the signposted entrance to the complex). Better yet, alight from the Orhei-bound bus at the Ivancea turn-off and hire to a taxi to Orheiul Vechi, striking a deal for return service, including a two-hour wait, for around \$12, or one-way for about \$6. There is a daily afternoon bus (3pm) to Orhei from Orheiul Vechi.

## Soroca

pop 38,492

Soroca is the Roma 'capital' of Moldova, but people come here to see the outstanding **Soroca fortress** (☎ 230-24 873; <http://soroca-fortress.nflame.net>; admission free; ☎ 9am-6pm Wed-Sun May-Oct, low season by appointment). Part of a medieval chain of military fortresses built by Moldavian princes between the 14th and 16th centuries to defend Moldavia's boundaries, the fortress was founded by Ștefan cel Mare and rebuilt by his son, Petru Rareș, in 1543-45.

The fortress is administered by the **Soroca Museum of History and Ethnography** (☎ 230-22 264; Str Independentei 68; admission \$0.10; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun, low season by appointment). This well-designed museum is a real treat; its 25,000 exhibits cover archaeological finds, weapons and ethnographic displays.

The simple, but clean and bright rooms at the **Nistru Hotel** (☎ 230-23 783; Str Mihail Malmut 20; d \$19.50) are your best bet in Soroca. The hotel

## WORTH A TRIP

**Satul Moldovenesc** (☎ 248-36 136; <http://moldovacc.md/satmoldovenesc>; Hârtopul Mare; 1-room house \$15-45, 2-room house \$52) Only 30km northeast of Chișinău (head towards Dubăsari then north to Hârtopul Mare and follow the signs), this full-service complex in the middle of nature offers a very active programme of rest and relaxation! You can rent an island for \$12 and enjoy a picnic there, have a sauna, go horse riding (children can be 'accompanied on their ride of the donkey'), and go swimming or fishing in one of the three lakes nearby.

is hidden down an improbable side street one block east of the red-roofed Soroca city council building, which faces the park.

There are 12 daily buses to Soroca from Chișinău's North Bus Station.

# TRANSDNIESTR

pop 555,500

The self-declared republic of Transdnestr (Pridnestrovskaya Moldavskaya Respublika, or PMR in Russian) is one of the world's last surviving bastions of communism. At least that's what most people say.

Transdnestr incorporates a narrow strip of land covering only 3567 sq km on the eastern bank of the Nistru River. It was the scene of a bloody civil war in the early 1990s when the area declared independence from Moldova. Travellers will be stunned by a region that is very much an independent state in all but name. It has its own currency, police force, army and borders, which are controlled by Transdnestrian border guards. Western travellers are grudgingly allowed to travel in the region. Russian is the predominant language. Transdnestrians boycott the Moldovan independence day and celebrate their own independence day on 2 September.

See **Images of Transdnestr** (<http://geo.ya.com/travel/images/transdnestr.html>) for some excellent photos of the region, and [www.president-pmr.org](http://www.president-pmr.org) for the 'official' account of Transdnestr.

## History

Igor Smirnov was elected president of Transdnestr in 1991 following the region's declaration of independence four months prior. Transdnestr insists it's an independent country and a sovereign state within Moldova. Most of the time it pushes for the creation of a Moldovan federation, with proportionate representation between Moldova, Transdnestr and Gagauzia.

Neither Smirnov's presidency nor the Transdnestrian parliament is recognised by the Moldovan – or any other – government. The Russian 14th army, headquartered in Tiraspol since 1956, covertly supplied Transdnestrian rebels with weapons during the civil war. The continued presence of the 5000-strong Russian 'operational group' in Transdnestr today is seen by local Russian speakers as a guarantee of their security.



## TREAD LIGHTLY IN TRANSDNIESTR

At the time of writing rising political and economic turmoil was making a day trip into Transdnestr more hair-raising than it's been in years. The happy-go-lucky days of benign Kafka-esque moments at the border and a time-travel stroll through Tiraspol have been replaced by social ostracism of foreigners and the creepy feeling of being watched at all times, as renewed paranoia deepens. There have been accounts of people being reported and then detained by police for simply speaking English or giving blankets to the poor in Tiraspol. Picture taking, no matter how innocent, is becoming decidedly uncool – I was barred entrance to a café I needed to review for this book after the owner spied me taking a quick photo down the street. Frosty merchants rush through transactions without a word.

The source of the trouble is a very complex political predicament, the latest chapter in a four-way theatre of one-upmanship between the Ukraine, Russia, Moldova and Transdnestr. Barring a sudden flash of diplomatic magic, the situation is expected to get far worse before it gets better. All train service in and out of Transdnestr had been suspended at the time of writing.

The upshot is that the border can still be amusingly memorable; bobbing and weaving around invented infractions and creative interpretations of the law. Shaky political climate notwithstanding, border guards still have a vested financial interest (bribes) in letting you through – budget around US\$20 to \$30 for this excitement, coming and going, depending on how dodgy you look or how big your camera bag is.

Entry permits are still (officially) \$1 to \$5 depending on your nationality, available at the border no matter what the guys on duty playfully tell you. If you stay under 24 hours, you needn't register with the authorities, and if you enter with a Moldovan national, you can be listed on their entry permit (as several names can be inscribed on one) for a few pennies.

If you're staying for over 24 hours, you'll need to register with the **OVIR** (☎ 533-79 083; ul Kotovskogo No 2A; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri). Enter through the rusting, prison-like gate and inquire at the hidden white building with the red roof. Outside of the OVIR business hours you must go to the **Tiraspol Militia Office** (formerly the Tiraspol Militia Passport Office; ☎ 533-34 169; Roza Luxemburg 66; ☎ 24hr) where registration is possible, but you'll probably be asked to check in at the OVIR office the following working day anyway. The registration fee is about \$0.60. Some hotels won't even talk room availability with you until you've registered, no matter how long you're staying. Some top-end hotels will register you automatically.

As always, check the current political situation before heading into erratic territory.

The Ministry of State Security (MGB), a modern-day KGB, has sweeping powers, and has sponsored the creation of a youth wing, called the Young Guard, for 16- to 23-year-olds.

Alongside a number of agreements between Moldova and Transdnestr since 1991, there have been countless moves by both sides designed to antagonise or punish the other. In 2003 alone Smirnov, reacting to one of his demands being refused by Moldova, slapped exorbitant tariffs on all Moldovan imports, instantly halting trade over the 'border' and making life more difficult for ordinary people on both sides. In September 2003 Smirnov even severed phone connections between the two for a few weeks, so that calls could not be made between the regions.

While Smirnov is becoming increasingly mistrusted by his 'electorate', a large sub-

section of locals still refuse to criticise their government. Political and economic attitudes aside, popular opinion still strongly supports independence from Moldova.

See the boxed text (above) for current information on Transdnestr's political and economic climate. On 6 July 2006, a bomb blast on a local bus in Tiraspol killed eight people. Transdnestr politicians were quick to blame 'Moldovan provocateurs'. Popular opinion in Moldova is that a would-be arms dealer probably lost control of his merchandise.

## Language

The official state languages in Transdnestr are Russian, Moldovan and Ukrainian. Students in schools and universities are taught in Russian, and the local government and most official institutions operate almost solely in

Russian. All street signs are written in Russian, Moldovan and sometimes Ukrainian.

## Money

The only legal tender is the Transdnestr rouble (TR). Officially introduced in 1994, it quickly dissolved into an oblivion of zeros. To keep up with inflation, monetary reforms introduced in January 2001 slashed six zeros from the currency, with a new TR1 banknote worth one million roubles in old money. Some taxi drivers, shopkeepers and market traders will accept payment in US dollars – or even Moldovan lei or Ukrainian hryvnia, but generally you'll need to get your hands on some roubles (US\$1 = TR8.30).

Spend all your roubles before you leave, as no one honours or exchanges this currency outside Transdnestr, though you can probably find takers at the bus station in Chişinău if you somehow get stuck with a large amount.

## Post

Transdnestr stamps featuring local hero General Suvorov can only be used for letters sent within the Transdnestr republic and

are not recognised anywhere else. For letters to Moldova, Romania and the West, you have to use Moldovan stamps (available here, but less conveniently than in Moldova).

## Media

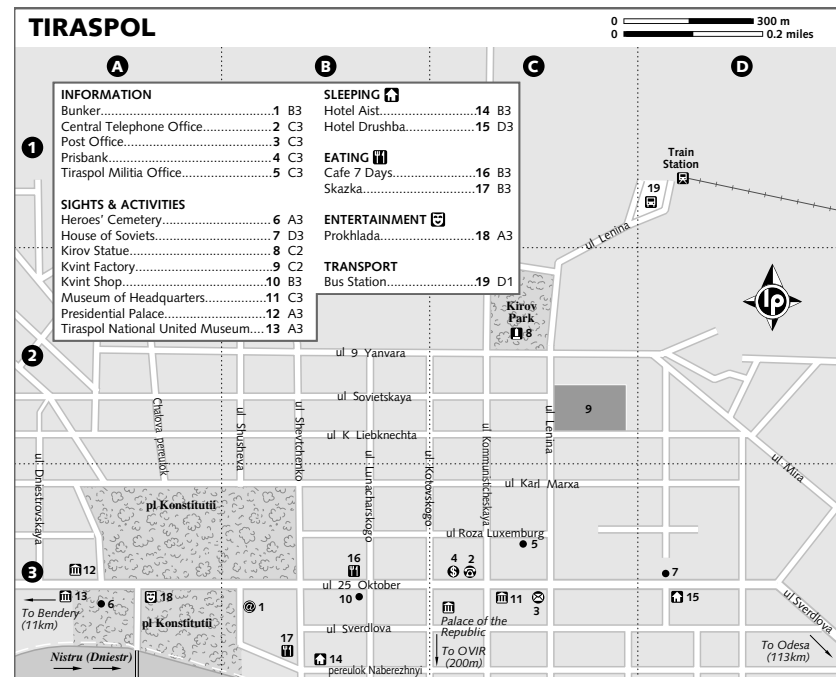
The predominantly Russian Transdnestr TV is broadcast in the republic between 6am and midnight. Transdnestr Radio is on air during the same hours. Bendery has a local TV channel that airs 24 hours.

The two local newspapers are in Russian. The *Transdnestr* is a purely nationalist affair advocating the virtues of an independent state; *N Pravda* is marginally more liberal.

## TIRASPOL

☎ 533 / pop 183,678

Tiraspol (from the Greek, meaning 'town on the Nistru'), 70km east of Chişinău, is the second-largest city in Moldova, sorry, make that the largest city and capital of Transdnestr! As Soviet-licious as they come and still a candidate for World's Largest Open-Air Museum; nevertheless MTV and Red Bull are making their presence felt. With



questionable business dealings from the tiny elite rife, the have/have-not divide is glaring. The city was founded in 1792 following Russian domination of the region. Its inhabitants are predominantly Russian (41%), with ethnic Ukrainians comprising 32% and a much harassed ethnic Moldovan minority filling 17%.

## Orientation & Information

The train and bus stations are next to each other at the end of ul Lenina. Exit the train station and walk down ul Lenina, past Kirov Park, to ul 25 Oktober (the main street). Ul 25 Oktober, Tiraspol's backbone, is also its commercial strip, with most of the shops and restaurants.

**Bunker** (pereulok Naberezhnyi 1; per hr \$0.40; ☎ 9am-11pm) A modern internet club.

**Central telephone office** (cnr ul 25 Oktober & ul Kommunisticheskaya; ☎ 7am-8.45pm) You can buy phonecards (\$2.40 or \$8) to use in the modern pay telephones.

**Post office** (ul Lenina 17; ☎ 7.30am-7pm Mon-Fri) Won't be of much use to you unless you want to send postcards to all your friends in Transdnestr (but if you do, be sure to bring your own postcards).

**Prisbank** (ul 25 Oktober; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Sat) Change money at this bank, next door to the central telephone office.

## Sights

At the western end of ul 25 Oktober stands a Soviet armoured tank, from which the Transdnestr flag flies. Behind is the **Heroes' Cemetery** with its Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, flanked by an eternal flame in memory of those who died on 3 March 1992 during the first outbreak of fighting.

The **Tiraspol National United Museum** (ul 25 Oktober 42; admission \$0.30; ☎ 9am-5pm Sun-Fri) is the closest the city has to a local history museum, with an exhibit focusing on poet Nikolai Dimitriovich Zelinskogo, who founded the first Soviet school of chemistry. Opposite is the **Presidential Palace**, from which Igor Smirnov rules his mini-empire.

The **House of Soviets** (Dom Sovetovul; ul 25 Oktober), towering over the eastern end of ul 25 Oktober, has Lenin's angry-looking bust peering out from its prime location. Inside is a **memorial** to those who died in the 1992 conflict. Close by is the military-themed **Museum of Headquarters** (ul Kommunisticheskaya 34; admission \$0.30; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat).

The **Kvint factory** (☎ 37 333; http://kvint.biz; ul Lenina 38) is one of Transdnestr's pride and joys – since 1897 it's been making some of Moldova's finest brandies. Buy some of its products either near the front entrance of the plant or at its **town centre store** (ul 25 Oktober 84; ☎ 24hr).

Further north along ul Lenina, towards the bus and train stations, is **Kirov park**, with a **statue** of the Leningrad boss who was assassinated in 1934, conveniently sparking mass repressions throughout the USSR.

## Sleeping & Eating

You must register at the **OVIR** (ul Kotovskogo No 2A; ☎ Mon-Fri) if staying more than 24 hours (see the boxed text, p516).

**Hotel Drushba** (☎ 34 266; ul 25 Oktober 116; r \$20-40) There are several dozen categories of rooms on offer at this massive place that has hopefully seen better days. Some have hot water, TV, fridge, larger beds, private bathroom or shower.

**Hotel Aist** (☎ 37 174; pereulok Naberezhnyi 3; d \$25-40) The grass in the cement cracks outside gives it a derelict feel, but this is a decent hotel. The more expensive rooms have luxuries, such as hot water, private toilet and TV.

**Cafe 7 Days** (☎ 32 311; ul 25 Oktober 77; mains \$0.35-1.50; ☎ 9am-11pm) A great selection of tasty Russian fast food, such as blini (stuffed pancakes), and Western imports, including pizza, as well as salads, are served at this modern, pleasant café.

**Skazka** (pereulok Naberezhnyi 1; mains \$2-3.50; ☎ 10am-8pm) The office building-calibre green and glass exterior hides a 'fairytale' place with half-hearted castle décor geared towards children and a large Moldovan menu. The summer terrace faces the river.

## Entertainment

**Prokhlada** (☎ 34 642; ul 25 Oktober 50; mains \$2-4; ☎ 4pm-6am) This cavernous, sombre but friendly space is the best place in town for a meal, lazy drink or hot dancing session.

## Getting There & Away

You can only pay for tickets to other destinations in Transdnestr with the local currency, but will be allowed to pay in Moldovan lei/Ukrainian hryvnia for tickets to Moldova/Ukraine. You can usually pay the driver directly.

From Tiraspol there are five daily buses to Bălți (\$7, six hours), 13 daily to Odesa (\$5, three hours), once daily to Kyiv (\$10, 14

hours) and once weekly to Berlin. Buses go to Chişinău nearly every half-hour from 5.50am to 8.50am, and maxitaxis run regularly from 6.30am to 6.10pm.

Trolleybus 19 (\$0.10) and quicker maxitaxis 19 and 20 (\$0.15) cross the bridge over the Dniestr to Bendery.

## TRAIN

All train service in and out of Transdnestr had been suspended at the time of writing. However, when in operation, tickets for same-day departures are sold in the main train station ticket hall. Advance tickets (24 hours or more before departure) are sold in the ticket office on the 2nd floor.

Most eastbound trains from Chişinău to Ukraine and Russia stop in Tiraspol. Seven daily trains go to Chişinău (\$0.90), three daily to Odesa (\$2), two daily to Moscow and Minsk, and once daily to St Petersburg.

## BENDERY

☎ 552 / pop 123,038

Bendery (sometimes called Bender, and previously known as Tighina), on the western banks of the Dniestr River, has made something of a miraculous recovery in recent years. Scars from the bloodshed in the early 1990s have noticeably healed. The city centre in particular is a breezy place, vastly more inviting than Tiraspol.

During the 16th century Moldavian prince Ştefan cel Mare built a large defensive fortress here on the ruins of a fortified Roman

camp. In 1538 the Ottoman sultan, Suleiman the Magnificent, conquered the fortress and transformed it into a Turkish *raia* (colony), renaming the city Bendery, meaning 'belonging to the Turks'. During the 18th century Bendery was seized from the Turks by Russian troops who then massacred Turkish Muslims in the city. In 1812 Bendery fell permanently into Russian hands. Russian peacekeeping forces remain here to this day.

Bendery was hardest hit by the 1992 military conflict with Moldova, both in terms of destruction and loss of life. Though extensive repairs have been made, finding bullet-pocked buildings isn't uncommon.

## Information

**Central department store** (cnr ul Lenina & ul Kalinina; per hr \$0.50) Has two internet clubs on the top floor.

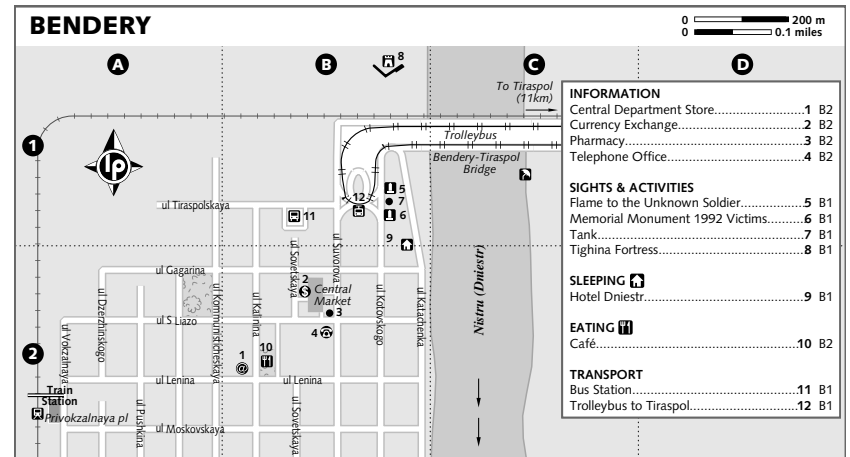
**Currency exchange** (ul Sovetskaya) Change money here; located next to the Central Market.

**Pharmacy** (cnr ul Suvorova & ul S Liazo; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat, to 4pm Sun)

**Telephone office** (cnr ul S Liazo & ul Suvorova; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, to 4pm Sat) International telephone calls can be booked from here.

## Sights

Bendery's main sight is, paradoxically, impossible to see. The great Turkish **Tighina fortress**, built in the 1530s to replace a 12th-century fortress built by the Genovese, is now being used by the Transdnestr military as a training ground and is strictly off-limits. The best view of it is from the bridge



going towards Tiraspol. At the entrance to the city, close to the famous **Bendery–Tiraspol bridge**, is a **memorial park** dedicated to local 1992 war victims. An eternal flame burns in front of an armoured **tank**, from which flies the Transdnestr flag. Haunting **memorials** to those shot dead during the civil war are evident throughout many of the main streets in the city centre.

### Sleeping & Eating

A three-tier pricing system is intact here, with prices for locals; Moldovans, Ukrainians and Belarusians; and all other foreigners.

**Hotel Dniestr** (☎ 29 478; ul Katchenka 10; r \$20) Pricier doubles have hot water, TV and fridge. There's an adjacent restaurant and terrace café.

**Café** (cnr ul Kalinina & ul Lenina; mains \$1-2; ☎ 9am-11pm) Located in the park across from the department store, this small restaurant has a popular, pleasant terrace, where grilled-meat dishes are the favourite. It also doubles as a hang-out and bar.

### Getting There & Around

All train service in and out of Transdnestr had been suspended at the time of writing. However, when in operation, there are at least 15 daily trains to Chişinău, including ones coming from Moscow and Odesa. The train station is located at Privokzalnaya pl.

There are buses and maxitaxis every half-hour or so to Chişinău (\$2, 1" hours), and two daily to Comrat.

Trolleybus 19 for Tiraspol (\$0.10) departs from the bus stop next to the main roundabout at the entrance to Bendery; maxitaxis also regularly make the 20-minute trip (\$0.15). There are two daily buses to Odesa (\$5, three hours) and one to Kiev (\$10, 14 hours).

Local maxitaxis (70 kopeks) leave from the currency exchange near the central market.

## GAGAUZIA

pop 171,500

Subordinate to Moldova constitutionally and for foreign relations and defence, Gagauzia (Gagauz Yeri) is an autonomous region covering 1832 sq km of noncontiguous land in southern Moldova. The region eventually found its niche within Moldova through

judicious mediation, but there's still simmering unrest between the two entities over language and economic issues.

Gagauzia is comprised of three towns and 27 villages dotted throughout three broken-up districts.

The Gagauz are a Turkic-speaking, Christian ethnic minority whose Muslim antecedents fled the Russo-Turkish wars in the 18th century. They were allowed to settle in the region in exchange for their conversion to Christianity. Their language is a Turkish dialect, with its vocabulary influenced by Russian Orthodoxy as opposed to the Islamic influences inherent in Turkish. Gagauz look to Turkey for cultural inspiration and heritage.

The republic has its own flag (blue, white and red stripes with three white stars in the upper left corner), its own police force, its own newspapers (*Sabaa Ildyzy*, *Gagauz Vesti* and *Guneshhik*), and its own university. The official languages here are Gagauzi, Moldovan and Russian, though Russian is used almost everywhere, including the university. Gagauz autonomy was officially recognised by the Moldovan government on 23 December 1994; that day is now celebrated annually as Independence Day. Unlike the more militant separatists in Transdnestr, the Gagauz forfeited independence for large-scale autonomy. Theirs is a predominantly agricultural region with little industry to sustain an independent economy.

### COMRAT

☎ 298 / pop 25,197

Gagauzia's capital, 92km south of Chişinău, is no more than a dusty town with little of tourist interest outside of being an intriguing cultural and provincial oddity. In 1990 Comrat was the scene of clashes between Gagauz nationalists and Moldovan armed forces, pre-empted by calls from local leaders for the Moldovan government to hold a referendum on the issue of Gagauz sovereignty. Local protesters were joined by Transdnestr militia forces, who are always game for a bit of clashing.

Comrat is home to the world's only Gagauz university (taught in Russian). Most street signs are in Russian; some older ones are in Gagauzi but in the Cyrillic script. Since 1989, Gagauzi, alongside Moldovan, has used the Latin alphabet.

From the bus station, walk south along the main street, Str Pobedy, past the market to pl Pobedy (Victory Sq). St John's Church stands on the western side of the square, behind which lies the central park. Pr Lenina runs parallel to Str Pobedy, west of the park.

Change money at the **Moldovan Agrobank** (Str Pobedy 52; ☎ 8am-2pm Mon-Fri). A small currency exchange is inside the entrance to the market. You can make international calls at the **post office** (Str Pobedy 55; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, to 5pm Sat). Surf the web at **IATP** (☎ 25 875; Str Lenina 160; per hr \$0.40; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri).

The regional **başkani** (assembly) is on pr Lenina. The Gagauzi and Moldovan flags fly from the roof.

Next to the assembly is the **Gagauz Culture House**, in front of which stands a statue of Lenin. West of pr Lenina at Str Galatsăna 17 is the **Gagauz University** (Komrat Devlet Üniversitesi), founded in 1990. Four faculties (national culture, agronomy, economics and law) serve 1500 students, who learn in Russian and Gagauz. The main foreign languages taught are Romanian, English and Turkish.

### Getting There & Away

There are five daily return buses from Chişinău to Comrat (\$3.90). From Comrat there are two buses daily via Bendery to Tiraspol, and one only as far as Bendery.

## MOLDOVA DIRECTORY

### ACCOMMODATION

Chişinău has a good range of hotels. Most towns have small hotels that have survived from communist days. Basic singles or doubles with a shared bathroom cost \$30 to \$50 per room in Chişinău, but outside the capitals singles will usually be \$20 to \$30 and doubles \$25 to \$40. Unless noted otherwise, all accommodation options include breakfast in the price.

You will be asked to briefly present your passport upon registration; they may keep it for several hours in order to register it.

Camping grounds (*popas turistic*) are practically nonexistent in Moldova. The good news is that wild camping is allowed anywhere unless otherwise prohibited.

The idea of homestays in Moldova is in its infancy. Check **Marisha** (www.marisha.net) for a growing list of options. There are no hostels in Moldova.

### BUSINESS HOURS

Banks can be expected to open from 9am to 3pm, with many closing for an hour around noon. Most shops are open from 9am or 10am to 6pm or 7pm, some closing on Sunday. Post offices are open from 8am to 7pm Monday to Friday, until 4pm Saturday and closed Sunday. Museums are usually open from 11am to 5pm, with most closing on Monday. Restaurants can be expected to stay open until at least 11pm nightly. Theatrical performances and concerts usually begin at 7pm.

### CUSTOMS

Moldova's customs procedures have loosened significantly and generally there should be little problem bringing whatever you like in and out of the country. See **Welcome to Moldova!** (www.turism.md) for the latest information on customs regulations.

There is no limit to the amount of foreign currency you can bring in or out of the country, but the amount must be declared upon entering on a customs declaration form you'll be given, and then again upon exiting the country; purportedly, this is to ensure you do not leave with more money than you arrived with. You might be asked to prove that you have at least \$30 for each day of your stay.

You're allowed to cross the border either way with 1L of alcohol, 2L of beer and up to 200 cigarettes, though these rules are not strictly enforced. Visit the **customs office** (☎ 22-569 460; Str Columna 65) in Chişinău for official permission to take antiques or large art pieces out of the country.

### EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

#### Moldovan Embassies & Consulates

Moldova has embassies and consulates worldwide.

**France** (☎ 01 40 67 11 20; www.ambassade-moldavie.com; 1 rue Sfax, 75116 Paris)

**Germany** (☎ 069-52 78 08; www.konsulat-moldova.de; Adelheidstrasse 8, 60433 Frankfurt)

**Romania** Embassy (☎ 01-230 0474; ambasadamoldova@zappmobile.ro; Aleea Alexandru 40, 011834 Bucharest)

Consulate (☎ 01-410 9827; Str C Constantinescu 47, sec 1, 71326 Bucharest)

**Russia** (☎ 495-924 5353; www.moldembassy.ru; 18 Kuznetsky most, 103031 Moscow)

**Turkey** (☎ 312-446 5527; ambmold@superonline.com; Kaptanpaşa Sok 49, 06700 Ankara)

**Ukraine** (☎ 044-280 7722; kiev@mfa.md; vul Sichnevogo Povstannya 6, 01010 Kyiv)

**USA** (☎ 202-667 1130; embassyofmoldova@mcchisppeed.net; 2101 S St NW, Washington, DC 20008)

### Embassies & Consulates in Moldova

Following is a list of countries with embassies or consulates in Chişinău:

**France** (☎ 22-228 204; www.ambafrance.md; Str 31 August 1989, 101A)

**Germany** (☎ 22-234 607; ambasada-germana@riscom.md; Str Maria Cibotari 35)

**Romania** Embassy (☎ 22-228 126; ambrom@moldnet.md; Str Bucureşti 66/1) Consulate (☎ 22-237 622; Str Vlaicu Pircalab 39)

**Russia** (☎ 22-234 941; www.moldova.mid.ru; B-dul Ştefan cel Mare 153)

**Turkey** (☎ 22-509 100; turkembassy@arax.md; Str V Cupcea 60)

**UK** (☎ 22-225 902; www.britishembassy.md; Str Nicolae Iorga 18)

**Ukraine** (☎ 22-582 124; www.mfa.gov.ua, in Ukrainian; Str V Lupu 17)

**USA** (☎ 22-233 772; http://moldova.usembassy.gov; Str A Mateevici 103A)

### FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Moldova is not a festival-heavy country, perhaps as its citizens find any excuse to party anytime throughout the year. Their major festival is the **Wine Festival** on the second Sunday in October (and for several wine-drenched days preceding and following it). The government has even instituted a visa-free regime for this period. Chişinău's **City Day** is 14 October.

### GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELLERS

Before Moldova repealed its Soviet antigay law in 1995, it was one of only four European countries to still criminalise homosexuality. Now Moldova has among the most progressively liberal laws on the continent: homosexual activity is legal for both sexes at 14, the same age as for heterosexual sex. In 2003 the government adopted a National Human Rights Plan which would see the prohibition of discrimination against homosexuals enshrined in law. Gay Pride parades happen in Chişinău yearly in late April/early May.

However, homosexuality is still a hushed topic, and politicians still get away with antigay rhetoric. While most people take a laissez-faire attitude towards the notion of homosexuality, being visibly out is likely to

attract unwanted attention. For more information, visit [www.gay.md](http://www.gay.md).

### HOLIDAYS

The following national holidays are celebrated in Moldova.

**New Year's Day** 1 January

**Orthodox Christmas** 7 January

**International Women's Day** 8 March

**Orthodox Easter** March/April/May

**Victory (1945) Day** 9 May

**Independence Day** 27 August

**National Language Day** 31 August

Transdnestrans boycott the Moldovan Independence Day; they celebrate their own Independence Day on 2 September.

### INTERNET RESOURCES

Get your everyday Moldova news and information at **Moldova Azi** ([www.azi.md](http://www.azi.md)).

### MONEY

Moldovan lei come in denominations of 1, 5, 10, 20, 50, 100, 200 and 500 lei. There are coins for 1, 5, 10, 25 and 50 bani (there are 100 bani in a leu).

Note that the breakaway Transdnestrans republic has its own currency, which is useless anywhere else in the world (see p517).

It's easy to find ATMs in Chişinău, but not in other towns in Moldova. Eximbank will cash travellers cheques and give cash advances on major credit cards. It's almost impossible to use travellers cheques in shops or restaurants. While credit cards won't get you anywhere in rural areas, they are widely accepted in larger department stores, hotels and most restaurants in cities and towns. In Moldova, prices are often quoted in US dollars, and so that's what we've quoted for costs in this chapter.

### POST

From Moldova, it costs \$0.35 to send a postcard or letter under 20g to Western Europe, Australia and the USA.

**DHL** ([www.dhl.com](http://www.dhl.com)) is the most popular international courier service in the region. It has offices in Chişinău and Tiraspol. See its website for details.

### TELEPHONE

Moldtelecom, the wonderfully named, state-run telephone company, sells pay cards (\$2.25 or \$3) that can be used to dial any number

### EMERGENCY SERVICES

- Ambulance ☎ 903
- Fire ☎ 901
- Police ☎ 902

within Moldova only. These are sold at any telephone centre in the country. To make an international call using a prepaid card, you need to use a private company like Treitelemcom. Its cards cost \$3.75 to \$35 and are available at any Moldpressa newspaper stand (and can be used to make local calls, too).

Mobile phone service in Moldova is provided by Chişinău-based Moldcell (run by Moldtelecom) and **Voxtel** (☎ 22-575 757; [www.voxtel.md](http://www.voxtel.md); Str Alba Iulia 75, Chişinău).

### VISAS

From 1 January 2007 citizens of EU member states, USA, Canada and Japan will no longer need visas! Everyone else is still on the hook for visas. Additionally, Australians, New Zealanders and South Africans all require an invitation from a company, organisation or individual. When acquiring a visa in advance, payments to the consulates are usually in the form of a bank deposit at a specified bank.

Visas can be easily acquired on arrival at Chişinău airport (single/double entry \$60/75) or, if arriving by bus or car from Romania, at three border points: Sculeni (north of Iaşi); Leuşeni (main Bucharest-Chişinău border); and Cahul. Visas are not issued at any other border crossings, nor when entering by train. Citizens of countries requiring an invitation must present the original document (copies/faxes not accepted) at the border if buying a visa there.

In 2002 Moldova generously started instituting a visa-free regime for all foreigners wishing to partake in its Wine Festival (second Sunday in October). These visa-free visits cannot exceed 10 days.

An HIV/AIDS test is required for foreigners intending to stay in Moldova longer than three months. Certificates proving HIV-negative status have to be in Russian and English.

See **Welcome to Moldova!** ([www.turism.md](http://www.turism.md)) and follow the links to check for the latest changes in the visa regime.

### Costs & Registration

The price of a single-/double-entry tourist visa valid for one month is \$60/75. Single-/double-entry transit visas valid for 72 hours are \$30/60. Special rates apply for tourist groups of more than 10 persons, and for children, the handicapped and the elderly.

Visas can be processed within a day at the **Moldovan consulate** (☎ 40-21-410 9827; B-dul Eroilor 8, Bucharest) in Romania. Applications must be made between 8.30am and 12.30pm Monday to Friday. After paying for the visa at a specified bank in the city centre, you then collect your visa between 3pm and 4pm the same day.

## TRANSPORT

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

As a result of the Soviet legacy, travellers may experience some questioning or minor hassle on entering Moldova, but, thanks to the same legacy, any potential complication is easy to resolve on the spot – most often by offering a few dollars. Moldovan border guards are generally friendly and down-to-earth, although they may be curious about you, as they see few foreign tourists.

### Air

Moldova's only airport of significance is **Chişinău International** (KIV; ☎ 22-526 060), 14.5km south of the city centre. **Voiaj Travel** ([www.voiaj.md](http://www.voiaj.md)) in Chişinău publishes the latest airport schedules. For information on flights to/from Western Europe and beyond, see p927.

There are two national airlines. **Moldavian Airlines** (code 2M; ☎ 22-549 339; [www.mdv.md](http://www.mdv.md); B-dul Ştefan cel Mare 3, Chişinău), located in the **Air Service** ([www.airservice.md](http://www.airservice.md)) travel centre, offers 12 weekly flights to Timişoara and two daily flights to Budapest, from where it has connections to other European destinations. **Air Moldova** (code 9U; ☎ 22-546 464; [www.airmoldova.md](http://www.airmoldova.md); B-dul Negruzzi 8, Chişinău) has daily flights between Chişinău and Bucharest, and to Timişoara.

Also in the Air Service travel centre is **Carpatair** (code V3; ☎ 22-549 339; [www.carpatair.com](http://www.carpatair.com)), which flies to Timişoara and beyond six times weekly. **Aerotour** (code UN; ☎ 22-542 454; [www.transaero.md](http://www.transaero.md); B-dul Ştefan cel Mare 4, Chişinău) has two flights daily to Budapest, one or two flights daily to Bucharest and two flights weekly to Prague.

**Tarom Romanian Air Transport** (code RO; ☎ 22-541 254; www.tarom.ro; B-dul Ștefan cel Mare, 3, Chișinău; ✈ 9am-5pm) flies to Bucharest eight times weekly.

The following airlines also fly to and from Moldova:

**Austrian Airlines** (code OS; ☎ 22-244 083; www.austrianair.com)

**Transaero** (code UN; ☎ 542 454; www.transaero.md)  
Flies between Chișinău and Bucharest.

**Turkish Airlines** (code TK; ☎ 22-527 078; www.turkishairlines.com)

## Land BUS

Moldova is well linked by bus lines to central and Western Europe. While not as comfortable as the train, buses tend to be faster, though not always cheaper.

**Eurolines** (www.eurolines.md) has a flurry of buses linking Moldova with Western Europe.

Buses between Chișinău and Kiev or Odesa run through Transdnestr and Tiraspol; even with a Moldovan visa, local authorities are likely to make you pay for an additional transit permit.

## CAR & MOTORCYCLE

The Green Card (a routine extension of domestic motor insurance to cover most European countries) is valid in Moldova. Extra insurances can be bought at the borders.

## TRAIN

From Chișinău, there is one daily train to Lviv and three to Moscow. Westbound, there are nightly trains to Romania and beyond.

There's an overnight service between Bucharest and Chișinău; at 12 hours, the journey is longer than taking a bus or maxitaxi (the train heads north to Iași, then south again), but is more comfortable if you want to sleep.

## GETTING AROUND Bicycle

Moldova is mostly flat, making cycling an excellent way of getting around. That is, it would

be if it weren't for the bad condition of most of the roads, and for the lack of infrastructure – outside of Chișinău, you'll have to rely on your own resources or sense of adventure (and trying to enlist help from friendly locals) if you run into mechanical trouble.

## Bus & Maxitaxi

Moldova has a good network of buses running to most towns and villages. Maxitaxis, which follow the same routes as the buses, are quicker and more reliable.

## Car & Motorcycle

It is now possible for foreigners to hire and drive a car in Moldova. In Chișinău, travel agencies can arrange car hire (see p513).

Be wary, however, as the roads are in poor condition. EU driving licences are accepted here; otherwise, bring both your home country's driving licence and your International Driving Permit, which is recognised in Moldova.

The intercity speed limit is 90km/h and in built-up areas 60km/h; the legal blood alcohol limit is 0.03%. For road rescue, dial ☎ 901. The **Automobile Club Moldova** (ACM; ☎ 22-292 703; www.acm.md) can inform you of all regulations and offer emergency assistance (this is a members-only service).

## Local Transport

In Moldova, buses cost about \$0.15, trolley-buses \$0.10 and city maxitaxis \$0.25.

## Taxi

In Moldova, there are official (and unofficial) metered taxis, both of which may try to rip you off. It's best to call a taxi (p513). A taxi ride to anywhere inside Chișinău is unlikely to cost more than \$3. The going rate is about \$0.25 per km. The handy Russian-style practice of waving a private car down for a 'ride' with someone who just happens to be going your way (for a fee!) is the more common way of getting lifts. You'll often need to agree upon a price before driving off.

© Lonely Planet Publications. To make it easier for you to use, access to this chapter is not digitally restricted. In return, we think it's fair to ask you to use it for personal, non-commercial purposes only. In other words, please don't upload this chapter to a peer-to-peer site, mass email it to everyone you know, or resell it. See the terms and conditions on our site for a longer way of saying the above - 'Do the right thing with our content.'