

Maramureș



Dismount from the horse-drawn cart and tip your chauffeur in cigarettes. You've found one of the last places where rural European medieval life remains intact. Where peasants live off the land as countless generations did before them. Where tiny villages, steeped in local customs and history, sit among rolling hills and dreamy landscapes. Where the word 'cappuccino' elicits a bewildered stare. Even Romanians joke that nothing has changed here for 100 years – welcome to Maramureș.

The last peasant culture in Europe is thriving here, with hand-built ancient wooden churches, traditional music, colourful costumes and festivals. Villagers' homes are still fronted with traditional giant, ornately carved wooden gates, and ear-smoking, 100-proof *țuică* (plum brandy) stills percolate in the garden, tended by a rosy-cheeked patriarch. Discovering this part of the world is a time-travel adventure, verily stunning Western visitors.

The region was effectively cut off from Transylvania by a fortress of mountains and has remained largely untouched by the 20th century (and the 19th century, and the 18th century...). It escaped the collectivisation of the 1940s, systemisation of the '80s and the Westernisation of the '90s and as such is living history.

Medieval Maramureș exists in the Mara and Izei Valleys. Eight of its churches – in the villages of Bârsana, Budești, Desești, Ieud, Plopis, Poienile Izei, Rogoz and Surdești – are on Unesco's list of World Heritage sites.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Find God (or don't) while facing fiery visions of hell at **Poienile Izei church** (p246)
- Knock on the wooden churches of **Budești** (p242), **Surdești** (p237) and **Ieud** (p246)
- Enjoy the beauty and humour of death through the painted wooden crosses in **Săpânța's Merry Cemetery** (p244)
- Get your medieval on at homestays in the **Izei** (p244) and **Mara Valleys** (p243)
- Ride up through the Vaser Valley on a narrow-gauge railway from **Vișeu de Sus** (p246)



History

Maramureș, with Baia Mare as its capital, was first documented in 1199. Prior to this, Dacian tribes are thought to have settled here around 1000 BC; today's inhabitants believe they are descended from these tribes. When the Roman emperor Trajan conquered the rest of Romania in AD 106, his forces never made it over the range of mountains protecting the Maramureș villages.

Hungary gradually exerted its rule over the region from the 13th century onwards. Tartar invasions of the Hungarian-dominated region continued into the 17th and 18th centuries, the last documented battle being on the Prislop Pass in 1717. Numerous churches sprang up in Maramureș around this time to mark the Tartars' final withdrawal from the region.

Maramureș was annexed by Transylvania in the mid-16th century, then ceded to the Austrian empire in 1699. It was not until 1918 that Maramureș was returned to Romania, albeit only part of it – the remainder went to what is now Ukraine.

Between 1940 and 1944 the Maramureș region – along with northern Transylvania and parts of Moldavia – fell under pro-Nazi Hungarian rule, during which time the entire Jewish population of its capital, Sighetu Marmăției, was shipped to Nazi Germany's concentration camps.

Ceaușescu's rule had little effect on the area. Indeed, he curiously encouraged the people here to maintain their traditional culture, contrary to his systemisation policies for the rest of Romania.

BAIA MARE

☎ 262 / pop 141,611

Baia Mare (Big Mine), at the foot of the Gutâi Mountains, is the seat of Maramureș County. The town was first documented in 1329 and developed as a gold-mining town in the 14th and 15th centuries. In 1446 the town became the property of the Iancu de Hunedoara family. In 1469, under the rule of Hungarian king Matthias Corvinus (Iancu de Hunedoara's son), the town was fortified.

Baia Mare gained notoriety during Ceaușescu's regime as home to the Romplumb and Phoenix metallurgic plants which released more than 5 billion cu metres of residual gases into the atmosphere each year, smothering the town with a sulphur-dioxide/metal powder smog. In the early 1990s, a new

GETTING INTO & AROUND MARAMUREȘ

Accessing Maramureș and then getting around can be a resolve-testing struggle. Train entry often requires visitor-challenging transfers in small, lazily marked stations and maxitaxis are, well, maxitaxis. The same goes for the sparse and limited options for getting around, though the upshot is you will rarely enjoy more genial hitchhiking conditions in Europe. For DIY touring, car hire is strongly recommended, preferably from Suceava or Cluj, meaning you'll have nary a transport dilemma throughout your visit – deficient countryside signage notwithstanding. A detailed map of the region is essential. Alternatively an organised tour (p244) will alleviate virtually all of the above.

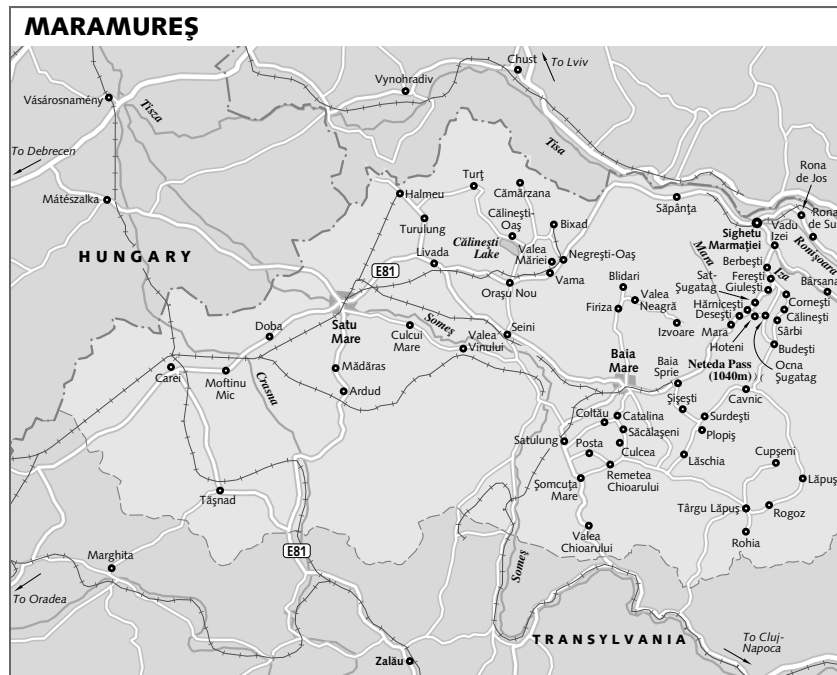
smoke stack was built in an attempt to alleviate air pollution.

The town was again thrown into the environmental hot seat in early 2000, when a poisonous spill from the Aurul gold mine caused one of Europe's worst environmental disasters. On 30 January a tailings dam burst, causing cyanide-contaminated water to leak from the gold mine – part-owned by Australian company Esmeralda Enterprises – contaminating the Someș and Tisa Rivers before spilling into the Danube and finally the Black Sea.

With six neighbouring countries affected, the water supply of 2.5 million people contaminated and the rivers' ecosystems devastated, the full impact of the spill may not be known for another two decades. Drinking water remains unpotable and fish stocks polluted.

On a lighter note, at the time of writing Baia Mare was in full renovation mode. Piața Libertății in particular will likely be a whole new, nightlife-focused hub of good vibrations by the time you read this. The city's museums are unexpectedly arresting and the superior hotels are a good place to reintegrate with the 21st century after staying in the villages.

Despite its lacklustre name, the **Chestnut Festival** (last weekend in September) is a lively bash, with concerts, dancing, sports events, people carousing in costume and dodgy-looking carnival rides.



Orientation

The train and bus stations, west of the centre on Str Gării, are a 15-minute walk from Piața Libertății, Baia Mare's central square. The Șasar River flows across the north of the town.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

At the time of writing, the city was suffering from a scarcity of internet cafés. Those with wi-fi enabled devices can plunder service from Hotel Rivulus while dining in Oaza Italiana (p236) – sit on the hotel side of the restaurant.

MONEY

Banca Comercială Română (B-dul Unirii 15; ☎ 8.30am-1pm Mon-Fri)

Banca Post (☎ 220 350; B-dul Traian 1B; ☎ 8.30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-noon Sat)

West Bank (☎ 224 586; B-dul Unirii 7; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri)

POST

Central post office (B-dul Traian 1B; ☎ 7am-8pm Mon-Fri) Has fax and cash transfer facilities.

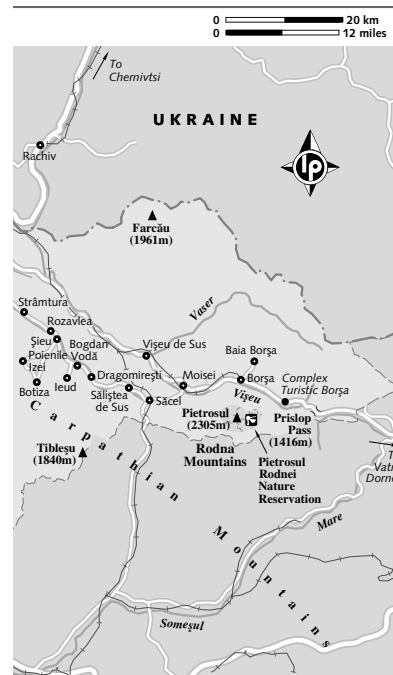
TOURIST INFORMATION

Mara Holidays (☎ 226 656; office@hotelmara.ro; B-dul Unirii 11; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) Helpful, English-speaking staff arrange car hire, walking, trekking and horse-riding tours, provide maps, and can book accommodation through Antrec.

Sights

Transylvanian prince Iancu de Hunedoara (János Hunyadi in Hungarian), royal governor of Hungary between 1446 and 1453, lived in the now-crumbling, 15th-century house **Casa Iancu de Hunedoara** (Piața Libertății 18). In 1456 he successfully thrashed the Turks on the banks of the Danube close to Belgrade. Hunedoara died of the plague in Belgrade that same year. Today, his house has temporary exhibitions arranged by the local history museum.

Hunedoara's life story – and that of Baia Mare – is told in the local **History & Archaeology Museum** (Muzeul de Istorie și Arheologie; ☎ 211 927; Str Monetăriei 1; admission €1.50; ☎ 8am-4pm Tue-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat & Sun). This expansive complex houses excavation displays, including the mother of all clay pot collections, extensive weapons exhibitions, tools, weathered documents, bronze



fragments and rooms devoted to literature, sports, industrial equipment and clocks.

Looming above Piața Libertății is **Stephen's Tower** (Turnul Ștefan). The 14th-century Gothic-style tower was initially topped with a bell but this was replaced by a mechanical clock in 1628. Behind the tower is the **Cathedral of the Holy Trinity** (Catedrala Sfânta Treime; Str 1 Mai), close to the local **Art Museum** (Muzeul de Artă; ☎ 213 964; Str 1 Mai 8; ☎ 10am-4pm Tue-Sun) with 250 exhibits tracking local artists from 1896 to the present.

The **central market** (cnr Strs 22 Decembrie & Vasile Alecsandri) is surrounded by the only remaining part of the 15th-century city walls and is beneath the **Butchers' Tower**, where famous brigand Grigore Pinteza Viteazul was shot in 1703.

Heading north from the market across the footbridge over the Șasar River, the **Dealul Florilor Stadium** (Stadionul Dealul Florilor) is home to the Baia Mare football club. Open-air Masses are often held on Sunday next to the WWI **Romanian Soldiers Monument** (Monumentul Ostașilor Români) in the park to the west of the football stadium.

Northwest of the football stadium is the **Ethnographic Museum** (Muzeul Etnografic; ☎ 212 845), in which all the traditional trades of the Maramureș region are represented.

Nearby, the **Village Museum** (Muzeul Satului; €1; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun, closed 16 Oct-14 May) displays traditional wooden houses and churches, for which the region is famed.

Baia Mare has a small **zoo** (admission €1; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) adjoining an **amusement park** (Str Petofi Sándor 28).

The **Mineral Museum** (Muzeul de Mineralogie; B-dul Traian 8) houses a monument to the Jews deported from Baia Mare to Auschwitz during WWII. Until 1848, Jews were not allowed to live in the city because of a 17th-century law forbidding them from settling in Hungarian mining towns.

Sleeping

Baia Mare has no budget accommodation options except for homestays which must be booked in advance.

Mara Holidays (☎ 226 656; office@hotelmara.ro; B-dul Unirii 11; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) This is an agent for Antrec and arranges rooms in private homes in the region for €15 to €20 per night, including a home-cooked breakfast.

Hotel Maramureș (☎ 216 555; Str Gheorghe Șincai 37; s/d €32/49) Grand three-star hotel with faded charm but comfortable rooms. Some rooms have balconies.

Euro Hotel (☎ 222 405; www.eurohotel-bm.ro; B-dul București 23; s/d 2-stars €35/49, 3-stars s/d €47/58; ☎) Wi-fi, pool, sauna, fitness centre, bar, restaurant, bowling – a few nights here will expunge all memories of village outhouses. Best value in town.

Hotel Rivulus (☎ 216 302; Str Culturii 4; s/d 2-stars €34/43, s/d 3-stars €43/52; ☎) Overlooking Piața Revoluției, this landmark monstrosity has newly renovated rooms, all with balconies. Two-star rooms are virtually identical to the three-star rooms, minus the refrigerator. Wi-fi is (officially) only available in three-star rooms.

Hotel Mara (☎ 226 660; www.hotelmara.ro; B-dul Unirii 11; s/d €50/60; ☎) Wary travellers can treat themselves to power showers, comfortable beds, swimming pool and massage here. Discounted rates are available on their web site.

Eating

Restaurant Dunarea (cnr Piața Libertății & Str 1 Mai; mains €2-3) A former favourite, this place was engulfed

first documented in 1445. In 1952 and 1955, political prisoners were sent to the gold and silver mines here.

Heading north from Cavnic along the mountainous **Neteda Pass** (1040m) towards Sighetu Marmăției, you'll pass a small memorial plaque to those who died in the mines under the communist purges.

Baia Mare to Izvoare

North of Baia Mare a dirt road twists and turns through the remote villages of **Firiza**, **Blidari** and **Valea Neagră**, culminating 25km north of Baia Mare at **Izvoare**, where there are natural springs.

Viewing churches is not on the agenda here; wallowing in the mountainous rural countryside dotted with delightful wooden cottages and ramshackle farms is. Izvoare is dominated by pine forests and the rather ugly **Statiunea Izvoare complex**. The complex is closed between mid-June and mid-September, when it is transformed into a summer holiday camp for students. The rest of the year it is open to travellers. In winter, a ski lift offers aerial views of the **sculpture park** spread throughout the grounds of the complex.

This route is not served by public transport and hitching is difficult as few vehicles pass by. A **hiking trail** (five to six hours, marked with red triangles) leads from Baia Mare to Izvoare; it starts about 3km north of Baia Mare along the Baia Mare–Izvoare road.

Sleeping & Eating

Complex Turistic Șuior (☎ 262-262 080; s/d €26/49) This complex of three new hotels is 1km further along the same road from Mogoșa Chalet. It boasts a ski lift and a swanky bar–restaurant in a lovingly created, peaceful setting.

Mogoșa Chalet (☎ 262-260 800; www.mogosar.ro; d/ste €34/69) The chalet overlooks Lake Bodi, 731m above sea level. Campers can pitch their tents by the lake. In summer you can hire boats or swim in the lake, and in winter you can skate on the lake or rent skis; there is a nearby chairlift and two ski lifts (open 10am to 4pm, Tuesday to Sunday). The chalet is located 6km northeast of Baia Sprie. Follow the road to Sighetu Marmăției and turn right at the signpost for Mogoșa.

ȚARA CHIOARULUI

The Țara Chioarului region in the south-western part of Maramureș takes in the area

immediately south of Baia Mare. The numerous villages, most of which boast traditional wooden churches, form a convenient loop – ideal for a two-hour driving tour by private transport.

Sights & Activities

Follow the main road south from Baia Mare to Cluj-Napoca for 14km to Satulung. Three kilometres south of Satulung, take the unmarked turn-off on the left opposite Cabana Stejarul to Finteușu Mare and continue for 5km until you reach the village of **Posta**. At the top of the hill towers a small wooden church dating from 1675.

Șomcuța Mare, 24km south of Baia Mare, is home to the annual **Stejarul (Oak Tree) Festival** (July), which attracts bands and choirs from all over the region. The small **Vălenii Șomcuței Cave** (Peștera de la Vălenii Șomcuței), 4km away, is signposted from the centre of the village.

Nine kilometres south of Șomcuța Mare lies **Valea Chioarului**, the southernmost village in Țara Chioarului. Its delightful, tall church stands next to the bus stop in the centre of the village. Beside the church is a bust of Mihail Viteazul (1994).

From Șomcuța Mare, a minor road winds its way to **Remetea Chioarului**, 12km northeast. Its tiny church, dating from 1800, is the highlight of Țara Chioarului. It stands majestically beside the village's extraordinarily ugly, seven-spired, modern church (1996).

Culcea, about 5km northwest of here, has an unremarkable plastered church built in 1720 and renovated in 1939. **Săcălașeni**, 2km further north, has a small church built in 1442, but sadly a modern church dominates the village.

From **Catalina**, just north again, head west 2km to the predominantly Hungarian village of **Colțâu** (Koltó in Hungarian). Hungary's most celebrated poet, Sándor Petőfi (1823–49), lived in the village in 1847, prior to leading the revolution against Habsburg domination of Hungary (1848–49). There's a small memorial house in the centre of Colțâu where the poet spent a few months. In the garden stands the giant, 300-year-old cypress tree under which Petőfi sought inspiration.

SIGHETU MARMĂȚIEI

☎ 262 / pop 41,425

Sighetu Marmăției is the northernmost town in Romania. Almost touching the Ukrainian border, it lies on the confluence of the Tisa,

FESTIVITIES & CULTURE

Outside of carefree, *țuică*-swilling wintertime, the most noteworthy celebration in Maramureș is the **Hora de la Prislop** folk music festival, held annually on the second Sunday in August. The festival's *hora* dancers stamp their feet, swing their upper body, and clap vigorously to the rhythm of a *țâpurțuri*, a chanted rhyme drummed out by three musicians on a traditional *zongora* (a type of viola), a *cetera* (shrill violin) and a *doba* (bongo made from fir or maple wood, covered with goat or sheep hide).

Additionally there is **Tânjaua de pe Mara**, a celebration of peasant work and diligence held in late April or early May in the villages of Hărnicești, Hoteni and Sat-Șugatag. Revellers, young and old, are 'watered' in the river for purification, before retiring to a feast and party. Tourists are welcome. Other notable festivals include **Sanzienele** (St John's Day/Midsummer Day) in the third week of June, which revolves around rejoicing in the regenerative power of nature, the **Maramusical Festival** in July and the **Saint Maria's Pilgrimage** in Moisei on 15 August.

The **Winter Festival** (27 December) is the undisputed high point of the year, featuring food, music, masks, a parade of colourful peasant costumes and oxen carrying baked cakes between their horns!

Family life is the source of many customs and rites of passage. Birth is seen as the passing of the soul from the unknown world to the known, or 'white', world. A *botejunea* (party) is held to celebrate each birth. Marriage ceremonies mix ancient and Christian rituals. The ceremonies begin at the homes of both parties and they make their way to the church separately. It is not until the couple are bound that the revelling begins – and the party doesn't end until dawn.

Death is bound in as many rituals. When someone dies their body is washed, dressed in traditional clothing, then laid out in their home for three days. The burial service takes place on the fourth day and is accompanied by a poetic verse recounting the person's personality and deeds. If an unmarried boy or girl dies they are given a symbolic wedding at the burial to assure they lived a full life.

While colourful folk outfits are the rule for ceremonies and festivals – and most Sundays, come to that – the daily garb in this region is often a less decorative version of the same outfits. Women wear linen ankle-length 'shirts' and sometimes vests on top with one or two wool red and black striped aprons (*zadii*) covering the waist down, with colourful scarves covering their hair. Men also wear linen shirts, wide trousers (*gaci*), peasant sandals (*opinca*), traditionally with pigskin soles, and a mirthful straw hat (*clap*) that resembles an inverted funnel. In winter this is accessorised with a short coat (*guba*), made of wool, and trimmed with a black velvet border at the collar and the pockets.

There are several regional myths, including those about Martolea, a mythical woman who punishes other women if they work on Tuesday evenings, and Vârcolac, a man who turns into a werewolf at full moon and attacks people.

Iza and Ronișoara Rivers. Its name is derived from the Thracian and Dacian word *seget*, meaning 'fortress'.

Sighet (as it is known locally) is famed for its vibrant Winter Festival. Its dusty streets bustle with markets, tucked beneath the domes of churches of all denominations.

Sighetu Marmăției's former maximum-security prison is now a museum, a sobering and informative highlight of any visit to northern Romania.

Information

ATM (Piața Libertății) Outside Hotel Tisa.

Banca Comercială Română (Str Iuliu Maniu; ☎ 8.30am–2.30pm Mon–Fri)

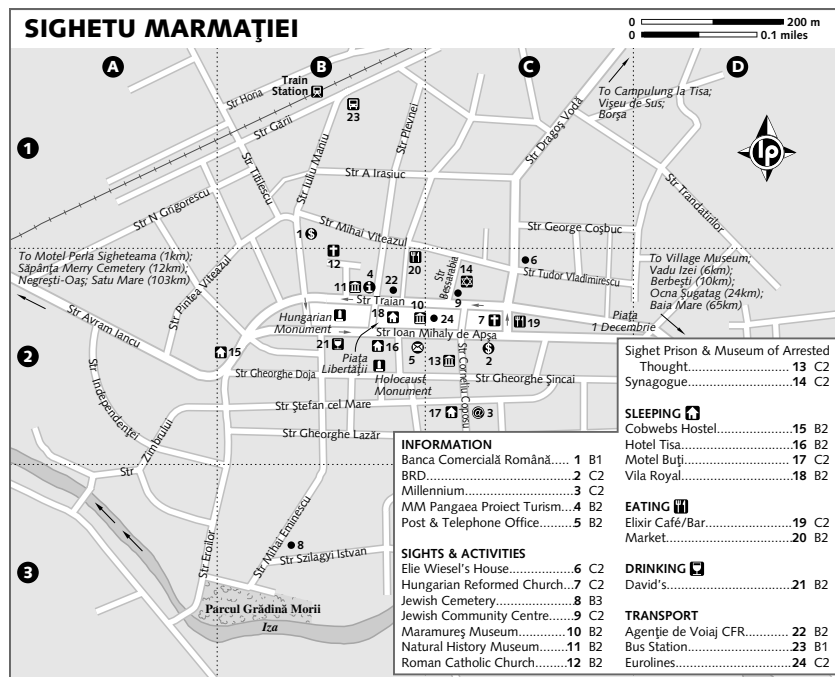
BRD (Str Ioan Mihalay de Apșa 24; ☎ 9am–5pm Mon–Fri) Has an ATM, cash transfer and exchange facilities.

Millennium (Str Corneliu Coposu; per hr €1.40; ☎ 9am–10pm Mon–Sat, noon–10pm Sun) For internet access.

Post & telephone office (Str Ioan Mihalay de Apșa 39) Opposite the Maramureș Museum.

TOURIST INFORMATION & TRAVEL AGENCIES

There is no official tourist office. The region's best source for beds, books and information is **Fundația OVR Agro-Tur-Art** (☎ 330 171; www.vaduizei.ovr.ro), in Vadu Izei (6km south). In Sighet, there's **MM Pangeae Proiect Turism** (☎ 312 228; Piața Libertății 15; ☎ 9am–4pm Mon–Fri), which offers simple maps and group tours.



In nearby Campulung la Tisa, 12km northwest of Sighet, there is the all-purpose **Tourist Info Office** (☎ 0747-255 001; Route 246; free domtinfo@hotmail.com; ☎ 24hr) run by Timea Homei, offering internet service, meals, a peaceful garden and help with any tourism needs in the region. Look for the banner in the village centre.

Sights

Sighetu Marmăției, first documented in 1328, was a strong cultural and political centre, being the birthplace of the Association for the Romanian Peoples' Culture, founded in 1863. On Piața Libertății stands the **Hungarian Reformed church**, built during the 15th century. Close by is the 16th-century **Roman Catholic church**.

Off the square is Sighet's only remaining **synagogue** (Str Bessarabia 10). Before WWII there were eight synagogues serving a large Jewish community which made up 40% of the town's population. Jews first settled in Sighet in the 17th century.

Next door is the **Jewish Community Centre** (☎ 311 652; Str Bessarabia 8; ☎ 10am-4pm Tue-Sun),

where you can purchase tickets to visit the **Jewish Cemetery** (Str Szilagy Istvan), a couple of blocks south of the centre (follow Str Mihai Eminescu south, then turn left into Str Szilagy Istvan). The cemetery isn't hard to find – just look for the 6m-high stone wall.

Elie Wiesel, the Jewish writer and 1986 Nobel Peace Prize-winner who coined the term 'Holocaust', was born in (and later deported from) Sighet. **Elie Wiesel's house** is on the corner of Str Dragoș Vodă and Tudor Vladimirescu. His autobiography, *La Nuit* (The Night), was the first account ever published of the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps in WWII. On Str Gheorghe Doja is a **monument** to the victims of the Holocaust.

Maramureș Museum (Piața Libertății 15; admission €0.50; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) displays colourful folk costumes, rugs, ceramics, regional paintings and carnival masks.

The decrepit but interesting **Natural History Museum** (Muzeul de Istorie și Științele Naturii; Str Traian; admission €0.90; ☎ 9am-3pm Mon-Fri) is stuffed with dead animal exhibits. Knock on the door to enter.

Visit traditional peasant houses from the Maramureș region at the open-air **Village Museum** (Muzeul Satului; ☎ 314 229; Str Dobâieș 40; adult/child/photo/video €0.90/0.50/0.90/2.90; ☎ 9am-4pm), southeast of Sighet's centre. Allow at least half a day to wander through the incredible constructions. Children love the wooden dwellings, cobbled pathways and 'mini' villages. You can even stay overnight in tiny wooden cabins for €5.50.

Sleeping

Budget and midrange accommodation options are sprouting at a startling rate in Sighet. Keep an eye out for newer options. For homestays in the area check out www.ruraltourism.ro and www.pensiuni.info.ro.

Cobwobs Hostel (☎ 0745-615 173; www.cobwobs.com; Str 22 Dec 1989 42; dm/d €10/18) Run by an English/Romanian husband and wife team, like it was their home - because it is. They cook a mean meal out of the garden and arrange tours of the area.

Motel Buți (☎ 311 035; Str Ștefan cel Mare 6; s/d/tr €21/28/41) This charming villa has spotlessly clean but small rooms, as well as a bar and pool table downstairs.

Hotel Tisa (☎ 312 645; Piața Libertății 8; d/tr €24/29) Smack-bang in the centre of Sighet, the ailing rooms here were enjoying renovation at the time of writing.

Motel Perla Sigheteană (☎ 310 613; www.perla.sighetean.ro; Str Avram Iancu 65; d €25) This place is out of town on the road to Săpânța.

Vila Royal (☎ 311 004; www.vilaroyal.ro; Str Ioan Mihali de Apșa; s/d €32/37) Also dead centre, this eight-room villa is one of the city's newer options, housed in a classic building circa 1885. The rooms have been plasticised, but are comfortable.

Eating & Drinking

David's (Str Ioan Mihali de Apșa; ☎ 7am-10pm; mains €3) The lively bar-of-the-moment, with a menu long on drinks and short on food.

Elixir Café/Bar (Str Traian) Get cosy with the locals at this busy, smoky joint that serves snacks and beer.

Hotel Tisa has a large, reasonably priced restaurant, which does good breakfasts. The town's **market** (Piața Agroalimentară) sells fresh fruit and veg.

Getting There & Away

BUS

The **bus station** (Str Gării) is opposite the train station. Several local buses leave daily to Baia Mare (€2, 65km), Satu Mare (€2.50, 122km), Borșa (€1), Budești (€1), Călinești (€1) and Vișeu de Sus (€1.50), and one bus daily to Bârsana, Botiza, Ieud and Mara. A bus leaves

SIGHET PRISON: A SUFFERING NATION

In May 1947 the communist regime embarked on a reign of terror; slaughtering, imprisoning and torturing thousands of Romanians. While many leading prewar figures were sent to hard-labour camps, the regime's most feared intellectual opponents were interned in Sighet's maximum-security prison. Between 1948 and 1952, about 180 members of Romania's academic and government elite were imprisoned here.

Today, four white marble plaques covering the barred windows of the prison list the 51 prisoners who died in the Sighet cells, notably the academic and head of the National Liberal Party (PNL), Constantin Brătianu; historian and leading member of the PNL, Gheorghe Brătianu; governor of the National Bank, Constantin Tătăranu; and Iuliu Maniu, president of the National Peasants' Party (PNȚ). Many simply died of starvation; the prisoners were given 700 calories a day to survive on – the average person needs between 2000 and 2500 – an impossible task in Romania's feared winters.

The prison, housed in the old courthouse, was closed in 1974. In 1989 it reopened as the **Museum of Arrested Thought** (Muzeul al Gândirii Arestate; ☎ 314 224; Str Corneliu Coposu 4; admission free; ☎ 9.30am-6.30pm Mon-Fri 15 May-15 Oct, 9.30am-4.30pm 15 Oct-15 May). Photographs are displayed in the torture chambers and cells. The memorial plaque outside reads 'In memory of the young, intelligent people at the forefront of Romanian intellectual life who were imprisoned because they did not believe in communism and died, through torture, in this odious prison'.

Possibly the most heart-rending sight is the bronze sculptures in the courtyard, dedicated to those who died. Figures shielding themselves, imploring, covering their mouths in horror, all naked and missing limbs look to the heavens in a frozen symbol of their agony.

for Săpânța every hour between 8am and 2pm, returning at 4pm and 5pm.

Eurolines (☎ 319 322; sighet@eurolines.ro; Str Traian; ☎ 9am-8pm Mon-Fri, 9am-4pm Sat) has a new office in the town centre.

TRAIN

Tickets are sold in advance at the **Agentie de Voiaj CFR** (☎ 312 666; Piața Libertății 25; ☎ 7am-2pm Mon-Fri). There's one daily fast train to Timișoara (€20), Bucharest (€20, 12 hours), Cluj-Napoca (€12.50, six hours) and Arad (€18). Three trains a week (Monday, Wednesday and Friday) head into Ukraine – this journey is only open to those not needing visas, as there are no visa-issuing facilities at this border crossing.

MARA VALLEY

The Mara Valley (Valea Mara), with its beautiful rolling hills, is the heart of Maramureș. It takes its name from the Mara River which runs southwest through the valley from Sighetu Marmăției to Baia Mare. Villages here are famed for their spectacular churches and carved gateways.

Giulești & Around

Heading south from Sighetu Marmăției, you reach the tiny village of **Berbești**, famed for the 300-year-old *troiță* (crucifix), a large, Renaissance-style cross carved with solar emblems, which stands by the roadside at the village's northern end. Traditionally, travellers prayed by the cross to ensure a safe journey.

Continuing south you'll find **Giulești**, the main village in the Mara Valley, notable for its crumbling wooden cottages with 'pot trees' in their front yards, on which a colourful array of pots and pans are hung to dry. It was here in 1918 that the revolutionary poet Ilie Lazăr summoned delegates from all over Maramureș prior to their signing Transylvania's Union agreement with Romania. Ilie Lazăr's house is preserved and open to tourists as a memorial museum. During the communist crackdown in the early 1950s, Ilie Lazăr was arrested and imprisoned at Sighet Prison (see p241).

The village of **Desești** is a few kilometres southwest of Giulești on the road to Baia Mare. Its tiny Orthodox church, built in 1770, was struck by lightning in 1925, destroying much of the outer walls and the steeple. It has since been repaired and fitted with a lightning conductor. Its interior paintings, by Radu

Munteanu, date from 1780 and feature Sodom and Gomorrah.

Close to the church is an oak tree, hundreds of years old and measuring about 4.5m in diameter. It has been preserved as a monument to the extensive oak forest that once covered the area before people felled the trees to build their homes.

Mara, just a couple of kilometres south of Desești, is best known for its elaborate wooden fences. These porches are a unique architectural feature of the Maramureș region. In more recent times, the spiritual importance of these outside porches has been overridden by the social status attached to them; see p245.

Sat-Șugatag & Around

Seven kilometres south of Giulești is **Sat-Șugatag**, home to a church dating from 1642. The church is famed for its fine, ornately carved wooden gate. Sat-Șugatag was first documented in 1360 as the property of Dragoș of Giulești.

Mănăstirea is 1km east of Sat-Șugatag. The church here was built by monks in 1633. By 1787 just one monk and four servants remained, and during the reign of Austro-Hungarian King Joseph II the monastery was closed. The original monks' cells are on the northern side of the church. Several 18th-century icons painted on glass and wood have been preserved, as have some of the frescoes on the outside western wall of the church, normally seen on the monasteries of northern Moldavia.

Three kilometres south of Mănăstirea is the small spa resort-village of **Ocna Șugatag**, built on a hilltop in 1321. The village is named after its former salt mine, which was exploited until the 1950s (*ocnă* means 'salt mine').

Four kilometres south of Ocna Șugatag is **Hărnițești**, home to a marvellous Orthodox church dating from 1770. A footpath, signposted 'Spre Monument', leads from the village's primary school to the hillside church.

Nine kilometres southeast of Ocna Șugatag is **Hoteni**, known for its **Tânjaua de pe Mara** folk festival held from 1 May to 14 May to celebrate the first ploughing (see p239).

Eastern Mara Valley & Cosău Valley

Heading south from Sighetu, bear left at **Ferești** along the road leading to Maramureș' least accessible villages. From Baia Mare, you can approach this area through Cavnic, across the Neteda Pass.

Cornești, the first village along this stretch, has a small 18th-century church with interior paintings by Hodor Toador. **Călinești**, 7km further south, is where in 1862 archaeologists uncovered a cache of bracelets and ankle chains, believed to date from Roman times. Călinești has two churches, known as Susani (*sus* meaning 'up') and Josani (*jos* meaning 'low'). The Susani church (1683) is on the left side of the road as you enter the village from the north. But the Josani church, built 20 years earlier, is more spectacular. To get to this church, turn right at the road for Bărsana and continue until you reach house No 385. A small path opposite this house twists and turns its way to the church; follow the upper path when you come to the fork.

From Călinești a mud track leads to **Sârbi**, inhabited since 1402. Its two churches are built from oak. The Susani church dates from 1667, with interior paintings by Al Ponehachile. Sârbi's Josani church dates from 1665. A traditional 'natural launderette', ingeniously constructed by villagers to utilise the water power from the stream, is still used to wash clothes and blankets. Just follow the pumping sound. A wooden thresher and loom sit nearby, as well as a *țuică* (plum brandy) 'factory' that welcomes visitors – look for the large white house or accost people with '*țuică fabricat?*' until you home in on it.

Budești, 4km south of Sârbi, is one of the most beautiful villages in Maramureș. Its Josani church, built in 1643, features four small turrets surrounding the main steeple, signifying its role as local law courts. Inside the church is a small collection of icons on glass and wood, dating from 1766. Other exhibits include a glass box containing a real-life miracle – a hunk of wood sliced in half to reveal a perfect blackened cross image. The church's most prized piece, however, is the 18th-century painting of the Last Judgment, preserved in its entirety. The church also houses the undershirt of its most famous 17th-century inhabitant, Grigore Pinteă Viteazul (a local Robin Hood), allegedly purchased from the local Romanian community in Budapest for 1000 forint. If the church is locked, inquire at the church up the hill for the key.

Blueberries and 'little angels', or red berries, grow in abundance on the fields surrounding the track.

Budești is impossible to reach without private transport or a long day of dedicated

hitching. Pack a lunch as food here is scarce. There's a small *pensiuine* down the hill from the church if you're too tired to hitch back to Sighet.

Sleeping & Eating

Fundația OVR Agro-Tur-Art (☎ 262-330 171; www.vaduizei.ovr.ro) In Vadu Izei, Fundația OVR Agro-Tur-Art arranges accommodation in private homes in the area for around €20 per night, including breakfast and dinner, or do it yourself at www.ruraltourism.ro and www.pensiuni.info.ro.

Camping Complex (tent sites/bungalows €2/10) Owned by Sind Romania (Union Romania), this complex has beautifully carved wooden bungalows sleeping up to six people.

Hotel Craiasca (☎ 262-374 059; www.craiasca.ro; s/d €15/20) This place has two restaurants, a bar and a disco, and offers spa treatments for €3 and three meals per day for an extra €10.

Hotel Salina (☎ 262-374 362/034; s/d incl spa treatments €29/34) This health resort, also owned by Sind Romania, has four salt pools and it's a bargain. It offers cheap holidays to Romanian workers and retirees.

SĂPÂNȚA

☎ 262

Săpânța village has a unique place in the hearts of Romanians. It boasts the 'Merry Cemetery', the church graveyard famous for the colourfully painted wooden crosses that adorn its tombstones. Shown in art exhibitions across Europe, the crosses attract busloads of visitors who marvel at the gentle humour and human warmth that created them. Villagers seem utterly untouched by the fame that the crosses have created. Life carries on as normal: old women sit outside their cottages, colourful rugs are hung on clotheslines and beaten clean with wire swatters and the odd horse and cart trundles past. The village itself lies 12km northwest of Sighetu Marmăției, just 4km south of Ukraine.

Five hundred metres down a gravel road, a **new wooden church** claiming to be the tallest wooden structure in Europe (75m) is being built with a controversial stone base. This pips the stone-free church in Surdești (p237) by 3m and has subsequently sparked a peevish debate about the legitimacy of stone bases. Ask the resident nun to open the basement chapel.

MERRY CEMETERY

Săpânța's **Merry Cemetery** (Cimitirul Vesel; €0.50) was the creation of Ioan Stan Pătraș, a simple wood sculptor who, in 1935, started carving crosses to mark graves in the old church cemetery. He painted each cross in blue – the traditional colour of hope and freedom – and on top of each he inscribed a witty epitaph to the deceased.

Prior to his death in 1977, Pătraș carved and painted his own cross, complete with a portrait of himself and a lengthy epitaph in which he wrote of the 'cross' he bore all his life, working to support his family since his father's death when he was 14 years old. Pătraș' grave is directly opposite the main entrance to the old church.

Every cross tells a different story, and the painted pictures and inscriptions illustrate a wealth of traditional occupations: shepherds tend their sheep, mothers cook for their families, barbers cut hair, and weavers bend over looms.

Since Pătraș' death, Dumitru Pop, his apprentice, has carried on the tradition. He lives and works in Pătraș' former house and studio, using the same traditional methods. He makes about 10 crosses each year, depending on the mortality rate in the village.

The house where Pop lives and works is also a **museum** (donation €0.30). In one small room, various pictures carved in wood and painted by Pătraș are displayed. These include portraits of members of the Executive Committee of the Communist Party, and a portrait of Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu carved in honour of Ceaușescu's visit to Săpânța in 1974. The interior of Săpânța's old church (1886), next to the cemetery, is adorned with painted frescoes.

Camping Poieni (☎ 372 228; tent sites/cabins per person €1.50/3; 📅 1 Jun-31 Aug) is 3km to the south of Săpânța and has an excellent trout restaurant.

Villagers rent out their rooms in the Săpânța area. The owners at the green-tiled **Pensiunea Ileana** (☎ 372 137; per person €14) don't speak English.

Pensiunea Stan (☎ 372 337; d €20) is opposite the cemetery entrance and has five double rooms. Breakfast not included.

There's a new bar and terrace by the cemetery entrance.

Buses run every hour (8am to 2pm) from Sighet bus station and return at 4pm and 5pm. The wooden church is signposted off the main Sighet/Negrești-Oaș road, though it's easier to just look up and follow the steeple.

IZEI VALLEY

☎ 262/pop 3000

The lush Izei Valley (Valea Izei) follows the Iza River eastward from Sighetu Marmăției to Moisei. The soul of ancient Romania lurks among the valley's tiny rural villages, inside its thatched roofs, tall wooden church steeples, 'pot trees' and wooden gates outside every home. Traditional crafts are still practised by wood carvers, blanket weavers and glass painters and there's ample opportunity for you to join in.

In mid-July Vadu Izei, together with the neighbouring villages of Botiza and Ieud,

hosts the **Maramuzical Festival**, a lively four-day international folk music festival.

Vadu Izei

Vadu Izei is at the confluence of the Iza and Mara Rivers, 6km south of Sighetu Marmăției. Its **museum** is in the oldest house in the village (1750). If you visit a private home in this village – and the whole region – you'll quickly realise that little has changed since the 18th century – including the state of indoor plumbing: nonexistent.

Vadu Izei has been supported since the early 1990s by the Belgian charity Opération Villages Roumains, which originally started out as an international pressure group against Ceaușescu's systemisation programme. More recently, the village gained financial backing from the European Union's Phare programme to develop infrastructure.

The village tourism society, **Fundația OVR Agro-Tur-Art** (☎ 330 171; www.vaduizei.ovr.ro; house 161), at the northern end of the village, is an unrivalled source of local information. Additionally, **Nicolae Prisăcaru** (☎ 330 093, 0721-046 730; prisnic@conseco.ro) or the lovely **Ramona Ardelean** (☎ 0744-827 829; aramona@gmx.de) arrange excellent guided tours (in French or English, full day €25 plus €0.25 per kilometre), as well as picnics, wood-carving and icon-painting workshops.

Contact any of the individuals listed above to arrange accommodations (around €20 per

person, breakfast and dinner included) or just show up and take your pick of the dozens of homes displaying *cazare* signs. Alternatively, www.ruraltourism.ro and www.pensiuni.info.ro list an array of homestays available in Maramureș.

Bârsana

From Vadu Izei continue for 12km through Oncești to the village of Bârsana (formerly Bîrsana), dating from 1326. In 1720 it built its first church, the interior paintings of which were created by local artists Hodor Toador and Ion Plohod.

The famous and enchanting Orthodox **Bârsana Monastery** (Mănăstirea Bârsana) is a popular pilgrimage spot in Maramureș. It was the last Orthodox monastery built in the region before Serafim Petrovai – head of the Orthodox Church in Maramureș – suddenly converted to Greco-Catholicism in 1711. The 11am service is a magical experience among the rolling hills and wildflowers.

Maria Pașca (☎ 331 165; house 377; bed without/with board €20/30) has rooms to rent at her home.

Rozavlea

Continue south through Strâmtura to Rozavlea, first documented under the name of Gorzohaza in 1374. Its fine **church**, dedicated to the archangels Michael and Gabriel, was constructed between 1717 and 1720 in another

village, then erected in Rozavlea on the site of an ancient church destroyed by the Tartars. The flower-strewn graveyard is a testament to the area's anarchic splendour.

Botiza

From Rozavlea continue south for 3km to Șieu, then take the turn-off right for idyllic Botiza. Botiza's **old church**, built in 1694, is overshadowed by the giant **new church**, constructed in 1974 to serve devout Orthodox families.

The 9am Sunday service is the major event of the week in Botiza. The entire village flocks to the church to partake in the religious activities which continue well into the afternoon.

Opération Villages Roumains runs a local *agroturism* scheme, which offers half/full board in local homes for €15/18 per night. Bookings can be made through the local representative, **George Iurca** (☎ 334 110, 0722-942 140; botizavr@sintec.ro; house 742; 📅 8am-10pm), whose house is signposted. George is a licensed guide for all regions of Romania, running tours in German, French and English (€10 to €15 per day, depending on the number of participants). He also rents out mountain bikes (€5 per day), vehicles with a driver/guide (€45 per day) and organises fishing trips (€20, plus licence, transport and accommodation).

WOODEN MARAMUREȘ

Even now, wood is everywhere in Maramureș. The region has a long history of using wood to build houses and churches using logs and/or thick beams with incredible joins and no nails. Traditionally the homes of the Mara, Coșău and Izei Valleys used oak, while in Bârsana pine was used, and this is still the case. Roofs are tall and steep, the oldest covered in thatch.

Immense carved wooden gates fronting average homes are common now, often used to illustrate the social status and wealth of the inhabitants, yet originally they were built only by royal landowners to guard against evil. The gates were the symbolic barrier between the safe interior and the unknown outside world, and people placed money, incense and holy water under them for further protection against dark forces. Gate carvings include the Tree of Life, the snake (guardian against evil), birds (symbols of the human soul) and a face (to protect from spirits). Sacalas Gheorghe (1860-1934) was one of the region's most gifted carvers.

Maramureș is particularly famed for its wooden churches, many of which are Unesco World Heritage sites. The Orthodox churches are divided into the ante-nave, nave and altar. Gothic-style towers rise up to 50m above the churches and it is a testament to the builders' technical expertise that they continue to survive the harsh winters of the region.

Wood is still the main raw material used for a variety of purposes such as gourds at weddings, carved religious seals and painted icons. Wooden crosses also dot the landscape; the wooden crucifix in the village of Berbești (p242) is of great historical importance as it is the oldest of its kind in the region.

Alternatively, ask for **Iaon Costinar** (☎ 334 044, 334 066; house 790; bed without/with full board €8/19), who can also organise accommodation.

Poenile Izei

From Botiza a track leads west to Poenile Izei, home of a church with the most dramatic frescoes of hell you are ever likely to encounter. The church, with its thatched roof, was built in 1604. Its interior frescoes, dating from 1783, have a depiction of hell symbolised by a ferocious bird waiting to swallow up sinners. Australian Aboriginal-style paintings depict the torments inflicted by the devil on sinners who fail to obey the rules represented in the frescoes. To visit, ask for the key at the priest's house – a large wooden house in the centre of the village with an ornately carved terrace.

There are rooms for rent at the homes of **Florentina Petreus** (☎ 334 204; house 77; bed without/with full board €18/25), and **Donita Ilies** (☎ 334 383; house 135), who speaks French and does excellent home-cooking.

Four kilometres further north along the same dirt track is the village of **Glod**, the birthplace of the popular Maramureș folk-singing duo, the Petreus Brothers.

Ieud

The oldest wooden church in Maramureș is in Ieud, 6km off the road south from Șieu. Century-old customs are still firmly intact in this fervently Orthodox village. Between 1787 (when the first marriage was registered) and 1980 there were no divorces in the village.

Ieud was first documented in 1365 but evidence suggests the village was inhabited as early as the 11th century by Balc, Dragoș Vodă's grandson and later Prince of Moldavia. In 1364 Ieud's fabulous Orthodox '**Church on the Hill**' (Biserica de Lemn din Deal) was built on castle ruins. It is made from fir-wood and used to house the first document known to be written in Romanian (1391–92), in which the catechism and church laws pertaining to Ieud were coded. The church is generally locked but you can get the key from the porter's house in the centre of the village, distinguishable by its simple, wooden gate.

Ieud's other church (Biserica de Lemn din Șes), today Greco-Catholic in denomination, was built in 1717. The church, at the southern end of the village, is unique to the region as it has no porch. It houses one of the largest collections of icons on glass found in Maramureș.

You can make accommodation bookings through Opération Villages Roumains' representative in Botiza, **George Iurca** (p245), or go straight to **Vasile Chindris** (☎ 336 197; house 201; bed without/with full board €12/25), **Liviu Ilea** (☎ 336 039; house 333; bed without/with full board €12/18) or **Vasile Rîșco** (☎ 336 019; house 705; without/with full board €12/18).

Bogdan Vodă

The former village of Cuhea was renamed Bogdan Vodă in 1968 in honour of the Moldavian prince (r 1359–65) from Maramureș, who marched southeast from Cuhea to found the state of Moldavia in 1359. Some of the interior paintings in the village church, built in 1718, draw upon the traditional method of painting on linen, while others are painted on wood. The church, dedicated to St Nicholas, is on the left as you enter the village from the north.

Dragomirești

Four kilometres south of Bogdan Vodă lies the village of Dragomirești, whose church (1722), in fine Maramureș fashion, was uprooted in 1936 and moved to Bucharest's National Village Museum (p76). The villagers have since built a new wooden church, on the same site, immediately to the left of the village entrance.

A further 4km east is **Sălișteța de Sus**, first documented under the name Keethzeleste in 1365. It has two old churches, dating from 1680 and 1722, along with two new multi-spired, concrete churches.

VIȘEU & VASER VALLEYS

☎ 262

The wooded mountains rise to dizzying heights around the picturesque Vișeu Valley (Valea Vișeu), which tracks the Vișeu River on its journey south. Breathing in the fresh Alpine air here is enough therapy for a lifetime. A railway line links this stretch, from Rona de Jos in the north to Borșa in the south, making it more accessible for travellers without private transport.

The twin villages of **Rona de Jos** and **Rona de Sus**, 19km southeast of Sighetu Marmației, lie just a couple of kilometres apart. Continue south through the unremarkable Petrova and Leordina, and you eventually come to the spectacular logging village of Vișeu de Sus.

Vișeu de Sus

This gateway to the wonders of the Vaser Valley was first chronicled in 1363 and is growing

STEAMED UP!

Since its construction in 1925, the narrow-gauge railway has been used to carry wood down the mountains. Steam engines were originally used as logging trains on this route. These days, the job's done mostly by diesel engines but there are still four steam engines making the arduous climb.

More than 4000 cu metres of fir wood (*brad*) are felled each month by the lumberjacks, who are ferried by train each morning 42km up the valley to the logging camp at **Comanu**, close to the Ukrainian border. Once up in the hills they barter cigarettes and vodka for freshly made cheese from the hilltop shepherds.

Tourists can also make the daily journey up past forests filled with elusive wolves and lynx. It's possible to pitch a tent 32km away at the camping grounds of **Făina** or **Valea Babii** (6km further on), but the cabanas are now reserved for workers. From Făina there's a well-marked hiking trail but it should only be undertaken in summer as there are few highly detailed maps of this region. Be wary not to stray near the border as border police are armed.

At **Novăț** there's an artists' camp where you'll find sculptors in action and hear much frenzied late-night debate under the stars.

A tourist-only train leaves daily at 8.30am and begins its homeward journey at about 5pm, except Sundays and holidays. Tickets cost €8 and are bought at the station before boarding the train.

To get to the wood factory (*fabrica de lemn*) and **train station** (☎ 262-353 535), turn left opposite Hotel Brad on the corner of Str 22 Decembrie and Str Iuliu Maniu, continue along Str Carpați for 2km and they're on the left. The tourist information office in Vișeu de Sus sells a good map of the Vaser Valley trails (€1).

yearly into a mecca for travellers and nature-lovers. Logging is the town's traditional industry – and it's this tradition which is the catalyst for its newest industry: tourism.

Vișeu de Sus's unique **narrow-gauge railway** winds up and into the Vaser Valley and is still used to bring wood down from the mountains. The original steam engines now have several diesel locomotive companions (see 'Steamed Up!', above).

Aside from the railway line, the town's main axis is Str 22 Decembrie. The Vaser Valley railway stop is northeast of the town centre.

The **tourist information centre** (☎ 352 285; Str Libertății 1; ☹ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri), situated in the library, opens and closes at whim, despite posted hours. When reachable, they sell maps of the region, arrange accommodation and book steam train tours. The supply of hiking maps is frustratingly low, but you'll find one good map of the valley's trails here (€1).

Hotel Gabriela (☎ 354 380; www.hotel-gabriela.ro; s/d €17/29; ☹) is two kilometres from Hotel Brad, on the road to Borșa. This three-star chalet-style option has internet facilities.

Hotel Brad (☎ 352 999; cnr Strs 22 Decembrie & Iuliu Maniu; s/d €19/32) has simple rooms that must be booked in advance as they fill up quickly during summer.

Moisei

Moisei lies 9km southeast of Vișeu de Sus, at the foot of the Rodna Massif. Known for its traditional crafts and customs, Moisei gained fame in 1944 when retreating Hungarian (Horthyst) troops gunned down 31 people before setting fire to the entire village.

Hungarian forces captured the 31 people and detained them in a small camp in Vișeu de Sus without food or water for three weeks. On 14 October 1944, the Hungarian troops brought the prisoners to a house in Moisei, locked them inside, then shot them through the windows. Of the 31, 29 were killed, leaving only two survivors. Before abandoning the village, the troops set it on fire, leaving all 125 remaining families homeless.

Only one house in Moisei survived the blaze; the one in which the prisoners were shot. Today, it houses a small **museum** (Expoziția Documentară – Istorica Martirii de la Moisei 14 Octombrie 1944), in tribute to those who died in the massacre. Photographs of the 29 who died as well as the two who survived the bloodbath adorn its walls.

Just opposite the museum is a circular **monument** to the victims, its 12 upright columns symbolising the sun and light. Ten columns are decorated with a traditional carnival mask

and two are decorated with human faces based on the features of the two survivors.

The museum and monument are at the eastern end of the village. If the museum is locked, knock at the house next door and ask for the key.

Each year, on 15 August, the **Feast of the Assumption** shuts down the area. Villagers from around the county, walking in groups for up to two days or more, carry crosses and holy pictures to Moisei's monastery. The singing, jubilant groups flood the narrow roads, testing the wafer-thin patience of heathen Romanian drivers.

Borșa

Ore has been mined at Borșa, 12km east of Moisei, since the mid-14th century. The area was colonised in 1777 by German miners from Slovakia; eight years later, Bavarian-Austrian miners moved to **Baia Borșa**, 2km northeast of the town, to mine copper, lead and silver.

The **Complex Turistic Borșa**, a small ski resort and tourist complex 10km east of Borșa town proper, is a main entry point to the splendid **Rodna Mountains**, part of which forms the Pietrosul Rodnei Nature Reservation (5900 hectares).

Hiking information is scarce in this hikers' heaven, largely because too few people make the effort to get here, but there are clearly marked trails leading from the top of the ski lift. Trails include a two-hour hike (in good weather) to the Prislop Pass and a pleasant one-hour hike signposted 'Cascada Cailor', which leads to the 40m high 'Horse' waterfall. If you want to stretch your legs before starting on the trails, there's a path leading up underneath the **ski lift** (Str Brădet 10; ☞ 7am-6pm).

In winter the Complex Turistic Borșa boasts the largest natural ski run in Europe (2km, beginner to intermediate). The small, relatively unspoilt resort is fast becoming a haven for travellers and skiers who wish to avoid the crowds in the Carpathians. Unfortunately, ski hire is not available.

Staff at the hotels or chalets of the complex are generally helpful. **Hotel Mia** (☞ 342 347; Str Al Cuza 237a) has clean, nice rooms as does **Hotel Iezer** (☞ 343 430; Str Decebal 2), **Hotel Perla Maramuresului** (☞ 342 539; Str Victoriei 27) and nearby **Hotel Mihali** (☞ 0742-797 599; Str Victoriei 65). At the Complex Turistic ski resort, **Pensiunea Focus** (☞ 344 038), near the chairlift, is the most attractive of the bunch.

Buses run between Borșa proper and the Complex Turistic throughout the day.

PRISLOP PASS

From Complex Turistic Borșa, a tight, winding road climbs for 10km to the remote Prislop Pass. Hikers can trek north into the Maramureș Mountains or head south into the Rodna Mountains and onward to Moldavia. Red triangles, then blue stripes lead to the peak of the Gargalau Saddle (1925m, two hours). Then either continue east (red stripes) to the Rotunda Pass, then southeast to Vatra Dornei, or west to the highest part of the massif and on to La Cruce (4½ hours). From here the weather station on the summit of Mount Pietrosul (2305m, blue stripes) is only 90 minutes away, which among the mind-bending views, allows for a good long gaze into Ukraine without the hassle of border checks. At this point, it's a direct hustle back down to Borșa (2½ hours).

Cabanas are scarce in this area, come prepared to camp out. Do not attempt to stray too far from these trails without a good map and compass.

SATU MARE

☞ 261 / pop 116,180

Satu Mare (Big Village), frequently clumped into the Maramureș region for the sake of guidebook simplicity (ahem), actually resides in Satu Mare county. Having spent a large part of modern history within Hungarian borders, the area has a substantial ethnic Hungarian population; many people still refer to the town by its former Hungarian name, Szatmar. It's also a strong contender for 'Ugliest Town in Romania' – a grand, communist architectural experiment which went horribly wrong. Nonetheless it has a certain charm because of its dubious looks, and demoralised locals are sincerely surprised and thrilled when travellers pass through. Still, you won't be buying postcards.

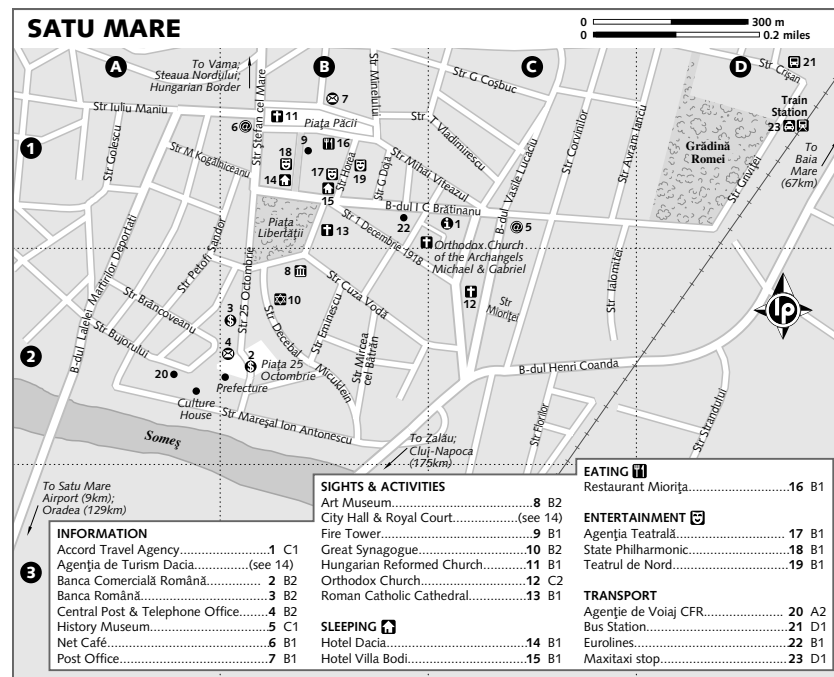
Orientation

The train and bus stations are adjacent at the northern end of Str Griviței, to the east of the centre. South of the centre, the Someș River crosses the town from east to west.

Information

CULTURAL CENTRES

Culture House (Centre Socio Cultural Franco Romanian; ☞ 0766-784 080) Has a film club and French library.



INTERNET ACCESS

History Museum (B-dul Vasile Lucaci 21; admission €0.75, per hr €0.30; ☞ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun)

Net Cafe (Stefan cel Mare 4; per hr €0.50; ☞ 9am-1am) Situated just off Piața Libertății.

MONEY

Banca Română (Str 25 Octombrie; ☞ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) Cashes travellers cheques, gives cash advances on Visa/Mastercard and has an ATM.

Banca Comercială Română (Str 25 Octombrie; ☞ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) Has the same facilities as Banca Română.

POST & TELEPHONE

Central post and telephone office (Str 25 Octombrie; ☞ 7am-7pm Mon-Fri)

Post office (Piața Păcii; ☞ 7.30am-7.30pm)

TOURIST INFORMATION & TRAVEL AGENCIES

Accord Travel agency (☞ 737 915; www.accord-travel.ro; B-dul IC Brătianu 7) These people speak the daylight hours out of English, sell maps of the region, arrange tours of Maramureș and rent cars. They can arrange private accommodation in rural homes for €15 to €20 per night.

Agencia de Turism Dacia (☞ 710 060; Piața Libertății 8; ☞ 9am-4pm Mon, Wed & Fri, 9am-5pm Tue & Thu, 10.30am-1.30pm Sat) Situated in Hotel Dacia, this agency sells tickets for international buses to Bucharest.

Sights

Satu Mare's sights are centred on or around Piața Libertății.

The town's **art museum** (cnr Str Cuza Vodă & Piața Libertății; admission €0.90; ☞ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun) is large enough to make it worth spending some time checking out local works.

PUTTING THE 'UG' IN UGLY

Since you're surrounded by them anyway, why not turn the tables and admire Satu Mare's pitiable buildings for their glorious tastelessness? Seek out, rank and even pose in front of the city's top eyesores. Popular opinion is that the prefecture building reigns Ugly Supreme, but keep an eye out for the building on Piața Libertății that is so shameful that they've tried to completely cover it with commercial banners.

On the northern side of the square is the former **city hall and royal court**, which now houses Hotel Dacia. Continuing north down the alleyway next to the hotel, you come to a courtyard, in the centre of which stands a 45m-tall **fire tower** (Turnul Pompierilor), built in 1904.

A **Roman Catholic cathedral** lies on the eastern side of Piața Libertății. Building began on the cathedral in 1786; its two towers were added in 1837. It was badly damaged during WWII and remained closed until restoration was completed in 1961.

On Piața Păcii, immediately north, is the town's large **Hungarian Reformed Church**. In front of the church is a statue of Ferenc Kőlcsey, who founded the Hungarian school next door. Satu Mare's Orthodox community worships at the **Orthodox church** at the eastern end of Str 1 Decembrie 1918.

Prior to WWII about 13,000 Jews lived in Satu Mare, which then boasted eight synagogues and a school. Most Jews were deported to death camps in 1944 and most of their synagogues destroyed, although the **Great Synagogue** (1920), located on Str Decebal, is still in use today.

Sleeping

Piața Libertății is ringed with three-star hotels. There are a few motels and camping north of the city.

Hotel Dacia (☎ 714 276/7; Piața Libertății 8; s/d 2-stars €25/32, s/d 3-stars €36/47; 📺) *Grande dame* of the lush, leafy square, with stately rooms.

Hotel Villa Bodi (☎ 710 861; villabodi@villabodi.ro; Piața Libertății 5; s/d €51/69; 📺) This plush 'villa' is dressed in an elegant 19th-century European style. It also has a sauna and Jacuzzi.

Eating & Drinking

Hotel Dacia (Piața Libertății 8; mains €4; 🕒 7am-midnight) This gorgeous, stately room looks primed for a royal reception – though the music suggests 'wedding reception'.

Restaurant Miorița (Str Mihai Viteazul 5; mains €4) Here, local cuisine is served in a sunny, green environment. Live bands play most nights.

Teatrul de Nord (☎ 715 876; Str Horea 5) This theatre has a popular outside bar during summer.

Entertainment

Posters advertising what is on where in the city – including underground dance parties – line walls and bollards.

The **State Philharmonic** (☎ 712 616; Piața Libertății 8) is tucked in an alleyway beside Hotel Dacia. Plays in Romanian are performed at the **Teatrul de Nord** (☎ 715 876; Str Horea 5). Tickets for both venues are sold at **Agentia Teatrală** (☎ 712 106; Str Horea 6; 🕒 10am-4pm Mon-Fri), opposite the Teatrul de Nord.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Satu Mare airport (☎ 768 640) is situated 9km south of the city on the main Oradea-Satu Mare road.

Tarom (www.tarom.ro) flies to Bucharest (single/return US\$75/124 plus about €4 tax each way) daily except Sunday. Tarom do not accept euros.

Carpatair (www.carpatair.ro) flies to Timișoara and beyond three times a week.

BUS

The **bus station** (autogară; ☎ 768 439) is a 10-minute walk east of the centre. Local daily services include 10 buses to Baia Mare (59km); and one each to Negrești-Oaș (50km), Oradea (133km) and Turț (35km).

Eurolines (☎ 710 995; satu.mare@eurolines.ro; Str IC Brătianu 5) offers the usual dazzling network of connections to everywhere.

A daily maxitaxi leaves from the **maxitaxi stop** outside the train station (Gara) for Budapest (€13).

TRAIN

Agentie de Voiaj CFR (☎ 721 202; Str Bujorului; 🕒 7am-7pm Mon-Fri) sells all train tickets.

There is one daily train to Budapest departing at 1.57am (€35). There are 10 daily trains to Baia Mare; one to Timișoara via Oradea (€9); three to Bucharest via Oradea or Baia Mare (€15); one to Cluj-Napoca (€8); and one daily to Constanța (summer only).

A taxi from the station to Piața Libertății costs €1.

ȚARA OĂȘULUI

☎ 261

Țara Oașului, literally 'Land of Oaș', refers to the geographical depression in the eastern part of Satu Mare district. The origin of the name is unclear although some say that Oaș is derived from the Hungarian word *vos* (iron), named after the supposed brutish, ironlike nature of the region's inhabitants. It certainly has a Wild West feel.

Several villages in the region cut loose in May/June during the **Festival of Sămbra Oilor**, which curiously celebrates the sheep departing for mountain pastures.

Turț

The northern village of Turț, 27km northeast of Satu Mare, is a colourful small town with houses painted chocolate-box pastels. Its centrepiece is a magnificent, new **Orthodox church** built and paid for by the town's 2300 families. Seven domes grace it and the interiors are painted with stunning scenes from the Old and New Testaments. It took five years to build and was finished in 2001.

Turț once boasted Romania's finest **pălincă factory**, producing the fiery plum brandy almost identical to traditional Romanian *țuică* except that it was distilled more than three times. The now-deserted factory is opposite strawberry fields, at the southern end of the village.

The remainders of the town's mining history lie in the southeastern part of Turț. From Satu Mare, follow the northbound Budapest road to Turulung village. Turț is signposted on the right just after the village. There's no hotel or restaurant here.

Negrești-Oaș & Around

Heading southeast from Turț, through the lakeside **Călinești-Oaș**, you come to **Negrești-Oaș**. The main reason for stopping in this small village is to visit the **Open-air Museum** (Muzeul Satului Oșenesc; admission €0.30; 🕒 10am-5pm Tue-Sun). Its small collection includes a traditional farm and pig sty from Moșișeni, a wine press from nearby Orașu Nou, and a felting mill and washing whirlpool, methods still used by vil-

lagers to wash clothes and rugs. There's also a small **Oaș History Museum** (Muzeul Țării Oașului; Str Victoriei) in the village.

Four kilometres south of Negrești-Oaș is **Vama**, historically a ceramics and pottery centre of which little evidence remains today. **Valea Măriei**, 2.5km west, is a small Alpine resort.

Four kilometres northwest of Negrești-Oaș (off the Călinești road) is **Bixad**, a 200-year-old hilltop monastery. It has great views and a beautiful church, which has just completed renovation work.

Sleeping & Eating

Popas Turistic Lacu Albastru (☎ 839 047; cabins €15) Located 1km southwest of Călinești-Oaș, opposite Albastru Lake, Popas Turistic has nine four-bed cabins, communal showers and a small bar-grill. You can camp at Popas Turistic or on the field opposite for €3.

Cabana Pintar (☎ 857 155; s/d/ste €17/23/29) As well as providing accommodation, this cabana, in Valea Măriei, also has a restaurant.

To reach the more attractive **Cabana Valea Măriei** (☎ 857 155; d/apt €23/29) and **Cabana Teilor** (d/apt €23/29), turn right along the forest track, immediately opposite Cabana Pintar. Cabana Teilor, at the end of the left fork, has a tennis court and a restaurant. Breakfast not included.

Getting There & Away

There are buses daily except Sunday from Satu Mare to Negrești-Oaș (1½ hours), from where they continue to Turț. This area is difficult to reach without private transport, so you may have to flag down a lift or jump on a horse and cart.

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