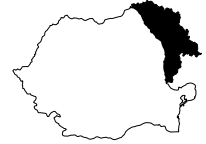


Moldova



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. Regrettably, news briefs that emerge from the region are punctuated by tales of civil war, breakaway republics, organised crime, human trafficking and a curious return to communism.

Landlocked and bounded by Romania and Ukraine, with the ethnic divisions to prove it, Moldova has come a long way in a short time and is arguably more advanced than EU-friendly Romania in many respects. The tourism focus is indisputably the country's wine industry, which produces staggeringly superb varietals and offers winery tours that will vanquish the stoutest of constitutions. Less celebrated are the attractions between the vineyards: sunflower fields, enormous watermelons, bucolic pastoral lands and the amazingly friendly people. Soberer diversions include remote monasteries cut into limestone cliffs and a rural backdrop inhabited by welcoming villagers.

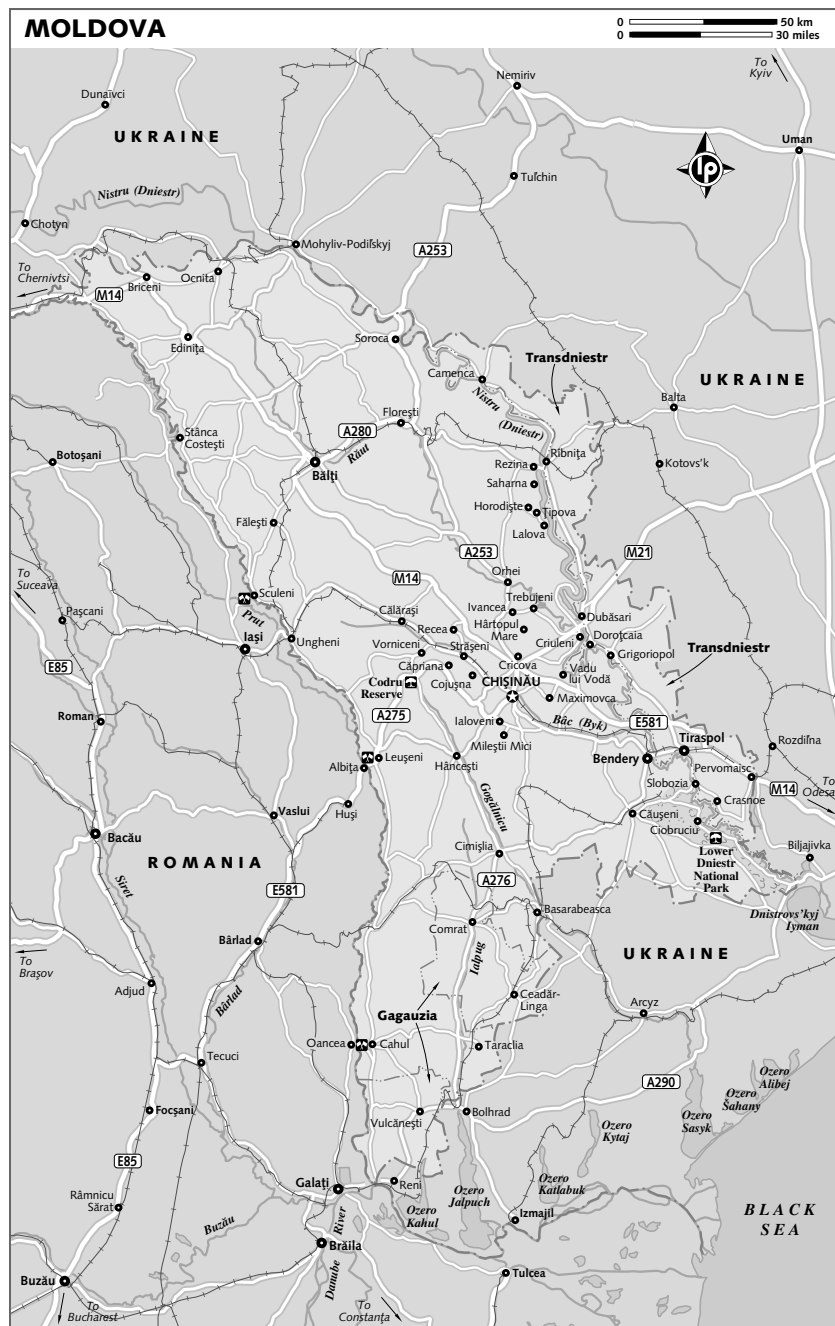
What could have been a fascinating ethnic mix went horribly wrong in the early 1990s. The Turkic Gagauz and the Soviet-bent Transdnestr areas recognised the opportunity and declared their respective independences almost simultaneously, which culminated in a bloody civil war. Today, Gagauz maintains a calm truce with Moldova, while the alluringly bizarre Transdnestr region is on the brink of reopening old wounds (see boxed text, p336).

While still in contention for the title of Poorest Country in Europe, Moldova's prices (particularly for accommodation) are unexpectedly high. Coming from Romania, expect to pay about the same for almost everything.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Gorge on the many dining gems found in **Chişinău** (p325) before diving into its kick-ass nightlife
- Stagger through organised or improvised **wine tours** (p329) at the country's world-famous vineyards
- Contemplate the lifestyles of 13th-century monks in the fantastic cave monasteries at **Orheiul Vechi** (p331) and **Țipova** (p332)
- Make a discreet visit to the living Soviet museum that is Transdnestr and its capital, **Tiraspol** (p337)
- Relax with likeminded Moldovans at the rural escapes of **Zimbet Camping** (p332) and **Satul Moldovenesc** (p331)





History

BESSARABIA

As with so many Eastern European countries, Moldova has been sliced, diced and tossed from one owner to another in its long history of settlement. Today's Moldova straddles two different historic regions divided by the Dniestr (Nistru) River. Historic Romanian Bessarabia incorporated the region west of the Dniestr, while tsarist Russia governed the territory east of the river (Transdnestr) after defeating the Turks in 1792.

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 it decided to unite with Romania, angering Moscow.

In 1924 the Soviet Union created the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (Moldavian ASSR) on the eastern banks of the Dniestr and later moved the capital from Balta (in present-day Ukraine) to Tiraspol.

WWII & SOVIETISATION

In June 1940 Romanian Bessarabia was occupied by the Soviet army in accordance with the secret protocol attached to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. The Soviet government immediately joined Bessarabia with the southern part of the Moldavian ASSR – namely, Transdnestr. This newly united territory was named the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (Moldavian SSR). The remaining northern part of the Moldavian ASSR was given back to the Ukrainian SSR. Bessarabia experienced terrifying Sovietisation, marked by the deportation of 300,000 Romanians. In June 1941 alone, 5000 families from Bessarabia were deported to Siberia.

In 1941 allied Romanian and German troops attacked the Soviet Union. Bessarabia and Transdnestr fell into Romanian hands. Thousands of Bessarabian Jews were rounded up in labour camps in Transdnestr, from where they were deported to Auschwitz.

In August 1944 the Soviet army reoccupied Transdnestr and Bessarabia and continued where they had left off. In 1949, 25,000 ethnic Moldovans (Romanians) were deported to Siberia and Kazakhstan, followed by some 250,000 between 1950 and 1952. Street names were also changed and Russian-style patronymics were included in people's names. To this day, most Moldovans, though non-Slavic,

have names like Andrei, Dimitri and Natasha – rarities in Romania.

Mikhail Gorbachev's policies of *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring) from 1986 onwards paved the way for the creation of the nationalist Moldovan Popular Front in 1989. In short order, Moldovan written in the Latin alphabet was reintroduced as the official state language and the Moldovan national flag (the Romanian tricolour with the Moldavian coat of arms in its centre) was reinstated. Transdnestr stuck to the red banner.

In June 1990 the Moldovan Supreme Soviet passed a declaration of sovereignty. Following the failed coup attempt against Gorbachev in Moscow in August 1991, Moldova declared its full independence.

THE BLOODY 1990S

Counteracting these nationalist sentiments was an emerging desire for autonomy among ethnic minority groups. In Transdnestr 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 Transdnestrans declared independence, establishing the Dniestr Moldovan Republic. In presidential elections, Igor Smirnov came out as head of Transdnestr, and Stepan Topal as head of Gagauzia.

Whereas Gagauzia didn't press for more than autonomy within Moldova, Transdnestr would settle 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 Transdnestr when Moldovan

CURRENCY NOTE

All prices in this chapter are quoted in US dollars to keep in line with the practice of Moldovan businesses using dollars rather than euros in their price lists.

police clashed with Transdniestran 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 cease-fire 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 Transdniestran troops to be stationed in the region. Troops remain here today, maintaining an uneasy peace.

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 comprising monies sent home from emigrants working abroad, an unproductive economic dependency is developing. Long-term domestic cultivation will be required to counteract this dependency.

In February 2001, Moldova became the first former Soviet state to elect a communist as its president.

National Parks & Protected Areas

Moldova has one nascent national park: the Lower Dniestr National Park (Parcul Național Nistru Inferior), administered by the non-profit environmental organisation **Biotica** (☎ 22-498 837; www.biotica-moldova.org). Covering more than 50,000 hectares of land southeast of Chișinău, it hugs the Dniestr River southward to the border of Ukraine. Formal opening of the park has been delayed due to lack of government support. See p333 for more information.

In addition to this, 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 and most frequently visited, boasts 924 plant species, 138 kinds of birds and 45 mammals. Biotica can provide information about trips to these sites.

Language

In short, the language is confusing. You might hear Moldovans referring to it as *limba de stat* (state language) or *limba noastră* (our language). Debate about whether or not there is such a language as Moldovan at all continues

to rage among nationalist circles. The language spoken here is essentially Romanian, but nationalists wishing either to distance themselves from Romanians (who are not overly beloved here), or to snuggle up to Russia, doggedly insist there is such a language as Moldovan.

The debate was briefly rekindled after the publishing of the *Dicționar Moldovenesc-Românesc* in 2003, a Moldovan-Romanian 'dictionary' by Vasile Stati, financed entirely by the Ministry of Culture in a politically (ie communist) motivated move to separate Moldova from Romania. More of a compendium of slang than an actual dictionary, its publication caused a passing scandal but was greeted overall with laughter and dismissal by the general population who know they speak Romanian, no matter what you call it.

The Soviet regime from 1924 onwards attempted to manufacture a 'new' language for its newly created Moldavian ASSR to pave the way for the incorporation of Bessarabia in 1940. Under Soviet 'tutelage', Romanian was written with the Cyrillic alphabet – until 1989! New words were also invented and lists of Romanian words 'polluting Moldovan' were drawn up. Some minor differences between Romanian and 'Moldovan' can be heard, and there are varied local expressions. Still, linguists agree that 'Moldovan' is at best a Romanian dialect; roughly equivalent to the difference between the English spoken in England and in America. The word *mântenesc* is sometimes used for 'thank you' instead of *mulțumesc*.

Recent changes to Romanian have been slow to take root in Moldova; thus you will still see the letter *i* rather than the contemporary *â*. Almost everyone in the republic speaks Russian fluently, and you'll find many flyers, posters and business cards written in Russian only, particularly in Chișinău. In Transdniestra and Gagauzia, Russian is what you'll see on most signs and hear on the street, though Romanian is generally understood.

Though it has been downplayed considerably since 2001 when the communists got back into power, 31 August remains National Language Day, a national holiday. Falling just after Independence Day and just before the first day of classes, it's mainly considered to be an extension of the former, serving as a convenient preparation day for students and, alas, devoid of flamboyant parades with monstrous inflatable dictionaries.

Dangers & Annoyances

While you might occasionally run into Soviet-style bureaucracy, it's much less an issue here than in Russia; people – even officials! – are generally open and accommodating. While street crime is low (there simply aren't enough foreigners to make this a viable occupation), flashing wealth around, as in any country, is not advisable, especially in places where you might stand out. Be wary of pickpockets on crowded buses and at train stations.

Travelling in the self-declared republic of Transdniestra can be wearying from a harassment-by-authorities perspective, but is still safe overall. Avoid sticking your nose into military objects and installations, no matter how pure your intentions.

Bucharest-style restaurant pricing scams are emerging in Chișinău, particularly in tourist-friendly basement joints with live music and wood-fire ovens (hint, hint). Never order anything, especially wine, without confirming the price *in writing* (eg on the menu) to avoid surprises on the bill, and be aware of the menu switcheroo. If you've been victimised, resist the urge to shred the receipts in a fury: save them for a police report.

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

Getting There & Away

Moldova is way off the beaten tourist track. Few trains and buses come here from further away than Romania, Ukraine and Hungary and, while flights from Western Europe are increasing, EasyJet won't be touching down here in the foreseeable future. While not a budget airline, **Carpatair** (www.carpatair.com) has begun service into Chișinău, via Timișoara, which is often cheaper than the competition, though occasionally Air Moldova under-cuts it. Most tourists find it easiest to enter via Romania, from where connections are frequent and easy. For an up-to-date list of all the open and traversable road borders into Moldova, see www.turism.md/eng/content/69.

People requiring visas for Moldova can usually pick one up upon arrival by air or road, but *not* when entering by train. If you try to enter by train and have not acquired a visa in advance, you will be turfed at the border and possibly arrested! The border crossing at Ungheni, Romania, does not have visa-issuing facilities. Cross at Sculeni.

NOT EXACTLY A NATIONAL SPORT

Did you know that Moldova is world famous for its underwater hockey teams? Well, OK, *infamously* 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 came out 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 (on probably the only occasion that Transdniestran 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!

BRIBE ME UP, BRIBE ME DOWN

The good news is that Moldovan police are getting a better income. The bad news is that a lucrative, tax-free second income is still hard to resist.

Whether you're a life-long resident or a fresh-faced visitor, submitting to police shakedowns for bribes is a fact of life in Moldova. Drivers are the most vulnerable, routinely being stopped for running 'red lights' or not yielding to cars tens of metres down the road. There's no attempt at subtlety; once the police have concluded with one slightly poorer driver, they stop the very next passing car and go to work on its driver, like an assembly line.

Travellers are occasionally stopped at random on the street for passport checks. It's important to know that *not having your passport on your person is a serious offence*, or so we're told. That settled, accusations may be levelled, with grimmer and grimmer consequences surfacing as the minutes wear on. As long as you haven't done something patently illegal you're not likely to get into much trouble, but particularly insistent officers have been known to throw defiant tourists in their cars and drive them around for hours for 'looking suspicious'. Note: staggering around drunk and alone after clubbing effectively invites this kind of harassment.

Expats living in Moldova report that the tap on the shoulder only happens once a month or so, but getting away without some kind of handout is virtually unheard of. Most problems can be solved with a \$7 to \$20 'fine', payable immediately. Just don't ask for a receipt.

Those requiring a letter of invitation to enter Moldova – which included people from Australia and New Zealand at the time of writing – will need to be carrying the original copy of the letter. Scanned, faxed or photocopied copies are not accepted.

If entering Moldova via some parts of Ukraine, you will pass through Transdnestr, where you might have to purchase a visitor's pass at the border. You will then be stopped when leaving Transdnestr to enter Moldova proper and made to pay a small fine. In this instance, make sure your passport gets a properly dated Moldovan entry stamp or there'll be trouble when you try to leave. For more information on visas, see p355.

CHIŞINĂU

☎ 22 / pop 664,325

In Chişinău (kish-i-now in Moldovan, kish-i-nyov in Russian) fleets of BMWs and Mercedes dominate traffic, while fashionably dressed youths 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 the conspicuously bold acts committed by 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 vi-

brant, good-natured city have long since dismissed these oddities in favour of what really counts: having a good time.

While photographs of Chişinău tend to show sprawling concrete esplanades smartly bookended by concrete apartment blocks, this is probably the cosiest of all the Soviet-style cities rebuilt after WWII (it was totally destroyed by bombardment and a 1940 earthquake). Just a block away from the main drag you don't feel the concrete at all through the lush foliage that holds the city in its embrace. First chronicled in 1420, Chişinău boasts wide avenues, pleasant parks, and is circled by yet more parks and lakes.

Visitors always marvel at how funky the city is; the communist government that's been in power since 2001 hasn't put a damper on the nightlife, which swings until the morning hours. One of the positive Soviet legacies the Moldovans inherited is a very Slavic attitude towards enjoying life – at all hours.

Jews used to comprise 35% of the city's population in 1913; today the figure is about 3%, though recent years have seen a reactivation of the community. In 1903 Chişinău was the scene of a pogrom that resulted in the murder of 49 Jews, with 500 injured and 1500 homes and shops vandalised; this was in response to rumours that Jews had ritually killed a Christian boy in Dubaşari to make unleavened Passover bread. See www.shtetlinks.jewishgen.org/kishinev/index for more information about Jewish Chişinău.

More than half of Chişinău's population today is Moldovan; Russians comprise 25% and Ukrainians 13%. As such, the Russian language is widely used in the city. The city celebrates – and how! – its City Day on 14 October, which bleeds into the Wine Festival, which takes place in the first weeks of October.

Chişinău's location in the centre of the country makes it an excellent base for day or several-day excursions to other parts of Moldova; it's usually possible to drive anywhere in the small republic and back in a day.

Orientation

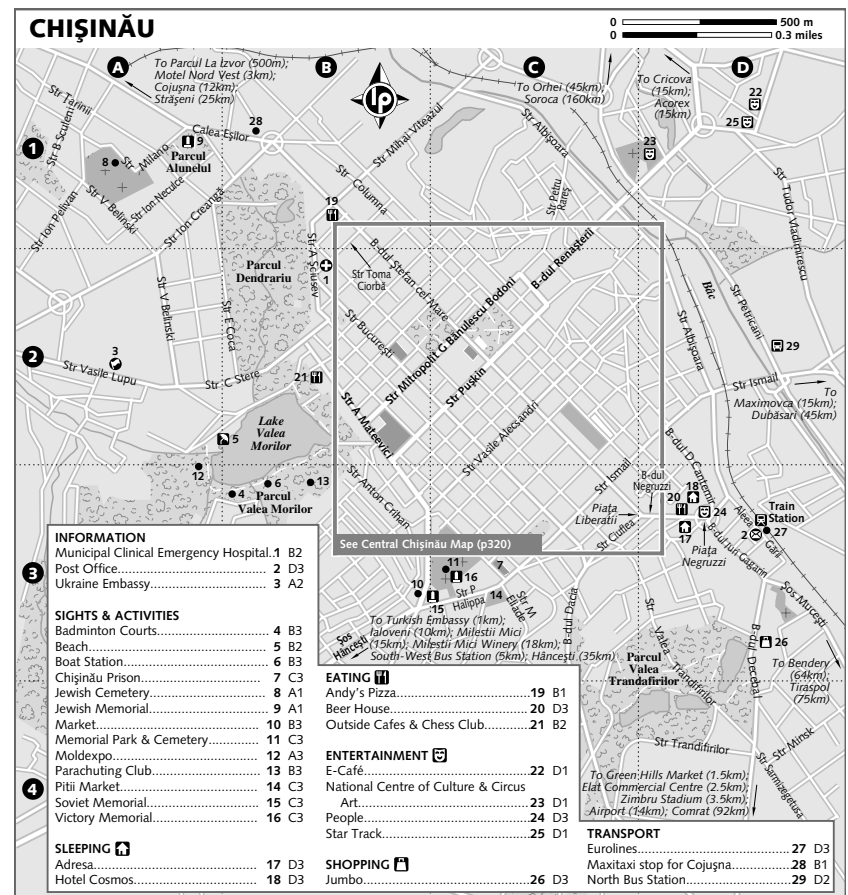
Chişinău's street layout is a typically Soviet grid system of straight streets.

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

MAPS & PUBLICATIONS

Some city and country maps are still around from the Soviet era, but they're as large as a city block. *Chişinău the Touristic Scheme* (\$1.50), published by Strih SRL, is a good reference.

Strih SRL also puts out a user-friendly map of Chişinău and Moldova (\$1.50), sold in most bookstores.



treasure of pertinent Moldova information, where she offers prompt personal assistance (within reason) via email as a public service to her beloved country. While there are several excellent guides in Moldova, Marisha is the only one determinedly trying to reach out and help travellers prior to arrival.

Other good contacts:

Radu Sargu (☎ 0691-389 53; www.moldova-travel.com) Arranges apartment rentals and provides local information.

Valery Bradu (☎ 227 850, 0794-629 86; valbrdu@yahoo.com; guiding per hr incl car, gas & driver \$19) A Chişinău-based guide since 2000.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Most travel agencies will give general tourist information and offer discounted rates at some hotels.

Moldovar Tur (Map p320; ☎ 270 488; moldovatur@travels.md; B-dul Ştefan cel Mare 4; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) This official state tourist agency can arrange tours of the Cricova winery (see Wine Route, p329; slightly more expensive than dealing with Cricova directly, but with fewer headaches) and other vineyard tours. It can also find you chauffeured cars.

România Tourism Office (Map p320; ☎ 222 354; B-dul Ştefan cel Mare 4; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) Get info about Romania and make advance bookings here.

Solei Tours (Map p320; ☎ 271 314; www.solei.md; B-dul Negruzzi 5; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-5pm Sun) This very efficient organisation can book accommodation and transport tickets but is known for multiday excursions into remote Moldova, taking in monasteries and places of interest and incorporating rural homestays.

Voiaj International (Map p320; ☎ 547 769; www.voiaj.md; B-dul Negruzzi 7; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat) This experienced, customer-friendly agency runs all sorts of tours throughout the country, books plane tickets and can get anything else you need done.

Sights & Activities

No one can accuse Chişinău 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. Sadly, little remains of its historic heart due to heavy bombing during WWII. There are still some great museums and parks, however, and it is fun to see how communist iconography merges with symbols of Moldovan nationalism.

Begin smack in the centre, where Chişinău's best-known parks oppose each other diagonally, forming two diamonds at the city's core. The highlights here are the Holy Gates (1841),

more commonly known as Chişinău's own **Arc de Triomphe** (Map p320). To its east sprawls **Parcul Catedralei** (Cathedral Park; Map p320), dominated by the city's main **Orthodox Cathedral** (Map p320) with its lovely bell tower from 1836. On the northwestern side of the park is a colourful 24-hour **flower market** (Map p320).

Government House (Map p320; Piaţa Marii Adunări Naţionale), where cabinet meets, is the gargantuan building opposite the Holy Gates. Parliament convenes in **Parliament House** (Map p320; B-dul Ştefan cel Mare 123) further north. Opposite this is the **Presidential Palace** (Map p320).

Grădina Publică Ştefan Cel Mareşi Sfint (Ştefan cel Mare Park; Map p320) is the city's main strolling, cruising area. The park entrance is guarded by a 1928 **statue** (Map p320) of Ştefan himself. The medieval prince of Moldavia is the greatest symbol of Moldova's strong, brave past. Every Moldovan will be happy to tell you that during Ştefan's 40-year reign, he lost a mere two battles (out of anywhere from 34 to 47, depending on your source's level of enthusiasm). In the northeast section of the park is the large **Cinema Patria** (Map p320; ☎ 232 905; B-dul Ştefan cel Mare 103), built by German prisoners of war in 1947, and still showing films to this day.

The **central market** (Map p320; Piaţa Centrală; ☎ 7am-5pm) spreads out across a huge area along Str Mitropolit Varlaam, around the bus station. The constant activity of the bustling crowds and tradespeople is reminiscent of Istanbul. Porters scurry around with trolleys to carry goods away, cars honk like crazy as they madly try to squeeze through the bustling crowds, women spit out sunflower seeds and old men huddle in groups gaggling for the best bargain.

JEWISH CHIŞINĂU

North of the central bus station is a maze of run-down, dusty streets. Many of these formed the Chişinău Jewish ghetto. On the street leading east from B-dul Renaşterii to Str Fantalului is a **memorial** (Map p320) to the martyrs and victims of the Chişinău ghetto, inscribed in Hebrew, Moldovan and Russian. At Str Rabbi Țirilson 4 are the remains of a **yeshiva** (Map p320), Chişinău's Jewish school, which functioned until WWII. Chişinău's only remaining working **synagogue** (Map p320) is close by at Str Habad Lubavia 8. Before WWII there were more than 70 synagogues in Chişinău, each serving a different trade. Glass blowers worshipped at this one.

The city's **Jewish cemetery** (Map p319; Str Milano) is northwest of the centre, next to Parcul Alunelul. Most graves are unkempt and overgrown. Ruins of an old synagogue lie next to the cemetery's surrounding stone wall. In Parcul Alunelul there is a **memorial** (Map p319) to the Jews killed in the 1903 pogrom. The remains of the victims were moved here after the cemetery in which they were buried was bulldozed by the communists in the 1960s. To get to the park and cemetery take bus 1 from B-dul Ştefan cel Mare and get off at the Parcul Alunelul stop. Cross the road and walk up the hill and along Str Milano.

MUSEUMS

The **National Archaeology & History Museum** (Map p320; ☎ 242 194; muzeum@mac.md; Str 31 August 1989, 121A; admission/photo \$1.15/0.75; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sat) is the granddaddy of Chişinău's museums, and well worth visiting. It has 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 in northern Siberia. A statue of Lupoaiac 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.

The **Muzeul de Arte Plastice** (National Museum of Fine Arts; Map p320; ☎ 241 312; Str 31 August 1989, 115; admission \$1.15; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) has an interesting collection of contemporary European (mostly Romanian and Moldovan) art, folk art, icons and medieval knick-knacks. Opposite is the **National Library** (Map p320; ☎ 221 475; Str 31 August 1989, 78a; ☎ 9am-5pm Sat-Thu).

National Ethnographic and Nature Museum (Map p320; ☎ 244 002; Str M Kogălniceanu 82; admission/tour in English \$1.15/8; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) has some pop art, lots of stuffed animals and exhibits covering the sciences of geology, botany and zoology. The highlight is a life-sized reconstruction of a mammal skeleton that was discovered in the Rezina region in 1966.

A few blocks south of here is the state university. Nearby is the **Chişinău History Museum** (Map p320; ☎ 241 584; Str A Mateevici 60A; admission \$0.40; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun). It's a treat mainly for the old water tower (1892) it's housed in. The museum was inexplicably closed at the time of writing. This is the main meeting place for the Chişinău branch of the notorious **Hash House**

Harriers (www.ch3.md). Their bimonthly runs and drink-fests to oblivion start here.

Several blocks northeast of the central parks is the **Pushkin Museum** (Map p320; ☎ 292 685; Str Anton Pann 19; admission/tour in English \$1.15/7; ☎ 10am-4pm Tue-Sun), housed in a cottage where Russian poet Alexandr Pushkin (1799-1837) spent an exiled period between 1820 and 1823. It was here that he wrote *The Prisoner of the Caucasus* and other classics – that is, when he wasn't involved in the amorous intrigues, hard drinking and occasional violence of his social circles in what was then a rough-around-the-edges distant outpost of the Russian empire.

SOUTH OF THE CENTRE

Bounded by Str A Mateevici and Str Ismail is a **memorial park** (Map p319), dominated by a **victory memorial** to the Soviet army in 1945. An eternal flame burns in the centre in memory of Chişinău's unknown soldiers who died in WWII. Soldiers' graves line the boundaries of the park and there is a small **military cemetery** at its northern end. In the centre of the park is a memorial to those who died during the fight for Moldovan independence in the early nineties. At the far northern end of the park is the **civil cemetery** (Cimitrul Central; Map p320), known locally as the Armenian cemetery, whose main entrance is on the corner of Str A Mateevici and Str Armenească. The blue-and-silver-domed **All Saints Church** (Map p320) in the centre of the cemetery dates from 1830.

The overcrowded **Chişinău Prison** (Map p319) is one block east, opposite the **Pitii Market** (Map p319; ☎ 7am-4pm).

South of the cemeteries, on the corner of Str P Halippa and Str Vasile Alecsandri, is another typically monstrous **Soviet memorial** (Map p319), with a small **market** (Map p319; ☎ 7am-4pm) opposite it.

A small **open-air military exhibition** (Map p320; nr Str 31 August 1989 & Str Tighina; admission \$0.10; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) displays Soviet-made tanks, fighter planes and other military toys inherited by Moldova's armed forces. Kids like to swing from the plane wings and tank guns.

PARKS & LAKES

Chişinău locals' favoured haunt is **Lake Valea Morilor** (Map p319), just west of the centre. Steps lead to the lake and surrounding park from Str A Mateevici (opposite the university). Bus 29a from the city centre stops outside the university entrance to the park.

The **beach** (Map p319) on the lake's north-western shores gets packed with sunbathers and swimmers at weekends. You can hire canoes, rowing and paddle boats from the **boat station** (Map p319; per hr \$2; ☎ 24hr Apr-Oct) on the lake's southern shores. There are **badminton courts** (Map p319) close to the university sports school on the southern shore. High-flyers should hike up to the **parachuting club** (Map p319; ☎ 223 563; per jump \$2; ☎ 8am-11pm), just back from the southeastern side of the lake. Get strapped in and plummet 40m on the parachute jump machine – the views are great from the top, where your stomach is likely to remain.

Moldexpo (Map p319; ☎ 747 419; Str Ghiocelilor 1), also inside Parcul Valea Morilor, is an enormous international exhibition centre hosting major expositions. Many tourists come here, however, to see the demoted communist triumvirate of Lenin, Marx and Engels guarding the entrance. Though they were ignominiously moved here from a prize spot in front of the Parliament building, the pedestals are often overflowing with flowers.

Northwest of the centre on the road to Cojuşna and Ungheni is Chişinău's largest park, **Parcul La Izvor**, on Calea Eşilor. It is dominated by three interconnecting lakes, which you can explore with hired **canoes and rowing boats** (per hr from \$2). Opposite the park's southern entrance is a **cable-car station** (per trip \$0.30; ☎ 7am-noon & 1-7pm Mon-Sat) that makes a three-minute journey across the valley. To get to the park, take trolleybus 1, 8 or 23 to the last stop. Maxitaxi (microbus) 11 runs from Str Studenţilor in the centre to Calea Eşilor.

Sleeping

BUDGET
Check out www.marisha.net for cheap home-stays in Chişinău.

Hotel Zarea (Map p320; ☎ 227 625; Str Anton Pann 4; s/d shared bathroom \$10/20, 'deluxe' d \$30) This drab high-rise has dour, smoky rooms that are priced appropriately. There's a bar and billiard club. Breakfast not included.

our pick Adresa (Map p319; ☎ 544 392; www.adresa.md; B-dul Negruzzi 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. Though 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 or climbing staircases somewhat less than sparkling. Still, they're all safe and clean. Check out the photo album of options before you agree on one and see where the apartment is on the map. Most aren't right in the centre but are a short taxi ride away.

Hotel Turist (Map p320; ☎ 220 637; B-dul Renaşterii 13; s \$26-50, d \$25) For a cool blast of the Soviet past, try this friendly place: it overlooks a giant Soviet memorial to communist youth and sports a snazzy socialist mural on its façade. Rooms are comfortable, if slightly kitsch. The low-end singles are in tatty condition.

Motel Nord Vest (☎ 759 828; Calea Eşilor 30; s/d \$38/51) This pleasant 100-bed motel is 3km to the northwest of the centre on the main Chişinău-Cojuşna highway. It has a tennis court, sauna and excellent restaurant and bar. Maxitaxi (minibus) 135 and 136 as well as all buses to Cojuşna stop right in front.

MIDRANGE

Hotel Naţional (Map p320; ☎ 540 305; www.moldovatur.travels.md; B-dul Ştefan cel Mare 4; s/d \$47/60; ☎ ☎) This 17-floor giant and its 319 ho-hum, mildly overpriced rooms is run by Moldova Tur. There are good services here like a small post office, a medical care room, shops, internet café, bar and restaurant.

Hotel Cosmo (Map p319; ☎ 542 757; cosmos@moldova.net; Piaţa Negruzzi 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 near the station.

TOP END

Mesogios (Map p320; ☎ 278 498; Str Armenească 23; apts \$86-162; ☎ ☎) Each of these beautiful, ultra-modern apartments is slightly different, some split level, some with restored furniture, and all of them fully equipped and with kitchenettes. The building, peeking through some trees on a quiet stretch of road, is a lovely example of Art Nouveau.

Flowers (Map p320; ☎ 260 202; hotelflowers@hotmail.com; Str Anestiade 7; s/d \$153/204; ☎ ☎ ☎) If your credit limit's in good standing, this is the place. 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. Public internet access included.

Jolly Alon (Map p320; ☎ 232 233; www.jollyalon.com; Str Maria Cibotari 37; s/d/ste \$172/204/249; ☎ ☎) The enticing sofas at reception are enough to make you want to check in immediately. Though the rooms aren't quite as luxurious, they are very spacious, some with balconies. Be sure to ask for one with a view over the park. In-room internet extra.

Eating

The assortment of great places to eat in Chişinău deserves a separate chapter; these are some of the best, but we encourage you to explore others that look interesting. See also Drinking (p326, as many pubs also have full menus).

CAFÉS & QUICK EATS

When the sun shines, outdoor cafés sprout like mushrooms. A popular terrace is outside the Opera & Ballet Theatre (p327). There are also some good outdoor cafés across the road from the main entrance to the university on Str A Mateevici and in the opposite courtyard leading to Parcul Valea Morilor. At the northern end of Str A Mateevici is another courtyard filled with outdoor cafés (Map p319) and chess fiends. The chess club is in the same courtyard.

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 is less than \$1. Most go there for beer and vodka shots.

Café (Map p320; Str Puşkin 22; mains \$1-2; ☎ 11am-11pm) This no-name cafeteria serves surprisingly succulent food priced for the university crowd.

Andy's Pizza (Map p319; ☎ 210 210; B-dul Ştefan cel Mare 169; mains \$2-4; ☎ 7.30am-11pm) This popular chain has locations all around Chişinău, but this is its most stylish branch, with a high-tech look that makes it popular with a young, on-the-move clientele. The thick and gooey pizzas, spaghetti and chicken wings keep clients happily purring.

Green Hills Café (Map p320; ☎ 223 295; B-dul Ştefan cel Mare 77; mains \$4-10; ☎ 8.30am-10pm Mon-Sat, 10am-10pm Sun) Though the meals are delicious, most come here for a quick fix – great coffee, cocktails or beer, and of course to people-watch while sitting on the city's main drag.

our pick Cactus Café (Map p320; ☎ 504 094; www.cactus.md; Str Armenească 41; mains \$4-8; ☎ 9am-10pm) This is a true winner. The eclectic interior décor (Wild West meets urban bohemian, but with grace and humour) is matched by the city's most creative menu. There are incredible breakfasts (a rarity in these parts), lots of vegetarian meals (soy meat!), wild plates such as turkey with bananas and the country's most killer gazzpacho.

RESTAURANTS

Class (Map p320; ☎ 227 774; Str Vasile Alecsandri 121; mains \$4; ☎ 11am-midnight) One of the country's rare Lebanese restaurants, Class doesn't disappoint with excellent starters, falafel and eggplant dishes. It offers waterpipes (\$2.50), live music

MAKE NEW FRIENDS

As the locals are friendly and outgoing, 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 şi Zdub and Gândul Măţei.

Zdob şi Zdub (zdoob-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-Chilli-Peppers sound fusion. In 2005, with little preparation and virtually no financial support from its own government, 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 Măţei (gun-dool muts-eh; www.gm.md) nimbly runs 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 Chişinău.

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

every night and exotic dancing on Friday and Saturday evenings.

Green Hills Restaurant (Map p320; ☎ 220 451; Str 31 August 1989, 78; mains \$4-10; 🍷 9am-midnight) This is run by the same bunch who operate the Green Hills café and supermarket, featuring the same menu. There's a large, extremely pleasant terrace that's perfect for a sit-down meal from the large selection of meat and vegetable dishes.

Oraşul Vechi (Old City; Map p320; ☎ 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. The grill house in the back has an open view into the gabled kitchen with wood-fire oven. Fish is the speciality with shark and octopus on the un-PC section of the menu.

Symposium (Map p320; ☎ 211 318; Str 31 August 1989, 78A; mains \$5-10; 🍷 11am-midnight) Though not as expensive as some top-class restaurants in town, this can be called one of the city's top dining experiences in terms of elegance and refinement. In this cellar refitted with antiques, the French-style cuisine is succulent, with lamb dishes the speciality. There's a large selection of local wines.

Vila Vechi (Map p320; ☎ 225 526; Str Mihai Eminescu 44/1; mains \$4-11; 🍷 11am-midnight) An elegant Moldovan restaurant, tastefully decorated in stone and modern art with a covered terrace done in a zebra-stripe motif.

El Paso (Map p320; ☎ 504 400; Str Armenească 10; mains \$4-15; 🍷 noon-11pm) To get your Mexican fix, head to this excellent, comfortable place. The menu runs the gamut from quesadillas to salmon in chilli sauce and pork with chocolate-almond sauce!

Mesogios (Map p320; ☎ 278 498; Str Armenească 23; mains \$5-12; 🍷 12.30am-11pm) Seafood is the focus here, with fish imported from the Mediterranean. There are meat dishes and Moldovan specialities too in this elegant dining room which incorporates some Art Nouveau design elements to match the building's impressive exterior.

our pick Beer House (Map p319; ☎ 275 627; B-dul Negruzi 6/2; mains \$4-14; 🍷 11am-11pm) Of all Chişinău's hot dining places, you'll be returning to this brewery-cum-restaurant again and again – most likely for its delicious home-brewed beers, but also for its great 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.

SELF-CATERING

The **central market** (Map p320; Piaţa Centrală; 🍷 7am-5pm) has since 1825 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 Bendery and Str Armenească. There's always something going on here at all times of the day or night.

Slightly out of the centre is **Green Hills Market** (B-dul Decebal 139B; 🍷 9am-9pm) – one of the best-stocked supermarkets in town. Its B-dul Ştefan cel Mare 77 location (Map p320) has a good grocery section too, and is more convenient.

Drinking

Coliba Studenţilor (Map p320; 🍷 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.

Dublin Irish Pub (Map p320; ☎ 245 855; Str Bulgară 27; pint of beer \$5.50; 🍷 noon-11pm) The atmosphere is always lively at this expensive but popular Celtic-cum-Moldovan Irish pub. While the bar is the highlight, the restaurant is a temptation as well with tantalising dishes such as Cock-a-leekie (leek with duck, chicken, prunes and veggies stewed in Guinness), 'slappy joe' and a classic Irish stew (mains \$2.50 to \$12).

Dejă Vu (Map p320; ☎ 227 693; Str Bucureşti 67; 🍷 11am-2am) This is a true cocktail bar, where the drinks menu is extensive and where the bartenders twirl glasses with aplomb. There is also a small dining hall serving meals, but most people come here to lounge about looking fabulous with multicoloured cocktails perched in their hands.

Robin Pub (Map p320; Str Alexandru cel Bun 83; 🍷 11am-midnight) A friendly local pub feel reigns supreme in this relaxed, tastefully decorated hang-out with an extravagant menu (mains \$5 to \$11). An ideal place to forget about the world for hours in a down-to-earth, unpretentious atmosphere.

Entertainment

Posters listing what's on where are pasted on the *teatrul concertate* noticeboard outside the Opera & Ballet Theatre on B-dul Ştefan cel Mare. The English-language magazine *Welcome* runs a fortnightly calendar of cultural events.

CLUBS

Chişinău rocks in all directions throughout the night, but be prepared to walk through metal detectors and deal with tough-guy posturing from goonish doormen at some of the larger clubs. Entry fees range from \$3 to \$12.

People (Map p319; ☎ 275 800; B-dul Negruzi 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 the next-door strip club, but the real action is on the dance floor. The crowd is mainly early 20s, though 'middle-aged customers are also welcome'.

City Club (Map p320; Str 31 August 1989, 121; 🍷 10pm-2am) 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.

Star Track (Map p319; ☎ 496 207; Str Kiev 7; 🍷 10pm-4am Tue-Sun) The centrepiece of the Rîşcani district nightlife, its dark interior sports comfortable sofas and intimate booths where love-struck couples can smooch while scrutinizing the dance performances by lace-clad men and women. Under Star Track is the less titillating but equally popular Military Pub.

E-Café (Map p319; ☎ 0691-326 81; B-dul Moscovei 1/2; entrance \$5) Also in Rîşcani, behind McDonald's, this club hosts jazz shows on Sunday nights (7pm).

CIRCUS

Itching to see the man on the flying trapeze? Head to the loftily titled **National Centre of Culture & Circus Art** (Map p319; ☎ 496 803; B-dul Renaşterii 33; 🍷 box office 9am-6pm). Performances are held at 6.30pm Friday, and at noon, 3pm and 6.30pm on Saturday and Sunday. Bus 27 from B-dul Ştefan cel Mare goes there. Renovations were under way at the time of writing.

LIVE MUSIC

Classical concerts and organ recitals are held at the **Sala cu Orgă** (Organ Hall; Map p320; ☎ 225 404; B-dul Ştefan cel Mare 79) next to the Mihai Eminescu National Theatre. Performances start at 6pm; tickets are sold at the door.

Moldova's National Philharmonic is based at the **Philharmonic Concert Hall** (Map p320; ☎ 224 505; Str Mitropolit Varlaam 78).

SPECTATOR SPORTS

Moldovans are big football fans and Chişinău 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; Map p320), south of the centre, has floodlighting. **Dinamo Stadium** (Stadionul Dinamo; Map p320) is north of the centre on Str Bucureşti. Moldovans like football so much, in fact, there's an American football team called the Chişinău Barbarians, who hold occasional matches, in full gear.

THEATRE, OPERA & BALLET

The **Opera & Ballet Theatre** (Map p320; ☎ 244 163; B-dul Ştefan cel Mare 152; 🍷 box office 10am-2pm & 5-7pm) is home to the esteemed national opera and ballet company. It mainly stages classics but some modern pieces are occasionally performed. Tickets costs upwards of \$3.

If your Romanian is up to snuff, you'll get a few belly laughs from the plays staged at the **Satirical Theatre** (Teatrul Satiric; Map p320; ☎ 224 034; Str Mihai Eminescu 55). Contemporary Romanian productions can be seen at the **Mihai Eminescu National Theatre** (Map p320; ☎ 221 177; B-dul Ştefan cel Mare 79; 🍷 box office 11am-1pm & 2-6.30pm) founded in 1933, while plays in Russian are performed at the **Chekhov Drama Theatre** (Teatrul Dramatic A Cehov; Map p320; ☎ 223 362; Str Pîrcălab 75), situated where Chişinău's choral synagogue was until WWII.

The **Lucaşfăru Theatre** (Poetic Star Youth Theatre; Map p320; ☎ 224 121; Str Veronica Mide 7) stages more alternative productions. Productions in Moldovan and Russian are held at the **Licurici Puppet Theatre** (Map p320; ☎ 245 273; Str 31 August 1989, 121; 🍷 box office 9am-2pm Tue-Sun). Performances the kids will enjoy despite the language barrier usually start at 11am daily.

Various cabarets, musicals and local theatre group productions take place at the **National Palace** (Map p320; ☎ 213 544; Str Puşkin 21; 🍷 box office 11am-5pm).

Shopping

Cricova (Map p320; ☎ 222 775; B-dul Ştefan cel Mare 126; 🍷 10am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat, 10am-4pm Sun) This commercial outlet of the Cricova wine factory is definitely worth a visit, especially if you won't be taking the winery tour (see p329). It stocks many types of affordable Cricova wines and champagnes (only \$2 to \$5 each), and the crystal glasses from which to drink them.

Mileştii Mici (Map p320; ☎ 211 229; www.milestii-mici.md; Str Vasile Alecsandri, 137; 🍷 9am-4pm Mon-Sat) This

major wine producer (also see p330) also has outlets on the 1st floor of the Elat Commercial Centre (4km southeast of the centre) and at the airport.

Ialoveni (Map p320; B-dul Ştefan cel Mare 128; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat & Sun) The outlet for the Ialoveni sherry factory.

Unic Shopping Centre (Map p320; B-dul Ştefan cel Mare 8; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Sat) This main shopping centre is redolent of Soviet times but will have everything you need.

Galeria L (Map p320; ☎ 221 975; Str Bucureşti 64; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat) This place holds temporary art exhibitions but also sells small works of art and souvenirs crafted by local artists.

Jumbo (Map p319; B-dul Decebal) A midsized commercial centre with clothes, food and internet shops.

Getting There & Away

AIR

All international flights to Moldova use Chişinău (Kishinev) airport, Moldova's only airport, 14.5km southeast of the centre. Moldova has three national airlines.

Moldavian Airlines (Map p320; ☎ 549 339; airport 525 506; www.mdv.md; B-dul Ştefan cel Mare 3) located in the **Air Service** (www.airservice.md) travel centre offers 12 weekly flights to Timișoara and two daily flights to Budapest, from where it has connections to other European destinations. Also in the Air Service centre is **Carpatair** (www.carpatair.com), which flies to Timișoara and beyond six times a week.

Air Moldova (Map p320; ☎ 546 464, airport 525 506; www.airmoldova.md; B-dul Negruzi 8) is the state carrier for Moldova, with direct flights to Amsterdam, Istanbul, Larnaca, Minsk, Moscow, Paris, Yekaterinburg, St Petersburg and Sofia.

Aerotour (Map p320; ☎ 542 454, airport 525 413; www.transaero.md; B-dul Ştefan cel Mare 4) has three weekly flights to Amsterdam and Rome, two to Paris and Prague, one or two daily flights to Bucharest, Moscow and Istanbul, two daily flights to Budapest, and a daily flight to Vienna.

Tarom (Map p320; ☎ 541 254, 272 618; tarom@mtc.md; B-dul Ştefan cel Mare 3; ☎ 9am-5pm) flies to Bucharest eight times a week.

BUS

Chişinău has three bus stations. The **north bus station** (Autogară Nord; Map p319; ☎ 439 489; Str Petricani) is where nearly all domestic and international

lines depart, except Transdnestr-bound lines, which depart from central. Services include 12 daily buses to Străşeni, and regular buses to Bălţi, Recea, Edinița and Briceni. There are buses every half-hour between 9.15am and 10pm to Orhei.

There are daily buses to Bucharest (\$14; 12 hours), Odesa (\$4.15), Moscow (\$31.50), St Petersburg, Kyiv and Minsk. You can buy advance tickets here or out of a tiny office at the train station. The information booth charges 1 leu (\$0.07) per question.

Domestic and international maxitaxis operate out of the **central bus station** (Autogară Centrală; Map p320; ☎ 542 185), behind the central market on Str Mitropolit Varlaam. Maxitaxis go to Tiraspol and Bendery 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), 5km from the city centre on the corner of Șoseaua Hâncești and Str Spicului. Above each ticket window is a list of destinations covered by that ticket-seller. Daily local services include five buses to Comrat in Gagauzia and six to Hâncești. A fleet of private maxitaxis to Iași, Romania (\$10, four hours) departs from here.

Eurolines (Map p319; ☎ 549 813, 271 476; www.euro lines.md; Aleea Gării) in the train station, offers regular routes to Italy, Spain and Germany (usually around \$140 return).

TRAIN

The **train station** (Map p319; ☎ 252 737; Aleea Gării) is swelling with pride after major renovations have made it as modern as any in Western Europe. The **left luggage office** (☎ 24 hr) is 100m north of the main entrance alongside the platform. Ticket counters 13, 14 and 15 are for international destinations; 12 is for destinations within Moldova and the CIS.

International routes include three daily trains to Moscow (\$46, 28 to 33 hours), one each to St Petersburg (\$31.50, 37 hours), Bucharest (\$29.50, 14 hours) and Lviv (\$15.50, eight hours), and two a week to Minsk (\$19.50, 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.

Five daily trains go to Comrat and four to Ungheni.

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Bus 65 departs every 30 minutes between 5am and 10pm from the central bus station to the airport. Maxitaxi 65 (\$0.25) departs every 20 minutes from Str Ismail, near the corner of B-dul Ştefan cel Mare.

BUS & TROLLEYBUS

Bus 45 (and maxitaxi 45a) runs from the central bus station to the southwestern bus station. Bus 1 goes from the train station to B-dul Ştefan cel Mare.

Trolleybus 1, 4, 5, 8, 18 and 22 go to the train station from the city centre. Bus 2, 10 and 16 go to Autogară Sud-vest. 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 maxitaxis. These are faster but more expensive than regular buses (\$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

Loran Car Rental (Map p320; ☎ 243 710; www.turism.md /loran; Str A Mateevici 79) has car-hire starting at €34 per day (Dacia Logan), including insurance. All payments must be made in cash (euros) and a deposit is required.

TAXI

Drivers at official taxi stands often try to rip you off. Calling a **taxi** (☎ 746 565/705/706/707) is cheaper. The official rate is \$0.25 per kilometre.

WINE ROUTE

Though vineyards small and large are scattered throughout the country, the ones most often visited are in easy striking distance of Chişinău. Each of these places makes for a pleasant (and woozy) day trip, and some can be combined into an epic wine-tasting adventure that would do a sommelier proud.

Moldovan wines routinely grab highest honours at European tastings and beyond.

There is arguably no other place on Earth where you can sample the same quality of wine at such low prices.

Private transport is all but essential to get around in these parts. Buses of varying frequencies bring you to most of the villages, though not always near the wineries, which can be a sobering three to five kilometres distant. If you aren't on an organised tour with a travel agency (p322), you can always hire a car, preferably with a designated driver, and make the journey yourself. Hiring a private taxi in Chişinău is also an option, negotiating a fixed price with the driver. Most will be happy to do it for \$40 to \$60 for a six- to eight-hour day.

Cricova

The **Cricova winery** (☎ 22-277 378; www.cricova.md; Str Ungureanu 1; ☎ 8am-4pm) is the grand duke of Moldovan wineries – and it knows it. This underground wine kingdom, 15km north of Chişinău 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, up to 100m underground. These 'cellars' are lined with wall-to-wall bottles and are kept at a temperature of 12°C to 14°C, with humidity at 96% to 98% to best protect the 1.25 million bottles of rare and collectible wine plus the 30 million litres of wine the factory produces annually (during Soviet times, the winery's output was two to three times this!). Tunnels have existed here since the 15th century, when limestone was dug out to help build Chişinău. They were converted into an underground wine emporium in the 1950s.

Cricova wines and champagnes enjoy a high national and international reputation. Legend has it that in 1966 astronaut Yuri Gagarin entered the cellars, re-emerging (with assistance) two days later. Russian president Vladimir Putin celebrated his 50th birthday here. Cricova's wines were among the top drops produced in the USSR. Its sparkling white was sold under the label 'Soviet Champagne'. Demand for its dry white sauvignon, muscadet and sweeter muscats remains high. Unique to the Cricova cellars is its sparkling red wine, made from cabernet sauvignon stocks and marketed as having a rich velvet texture and a blackcurrant and cherry taste. The *champanoise* method used to make sparkling wines here is unique to Moldova, France, Ukraine and Russia.

The most interesting part of your obligatorily guided tour is a visit to the wineglass-shaped cellar of collectibles, including 19 bottles of Gerhing's wines, a 1902 bottle of Becherovka, a 1902 bottle of Evreiesc de Paști from Jerusalem and pre-WWII French red wines.

You must have private transport and advance reservations to get into Cricova. Regrettably, the winery is lax when it comes to answering emails, or the phone for that matter, hence booking through travel agencies in Chișinău and swallowing the booking fee is the path of least resistance. You can also try to make a booking at Cricova's Chișinău headquarters (Map p320; Str Vasile Alecsandri 111/7). The two-hour tour (\$62 per person) includes trips down streets with names such as Str Cabernet and Str Pinot, 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.

Acorex

Once you've finished at Cricova, head to **Acorex** (www.acorex.net; ☎ 9am-6pm), just down the hill. There's no tour, but its shop sells the winery's Legenda, Reserve, Select and other limited lines not available in most stores or outside Moldova. Acorex is one of the most internationally awarded wineries in Moldova, so don't miss a chance to pick up yet another mouth-watering bottle of fermented heaven!

Cojușna

These spunky competitors to Cricova operate 12km northwest of Chișinău in the village of Cojușna. This place is moribund in comparison with Cricova or even Ialoveni. However, the tours given here are first rate, down to earth and very friendly. What they lack in production they make up for with heart and charm. Sales have plummeted since Cojușna's fabulous distribution network collapsed along with the USSR, and since most of its land was taken over and privatised (they reap the harvest of smaller wineries). Foreign investment will most likely be required to get the plant back up to its 12,000-bottle-per-hour capacity.

Cojușna (☎ 22-744 820, 715 329; Str Lomtatze 4; 2-3hr tour per person Mon-Fri \$17, Sat/Sun \$20/40; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, by appointment Sat & Sun), founded in 1908, is geared for tourists and is therefore very flexible – it will open its wine cellars and

wine-tasting rooms for you day and night. 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 local 17-year-old boy and his father.

Organising a tour of Cojușna is a breeze: just show up! However, you'll need to give advance warning if you require a tour in English. 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. Buses to Straseni stop at Cojușna, or you can catch one of the frequent maxitaxis leaving from Calea Eșilor (Map p319); take trolleybus 1, 5 or 11 up Ștefan cel Mare, to the Ion Creangă university stop. Alight at the Cojușna stop, ignore the turn on the left marked 'Cojușna' and walk or hitch the remaining 2km along the main road to the winery entrance, marked by a tall, totem pole-style pillar.

South of Chișinău

Moldova's wine road sprawls south of Chișinău too. **Ialoveni**, 10km south of the capital, is home to **Vinuri Ialoveni** (☎ 737 838; www.wineialoveni.com; Str Alexandru cel Bun 4; 1-4hr tours \$10-40; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri), known for its fine sherry called Heres. It's the only place in Moldova that makes this sweet drink. The premises aren't as impressive as Cricova's though here you get to see enormous 20,000L oak barrels up close.

At the **shop** (☎ 8am-1pm & 3-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat) you can buy bottles of Heres and other wines for as little as \$2. The Gloria line of sherry is particularly good, though it packs a wallop at 33% alcohol. Most prefer the dry matured Heres, which has a slight walnut taste. A range of tours is on offer, from a one-hour tour and tasting session to a four-hour excursion with a light meal and souvenir bottles.

While Cricova has the hype, **Mileștii Mici** (☎ 382 336, 382 333; www.milestii-mici.md; tours per person \$11.50-39; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri), 8km east of Ialoveni, has the goods. Also housed in a limestone mine, these are the largest cellars in Europe, with a network of 'streets' more than 200km in length, some 55km of which are being used for storage. It was recognised by Guinness in 2005 for having the largest wine collection in the world – 1.5 million bottles – though at the time of writing the collection had surpassed the 2-million-bottle

mark. Mileștii Mici specialises in producing and storing quality wine, sparkling wine and select collection wines, which have repeatedly won medals at national and international wine contests.

Tours, done by car, wind down through the cellars with stops at notable collections and artistically executed tourist points, terminating at the elegantly decorated restaurant, with a sea-bottom motif, 60m below ground. These tours, which include – naturally – wine tasting, are refreshingly informal and hilarious. Tours can be arranged directly with the winery. Officially, tour groups should have a minimum of four people; unofficially, this is negotiable. A Saturday or Sunday tour must have a minimum of 15 people.

To get here from Chișinău, take bus 35 from Autogară Sud-vest to Ialoveni. There are no buses between Ialoveni and Mileștii Mici but a local driver will take you there for around \$2. There is one direct bus from Chișinău's Autogară Sud-vest to Mileștii Mici (\$1.20).

ORHEIUL VECHI

Ten kilometres to the southeast of Orhei city 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 chimerical **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. Shorts are forbidden and women must cover their heads inside the monastery. A small, highly atmospheric chapel inside acts as the church for three neighbouring villages, as it did in the 13th century. You can visit the area where up to 13 monks lived for decades at a time, sleeping on pure bedrock, each occupying a tiny stone bunk (*keilies*) that opens into a central corridor. This leads to a stone terrace, from where views of the entire cliff and surrounding plains are breathtaking. The cliff face is

dotted with what appear to be holes; most of these are other caves and places of worship dug over the millennia, as this region was a place of worship for Geto-Dacian tribes from before Christ's time. In all, the huge cliff contains six complexes of interlocking caves, most of which are accessible only by experienced rock climbers and many of which are out of bounds for tourists.

Ștefan cel Mare built a fortress here in the 14th century but it was later destroyed by Tartars. Archaeologists since WWII have uncovered several layers of history in this region; some of their finds are on display in Chișinău's National History Museum (p323). The area is rich in archaeological treasures.

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. You can also visit a tiny **village museum** (☎ 235-34 242; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun) where several archaeological finds from the 15th and 16th centuries are presented. You can arrange guides (Russian and Romanian only) and get general information.

For an amusingly over-enthusiastic description of Orheiul Vechi, as well as excellent photographs and many details of the site, see <http://orhei.dnt.md>.

En route to Orheiul Vechi is **Ivancea**, which has an excellent **ethnographic museum** (Muzeul meșteșugurilor populare; ☎ 235-43 320; admission \$1; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) housed in a 19th-century stately mansion on beautiful grounds. Its eight halls are filled with traditional Moldovan costumes, musical instruments, pottery and folk art.

Sleeping

Orheiul Vechi Monastery Headquarters (☎ 235-56 912; d \$23) Spending the night here is highly recommend. It has five pleasant rooms and a small restaurant. The rooms facing the monastery have spine-tingling views.

Satul Moldovenesc (☎ 248-36 136; <http://moldovacc.md/satmoldovenesc>; Hârtopul Mare; 1-room house \$15-45,

2-room house \$52) Only 30km northeast of Chişinău (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, have a sauna, go horse riding (children can be 'accompanied on their ride of the donkey'), and swim or fish in one of the three lakes nearby.

Getting There & Away

A public transport-only trip to the monastery is an ordeal. Daily buses depart every half-hour from Chişinău going to Orhei (\$1.50), but 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 and taxi to Orheiul Vechi, striking a deal for there-and-back 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.

VADU LUI VODĂ

When Moldovans on a budget want to get away from it all, they head for Vadu lui Vodă and retire to **Zimbet Camping** (☎ 416 049, 0692-

005 70; 4-bed cabin/d without bathroom \$11.50/31, r with bathroom \$50). Fresh air, sports, walking, river recreation and enthusiastic beer drinking are the main pursuits here. Three square meals are available in the bar-restaurant for \$11.50 per day or you can dine at several bars or restaurants by the beach. The cabins and double rooms are bare, but for the beds, and the shared bathhouse is reminiscent of summer camp, but you'll be in good company with droves of likeminded Moldovans. Bond with nature, kick around on the nearby football pitch, ride the river banana or just retreat to a shady tree with a book and a bottle of Moldovan wine.

Maxitaxis for Vadu lui Vodă leave regularly from Chişinău's Autogară Centrală throughout the day. Pay the driver.

BĂLŢI, REZINA & ȚIPOVA

Bălţi (*balts*, from the Romanian word for 'swamp'), 150km northwest of Chişinău, is Moldova's fourth-largest city, with a population of 143,630. A major industrial and mafia-influenced area, and predominantly Russian-speaking, it has little to offer beyond being a convenient stopover en route to Ukraine. Although locals and expats alike report that they 'feel dirty just going into the city', it does have the advantage of the

best nightlife scene in Moldova outside of Chişinău.

Some 60km east of Bălţi on the western banks of the Dniestr River is the small town of Rezina. Seven kilometres south of the town is the Orthodox **Saharna Monastery**. Founded in 1495, the church used today dates from the 19th century and sits in a small valley. There are walking trails all around, some offering beautiful views of the entire monastery complex, and one leading to the Virgin Mary's footprint in rock (protected by a glass covering). There's also a lovely waterfall tumbling off an overhanging cliff. The **Day of the Holy Trinity** (8 September), a holiday throughout Moldova, is particularly lively here and includes evening concerts.

Some 12km further south is the marvelous **Țipova Monastery**, Eastern Europe's largest cave monastery, another of Moldova's memorable highlights. It dates from the 10th to the 12th centuries, and is famous as the place where Ştefan cel Mare got married. Embedded in a large cliff, the caves are more accessible here than at Orheiul Vechi, as footpaths lead up the cliff. Services resumed here in 1994 after the monastery was closed and partially ruined during the Soviet period. Though busloads of tourists and visiting schoolchildren have left behind unsightly graffiti inside the caves, it's otherwise a lovely area, and the paths lead to a small, picturesque waterfall nearby.

Țipova is in a remote corner of the country on the western banks of the Dniestr River. It's best accessed by car by following the turn-off to Lalova. The monastery is 4km past Horodişte at the far end of the village.

Hotel Basarabia (☎ 231-661 219; Str M Sadoveanu 1; d \$25) is a 1960s holdout in central Bălţi. It's slightly run-down, as you might expect, but could be a convenient stopover while exploring northern Moldova.

Probably your best dining bet in Rezina is the restaurant-bar complex **Plai** (☎ 254-23 986; Str A Scîusev; mains \$3; ☎ 8am-3am).

Bălţi is well served by buses. Daily services include five to Tiraspol, eight to Soroca and seven to Ungheni. There are buses every half-hour to/from Chişinău (\$3). One daily bus goes to Iaşi, Romania. It's possible to get to Țipova by taking a bus from Chişinău to Rezina, and getting off 20km before Rezina at the turn-off to Lalova. It's a 12km hitchhike or just plain hike from there.

SOROCA

☎ 230 / pop 38,492

Soroca is the Roma 'capital' of Moldova. The large Roma population here, even in Soviet times, was renowned for living at a much higher standard than most Moldovans; hence part of the reason for the palpable prejudice that exists against them. Explanations as to how this unlikely distribution of wealth occurred range from shrewd entrepreneurial skills to drug trafficking. Stately mansions that the richer Roma have built for themselves line both sides of the road on the hilltop, some facing the river and Ukraine on the other side of it.

Yet people come here to see the outstanding **Soroca fortress** (☎ 230-24 873, 0693-23 734; http://soroca-fortress.nflame.net; admission free; ☎ 9am-6pm Wed-Sun May-Oct, by appointment Nov-Apr). Visitors are thrown back to medieval times while wandering the grounds of this marvel, which gives a great impression of what life must have been like centuries ago between its nearly intact walls. Part of a medieval chain of military fortresses built by Moldavian princes between the 14th and 16th centuries to defend Moldavia's boundaries, it was founded by Ştefan cel Mare and rebuilt by his son Petru Rareş from 1543 to 1550. The limestone walls (18m high on the inside, 21m high on the outside) are more than 3m thick. Four towers plus a rectangular entrance tower still stand. Strategically placed at Moldavia's then most northeastern tip on the banks of the Dniestr River, Soroca (founded in 1499) was a key military stronghold.

The fortress is administered by the **Soroca Museum of History and Ethnography** (☎ 230-22 264; Str Independentei 68; admission \$0.10; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-6pm Tue-Sun May-Oct, by appointment Nov-Apr). 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 is hidden down an improbable sidestreet one block east of the red-roofed Soroca city council building, which faces the park.

There are eight daily buses from Bălţi to Soroca and 12 daily buses from Chişinău's Autogară Nord.

LOWER DNIESTR NATIONAL PARK

The nonprofit organisation **Biotica** (☎ 22-498 837; www.biotica-moldova.org) has devised the Lower Dniestr National Park (Parcul Național

THE LEGEND OF MAGNETIC HILL *Leif Pettersen*

At the insistence of my editor, I careened into the parking lot of the Safari Café just south of Orhei to test the legend of Magnetic Hill. Nazis were reputed to have buried Jews alive here, and strange happenings are alleged to occur in the area. Reportedly, if you park your car on the pavement right in front of the café, facing the main road, and slip it into neutral, the car will eerily advance, despite the slight uphill incline.

The legend is the high-point of the otherwise ho-hum town of Orhei, so locals are keen to encourage the hype. As I manoeuvred through the car park trying to identify the sweet spot, a waiter bounded out of the café to direct me. Finally positioned, I released the brake. And I moved. Indeed, as I advanced toward the hill the car accelerated, even as the incline increased. In the throes of a bug-eyed mind-screw, I repeated the experiment three times, once filming the experience from outside the car, nearly forgetting that I had to jump back into the car and stop it before it rolled into traffic.

That night, I couldn't sleep. I was deeply shaken.

Driving far off course, I returned to the Safari Café the following afternoon. I intended to test the phenomenon with a nonmetal object, a bottle of water. After one more indulgent test with the car, I climbed out and positioned the bottle at the end of the pavement.

I released the bottle and...

...to my utter consternation, it rolled 'uphill' too. I came to realise that the pavement, in fact, slopes *downhill* and Magnetic Hill is no more supernatural than the optical illusion that fuels it. I was hugely disappointed, but on the upside I slept like a baby that night.

DIVINE COMMUNICATION

When Mircea Cerari, the king of Moldova's Roma community, died at the age of 59 in July 1998, it was not his death but his entrance into the afterlife that raised eyebrows. Determined to keep in contact with loved ones from beyond the grave, the king had made arrangements to be buried with his computer, fax and mobile phone.

The lavish funeral, held in Soroca in northern Moldova two weeks after his death, was attended by some 15,000 Roma who had gathered from the far reaches of Europe to pay their respects. Also in attendance was Mircea Cerari's son Arthur, who has since inherited Moldova's Roma crown.

The king's impressive white marble grave contained not only his communication equipment but also a bar stocked with – what else? – vodka!

Arthur – yes, that would be 'King Arthur' – is also now the main representative for the **Cultural Society of Roma of Moldova** (Map p320; ☎ 22-419032; Str Puşkin 33, Ap 69) in Chişinău.

Nistrul Inferior) in recent years, and is attempting to drive its gradual implementation. Unfortunately, at the time of writing, the project still had not come to fruition due to political and economic obstacles. Comprising more than 50,000 hectares of wetlands, forest and agricultural land, the proposed project encompasses some 40 sites of archaeological importance, observation points, many villages and some vineyards (at Purcari and Tudora for example). Though it is not yet fully set up with a tourist infrastructure, rural homestays already exist and excursions may be possible by the time you read this. Eventually, canoeing, hiking, wine tasting and camping will all be available in this lovely area, shimmering with possibility. Meanwhile, you can visit private vineyards and village artisans to see them at work making wicker baskets or furniture.

One guesthouse that caters to tourists is **Meşter Faur** (☎ 242-35 259; Str Ştefan cel Mare 100) in the village of Cioburciu. Run by Pavel Taranu, it can guarantee a splendid time in remote Moldovan countryside, with boat tours, visits to local village enterprises, wine tasting and relaxation galore. No English spoken.

TRANSDNIESTR

One of the most patently curious regions in Europe, the self-declared republic of Transdniestr (Pridnestrovskaya Moldavskaya Respublika, or PMR in Russian; population 555,500) is nevertheless a largely unknown enigma. The street credibility of being one of the world's last surviving communist bastions is wearing thin, however, as the illusion of a worker's paradise is being swiftly eclipsed by sweet, sweet capitalism! Monuments to Lenin and other

Soviet heroes share high-profile street corners with expensive shops, while swanky hotels and stadiums pop up around Tiraspol, betraying a firm bling-centric platform on the part of business and political leaders. Meanwhile, simple folk struggle to get by in a land that the rest of the world knows nothing about.

Transdniestr defiantly occupies a narrow strip of land covering only 3567 sq km on the eastern bank of the Dniestr River, the scene of a bloody civil war in the early 1990s when the movement for independence from Moldova began. Independent in all but name, Transdniestr has its own currency, police force, army and borders, which are controlled by Transdniestran border guards. The predominantly Russian-speaking region boycotts the Moldovan Independence Day and celebrates its own independence day on 2 September.

On 6 July 2006, a bomb blast on a local bus in Tiraspol killed eight people. Transdniestran politicians were quick to blame 'Moldovan provocateurs'. Popular opinion in Moldova is that a would-be arms dealer probably lost control of his merchandise.

See <http://geo.ya.com/travelimages/transdniestr.html> for some excellent photos of the region.

Government & Politics

The generously eyebrowed Igor Smirnov was elected president of Transdniestr in 1991 following the region's declaration of independence four months earlier. In 1994 the Moldovan Parliament ratified a new constitution providing substantial autonomy to Transdniestr in regional affairs, as it did for Gagauzia. Transdniestrans, however, refused to recognise this autonomy as it didn't go

nearly as far as they wanted. They insist it's an independent country and a sovereign state within Moldova. Most of the time, they push for the creation of a Moldovan federation, with proportionate representation between Moldova, Transdniestr and Gagauzia – on the condition, of course, that Smirnov would then become vice-president of Moldova.

Neither Smirnov's presidency nor the Transdniestran Parliament is recognised by the Moldovan – or any other – government, which has nonetheless been forced to engage in dialogue with the breakaway state, often brokered by Russian officials who still act as if the area is within their interests. The Russian 14th army, headquartered in Tiraspol since 1956, covertly supplied Transdniestran rebels with weapons during the 1992 civil war. The continued presence of the 5000-strong Russian 'operational group' in Transdniestr today is seen by local Russian-speakers as a guarantee of their security and is generally welcomed.

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 who want to be indoctrinated into the happy world of xenophobia and military games in the hopes of building a dedicated nationalistic future generation. To observers, they are more akin to disenchanting skinheads than anything else.

Alongside a number of agreements between Moldova and Transdniestr 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 having been refused by Moldova, slapped exorbitant tariffs on all Moldovan imports, instantly halting trade over the 'border' and making life more difficult for common people on both sides. In September 2003, Smirnov even got so huffy he severed phone connections, so that calls could not be made between the regions for a few weeks.

Though Smirnov and other officials have become contemptibly self-serving, a large subsection of locals still cannot be coaxed into criticizing their government, often deflecting probing questions with third-hand, conspicuously propagandistic stories about positive actions made by their government on behalf of the people. Direct questions on the current state of corruption are often met with indifference.

Political and economic attitudes aside, popular opinion still strongly supports independence from Moldova.

Economy

Transdniestr's economy has been disastrous, despite the fact that 40% of Moldova's total potential industrial output is concentrated in Tiraspol. After a brief period of improvement in metal production and light industry, political hostility in early 2006 appears destined to plunge the region into a new round of economic hardship (see the boxed text, p336).

Inflation is rampant and the local currency, the Transdniestran rouble, is worthless outside its borders. The average salary is approaching US\$100 a month. State employers have been able to pay their workers more regularly than in the past, eliminating the need to earn a desperate living at the flea market, but a return to those difficult days seems inevitable.

It has been widely speculated that the mainstays of the economy – and why some people in Transdniestr are unfathomably rich – have included illegal arms sales (of old Soviet military machinery conveniently left on its territory), female slave trafficking, extortion of people trying to open businesses in the territory, money laundering and reaping profits from state-owned currency-exchange booths.

The region is dominated by a single company, Sheriff, owned on paper by Viktor Gushan, though it is rumoured that President Smirnov himself is actually behind the wheel. Nevertheless, the two are close; their sons career through the streets of Tiraspol in matching black Hummers. Sheriff has a hand in almost everything, from the multimillion-dollar luxury hotel and football stadium on the edge of Tiraspol (until very recently, the only European regulation football stadium in Moldova) to bread factories, liquor stores and car showrooms. It is rumoured that, in order to start a business in Transdniestr, you have to talk to Sheriff.

Suffice to say that foreign investment in Transdniestr is a long way off.

Population

Two-thirds of Transdniestr's population is elderly and impoverished. Ethnic Russians comprise 29% of the population, ethnic Moldovans 34% and Ukrainians 29%. While the populace is tired of living in an area where

the average salary is less than that in neighbouring Moldova (itself often considered Europe's poorest country), organised anti-government protests are unheard of. People here tend to be more cautious and reserved than in the rest of Moldova, with the older generations particularly uneasy about openly speaking their mind against the government. The prevailing sentiment is that they must just accept their lot, no matter how dire, and try to stoically endure.

Language

The official state languages in Transdniestra are Russian, Moldovan and Ukrainian. Students in schools and universities are taught in Russian, and local government and most official institutions operate almost solely in Russian. All street signs are written in Russian, sometimes Moldovan and even Ukrainian.

Money

The only legal tender is the Transdniestran rouble (TR). There are 1, 5, 25, 50 and 100 rouble notes and 1, 5, 10 and 50 kopek coins. The notes are tiny, often dirty and disintegrating. All notes sport the much-revered and famous 18th-century Russian military general Alexander Suvorov on the front, while the back features different places of 'national' importance, such as the Kvint brandy factory on the 5-rouble note. 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. All exchange offices are owned by the banks, so there's no shopping around for the lowest fee or best rate. Often you will find private citizens who will want to exchange dollars for roubles.

TREAD LIGHTLY IN TRANSDNIESTR *Leif Pettersen*

At the time of writing, rising political and economic turmoil was making a day trip into Transdniestra more hair-raising than it's been in years. The happy-go-lucky days of benign Kafkesque 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. The taking of photographs, no matter how innocent, is becoming decidedly uncool – I was barred entrance to a café I intended 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 antagonising theatre of one-upmanship between Ukraine, Russia, Moldova and Transdniestra. Barring a sudden flash of diplomatic magic, the situation is expected to get far worse before it gets better.

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 \$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 more than 24 hours, you'll need to register with the **OVIR** (Ulitsa Kotovskogo 2Ap338; ☎ 533-79 083; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri). Enter through the ominous, rusting prisonlike gate and inquire at the hidden white building with the red roof. At night or on weekends, register at **Tiraspol Militia office** (Map p338; ☎ 533-34 169; Roza Luxemburg 66; ☎ 24hr), though you'll probably be asked to follow up at the OVIR on the next business day. The registration fee is about \$0.60. Some hotels won't even talk room availability with you until you've registered. Some high-end hotels will register you automatically.

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

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

EXCHANGE RATES

For the latest exchange rates, check out www.cbpmr.net. Exchange rates at the time of writing:

country	unit	rouble
euro zone	€1	TR10.59
Moldova	1 Lei	TR0.63
Russia	R1	TR0.31
UK	£1	TR15.48
Ukraine	1 hv	TR1.60
US	\$1	TR8.30

Post & Telephone

Transdniestran stamps featuring Suvorov can only be used for letters sent within the Transdniestran 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). If you bring your mobile phone to the territory, note that there is no roaming available here, save for Moldovan mobile phones.

Media

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

The two local newspapers are in Russian. The *Transdniestra* 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 Transdniestra! Although it's 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. Not surprisingly, the have/have-not divide is

glaring. Entering the outskirts from Bendery, you're confronted by the behemoth state-of-the-art football and sports stadiums and a five-star hotel (under construction at the time of writing). Built at a cost of untold hundreds of millions of dollars by Viktor Gushan, owner of the Tiraspol Sheriff football team, its intended customer base is still unclear. Locals who are lucky to earn \$100 a month certainly won't be checking in soon, or even attending many games for that matter, and few visiting teams will be able to afford the rates.

The city was founded in 1792 following Russian domination of the region. Its population is predominantly Russian (41%), with ethnic Ukrainians comprising 32% and ethnic Moldovans 18% of the population.

Orientation & Information

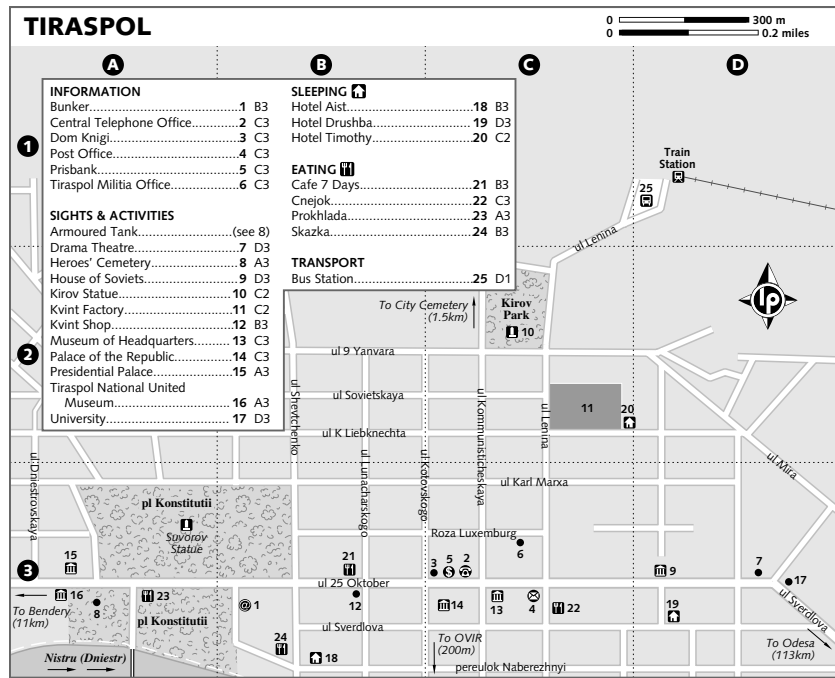
The train and bus stations are next to each other at the end of ulitsa Lenina. From the stations, walk down ulitsa Lenina, past Kirov Park, to ulitsa 25 Oktober (the main street).

The **post office** (ulitsa 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 Transdniestra (but if you do, be sure to bring your own postcards). At the **central telephone office** (cnr ulitsa 25 Oktober & ulitsa Kommunisticheskaya; ☎ 7am-8.45pm) you can buy phonecards (\$2.40 or \$8) to use in the modern payphones (the old metal clunkers can only make local calls), send telegrams or make long-distance calls. Change money next door at the **Prisbank** (☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Sat). **Bunker** (pereulok Naberezhnyi 1; per hr \$0.40; ☎ 9am-11pm) is a modern internet club.

Dom Knigi (ulitsa 25 Oktober 85; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-4pm Sat) is a big bookshop with a limited selection of Russian-only books (good luck finding any maps here).

Sights

At the western end of ulitsa 25 Oktober stands a Soviet armoured **tank** from which the Transdniestran 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 Russian inscription reads 'You don't have a name but your deeds are eternal'. There's also an Afghan war memorial here. Other victims of the civil war are buried in the **city cemetery**, north of the centre, where a special alley has been allocated to the 1992 victims.



The **Tiraspol National United Museum** (ulitsa 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 where Igor Smirnov rules his mini-empire. The enormous ploschad Konstitutii is bordered by ulitsa 25 Oktober and the park-lined concrete promenade along the Dniestr, a popular strolling area.

Ulitsa 25 Oktober, Tiraspol's backbone, is also its commercial strip, with most of the shops and restaurants. Fancy new stores blend with photo studios displaying hand-coloured portraits from the 1970s in their windows – a surreal mix. It's tree-lined, wide and impeccably clean, and people rush to and fro with their heads down. At night this street is virtually deserted, even on weekends.

The few Western foreigners who make it to Tiraspol love to capture images of the city's Soviet-style buildings and monuments – though be warned that conspicuous use of cameras, no matter the photographic subject,

is nearly guaranteed to invite suspicion from locals. That said, a must-snap is the **Palace of the Republic** (Dvoretz Respubliki), slightly recessed south of the main street between ulitsa Kotovskogo and ulitsa Kommunisticheskaya. On it is a glorious relief of young communist men and women engaged in strange activities that surely have something to do with building a better world.

Change films before you get to the administration building, the neoclassical **House of Soviets** (Dom Sovetov), towering over the eastern end of ulitsa 25 Oktober. Lenin's angry-looking bust peers out from its prime location smack in front of the building. Inside the building is a memorial to those who died in the 1992 conflict. Close by is the military-themed **Museum of Headquarters** (ulitsa Kommunisticheskaya 34; admission \$0.30; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat). The **Drama Theatre** is at ulitsa 25 Oktober, and close by is the **university**, founded in 1930.

The **Kvint factory** (☎ 37 333; <http://kvint.biz>; ulitsa Lenina 38) is one of Transdnestr's pride and joys. Since 1897 it's been making some of Moldova's finest brandies. There are no excursions,

but a gander at the factory might be of interest. Buy some of its products either near the front entrance of the plant or at the **town centre store** (ulitsa 25 Oktober 84; ☎ 24hr).

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

Sleeping

If staying more than 24 hours you must register at the **OVIR** (ulitsa Kotovskogo 2A, Tiraspol; ☎ 533-79 083; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) – see the boxed text, p336. Some hotels may staunchly refuse service until you've registered, no matter how long you're staying.

Hotel Drushba (☎ 34 266; ulitsa 25 Oktober 116; r/deluxe \$20/40) Several dozen categories of rooms are on offer at this massive place that has hopefully seen better days. Some have hot water, TV, fridge, larger beds, private bathroom or shower. The atmosphere is rather dour but the rooms are fine and the staff the most pleasant in town.

Hotel Aist (☎ 37 174, 77 688; pereulok Naberezhnyi 3; d \$25-40) Grass growing through cracks in the cement outside gives it a derelict feel, but the rooms are surprisingly nice. More expensive rooms have luxuries such as hot water, private toilet and TV.

Hotel Timothy (☎ 36 442; ulitsa K Liebknechta 395A; s/d \$60/80; ☎) The fanciest place in town is an ultramodern small hotel geared to business visitors (there's a business centre next door). The rooms are large, but plain and sparingly furnished. Some have spa baths. Yes, that framed portrait behind the check-in desk is of President Igor Smirnov, whose pals are probably the ones who use the hotel most frequently.

Eating

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

Cnejok (ulitsa Lenina 23; mains \$1.50-3.30) A new and notably friendly bar-restaurant that looks primed for hosting receptions if you would like bragging rights to 'Wackiest Wedding Locale, Ever'.

Skazka (pereulok Naberezhnyi 1; mains \$2-3.50; ☎ 10am-8pm) The offputting green and glass exterior

hides a 'fairy-tale' place with half-hearted castle décor geared toward children, and a large Moldovan menu. The summer terrace faces the river.

our pick Prokhlada (☎ 34 642; ulitsa 25 Oktober 50; mains \$2-4; ☎ 4pm-6am) This cavernous, sombre but friendly space is the best place in town for a meal or drink. Choose from six kinds of cognac as you view sports matches on a large TV screen. Dancing is encouraged, but often lonely. According to the sign outside you are not allowed to take in hand grenades, guns or gas bottles. But don't worry – that's just the old Transdnestr sense of humour in action!

Getting There & Away BUS

You can only pay in the local currency for tickets to other destinations in Transdnestr, but you can pay in Moldovan lei or Ukrainian hryvnia for tickets to Moldova or Ukraine. Pay the driver.

From Tiraspol five daily buses go to Bălți, 13 to Odesa and one to Kyiv. One bus a week goes to Berlin. Buses leave for Chişinău nearly every half-hour from 5.50am to 8.50pm, and maxitaxis run regularly from 6.30am to 6.10pm.

TRAIN

Tickets for same-day departures are sold in the main train station ticket hall. There is also an information booth – a question about national train services costs \$0.05 and a question about services to CIS countries costs \$0.10, though most tellers don't bother charging it. Buy advance tickets (24 hours or more before departure) in the ticket office on the 2nd floor.

Most eastbound trains from Chişinău to Ukraine and Russia stop in Tiraspol. There are seven daily trains to Chişinău (\$0.90, 2½ hours), three to Odesa (\$2, 2½ hours), two to Moscow (\$31, 25 to 31 hours) and Minsk (\$23, 23 hours) and one to St Petersburg (\$28, 35 hours).

Getting Around

Bus 1 runs between the bus and train stations and the city centre. Tickets for trolleybuses (\$0.10) are sold by the driver. Tickets for maxitaxis cost \$0.20. Trolleybus 19 and maxitaxi 19 and 20 (quicker) cross the bridge over the Dniestr to Bendery.

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. Physical and figurative scars from the bloodshed in the early '90s have noticeably healed. The centre in particular is a green, breezy and pleasant place, vastly more sociable and inviting than Tiraspol. Busy cafés, non-Soviet inspired sculptures and a palpably less guarded air make this place seem like it's sitting on the wrong side of the border.

During the 16th century, Moldavian prince Ștefan cel Mare built a large 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. The bloodiest fighting during the 1992 military conflict took place in Bendery and many walls of buildings in the centre remain bullet-pocked.

Information

Currency exchange (ulitsa Sovetskaya; ☎ 7am-5pm)

Next to Central Market.

Internet clubs (Central department store, cnr ulitsa Lenina & ulitsa Kalinina; per hr \$0.50) There are two internet clubs on the top floor, opposite the main Hotel Dniestr.

Pharmacy (cnr ulitsa Suvorova & ulitsa S Liazio; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat, 8am-4pm Sun)

Telephone Centre (cnr ulitsa S Liazio & ulitsa Suvorova; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 8am-4pm Sat) Book international telephone calls here.

Sights

Bendery's main sight is paradoxically impossible to see. **Turkish fortress** was built by occupying Turks in the 1530s, replacing a 12th-century fortress built by the Genovese. It is now being used by 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** to the unknown soldier 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 centre. The **City Council** building is at ulitsa Lenina 17.

Fifty metres south of the train station is a **Train Museum** inside an old Russian CY 06-71 steam locomotive. The museum was closed at the time of writing. Alongside Bendery's only museum is a typically Soviet, oversized **granite mural** in memory of the train workers who died in the 1918 revolution.

Sleeping & Eating

A three-tier pricing system is intact here, with one level for the locals, another for the Moldovans, Ukrainians and Belorussians, and the highest for all other foreigners.

Hotel Dniestr (☎ 29 478; ulitsa Katachenka 10; r \$20) The single rooms occasionally don't have hot water, but can be shared by two people as long as they are of the opposite sex (no funny stuff going on here!). The pricier doubles have hot water, TV and fridge – these are permitted to be shared by two people of any sex. There's an adjacent restaurant and terrace café. There's another branch of the hotel at ulitsa Kalinina 50 (closed for renovations at the time of writing), with similar prices, but you must register at the main ulitsa Katachenka hotel first.

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

Café Jessica (☎ 23 540; ulitsa S Liazio; mains \$1-2.50; ☎ 10am-midnight) The year-round Christmas lights and the glow from the one-armed bandits in this dingy café provide a surreal atmosphere. Don't bother reading the menu, just ask what's on that day and stick with the tried and true *pelmeni* (similar to ravioli). There's 'surpriz' on the menu but we caution against risking finding out what it is. For dessert, indulge in lemon slices sprinkled with sugar.

Andy's Pizza (ulitsa Lenina 29; mains \$2-4; ☎ 7.30am-11pm) Andy's has arrived in Transdnestr! Retreat here for a quick fix of familiar surroundings.

Getting There & Around

From the Privokzalnaya ploschad train station there are roughly 15 daily trains to Chișinău, including services from Moscow and Odesa.

The bus station is located on ul Tiraspol'skaya. There are buses and maxitaxis every half-hour or so to Chișinău and two daily to Comrat, as well as two daily buses to Odesa and one to Kyiv.

Trolleybus 19 for Tiraspol (\$0.10) departs from the bus stop next to the main roundabout at the entrance to Bendery. Maxitaxis regularly make the 20-minute journey (\$0.20).

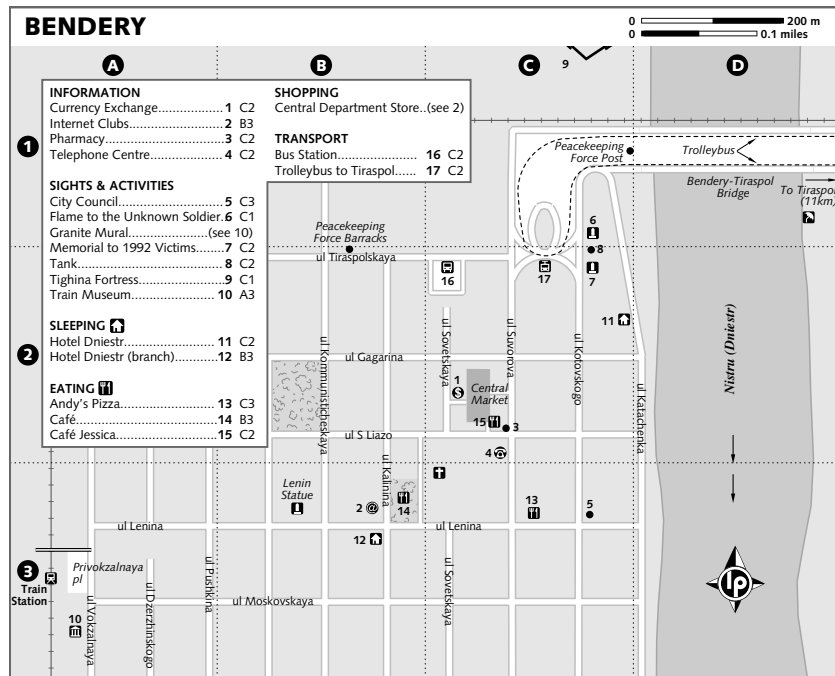
Local maxitaxis (\$0.08) leave from outside the currency exchange office.

GAGAUZIA

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. Unlike Transdnestr, 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. On a national level, Gagauzia is represented by the assembly's elected *başkan* (head, governor), a member of the Gagauz Halki political party who holds a safe seat in the Moldovan Parliament. Since 1995, this has been George Tabunshik.

Gagauzia comprises three towns and 27 villages dotted throughout three broken-up districts; Comrat, Ceadăr-Linga and Vulcănești. Wedged between these last two is the predominantly Bulgarian-populated district of Taraclia, which is not part of Gagauzia. Gagauz is further Swiss-cheesed by three Bulgarian villages in Ceadăr-Linga and a predominantly Moldovan village in Comrat district. Needless to say, there are no border controls at these atolls of territory.

The population of Gagauzia is 171,500, 78% of whom are Gagauz nationals; an additional 25,000 Gagauz live in other areas of Moldova, 20,000 more live in Greece and Bulgaria, and 32,000 in Ukraine. 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 dialect of Turkish, 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. Gagauzi is taught in 37 schools throughout Moldova.

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 Transdnistr, the Gagauz forfeited independence for large-scale autonomy. There is a predominantly agricultural region with little industry to sustain an independent economy. There are 12 vineyards on their territory producing fine wines, the profits for which Gagauzia accuses Chişinău of reaping.

COMRAT

☎ 298 / pop 25,197

Gagauzia's capital, 92km south of Chişinău, is no more than a dusty town with little of tourist interest apart from 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 Transdnistran militia forces, who are always game for a bit of clashing.

Comrat is home to the world's only Gagauz university – so what if nearly all courses are

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 ploshchad Pobedy (Victory Square). St John's Church stands on the western side of the square, behind which lies the central park. Prospekt 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, 8am-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 prospekt 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 prospekt Lenina at Str Galatsăna 17 is **Gagauz University** (Komrat Devlet Üniversitesi), founded in 1990. Four faculties (national culture, agronomy, economics and law) serve 1500 students. The main foreign languages taught are Romanian, English and Turkish. The university gets some funding from universities in Turkey.

On the eastern side of ploshchad Pobedy, **Hotel Aina** (☎ 22 841; Str Pobedy 127A; d 'deluxe' \$23) is a fairly modern hotel. Its bar serves light meals, including delicious *şaşlik* (shish kebab) and salads. Nearby, **Yunosti** (☎ 24 447; Str Pobedy 52; mains \$1-3; ☎ 9am-midnight) isn't a bad place to grab a meal or hang out for a few drinks.

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