

Transylvania



Locals sometimes shake their heads over the 'Dracula connection', but there's no denying a sense of spookiness about this broad, mountainous, culturally rich region, which fills the bulk of Romania's centre. But really the Dracula thing (p23) is such a small part of a visit here, and you're likely to forget about it along the way. Saxon towns such as Sighișoara, Sibiu, Cluj-Napoca and Brașov evoke medieval life; all make fine hubs, with hikes, ski runs, horse markets and cute villages within an hour or two. Much of the fun comes from hikes through the interlocking Carpathians (sometimes called the Transylvanian Alps), which create a U-shape on all of Transylvania's sides but the north. Skiing is best in the Bucegi Mountains' Prahova Valley, but outdoors enthusiasts debate what's best for summer fun – hiking to underground rivers of the Apuseni, rock climbing at Piatra Craiului National Park, biking atop the flat Bucegi plateau, exploring the largely unknown Retezat or hiking the knee-torturing Făgăraș.

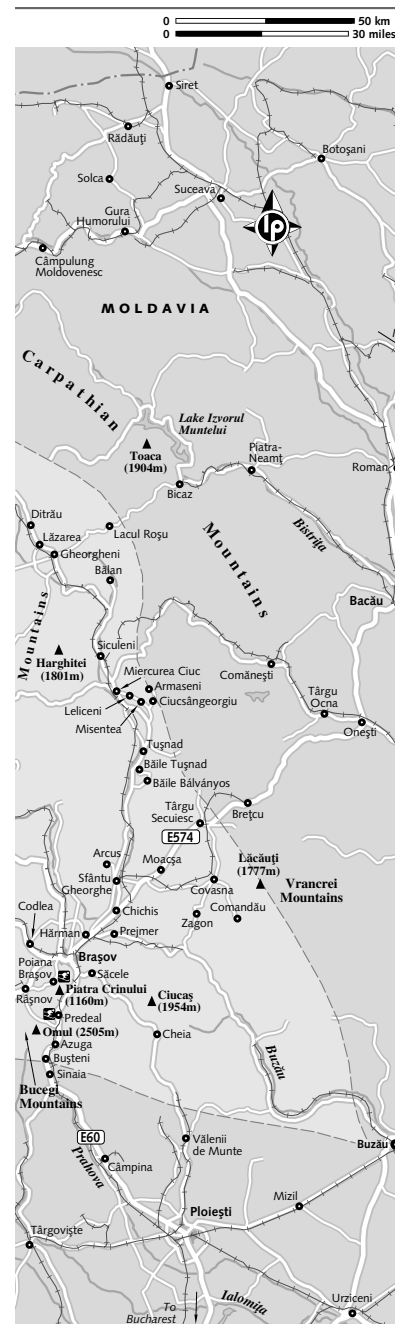
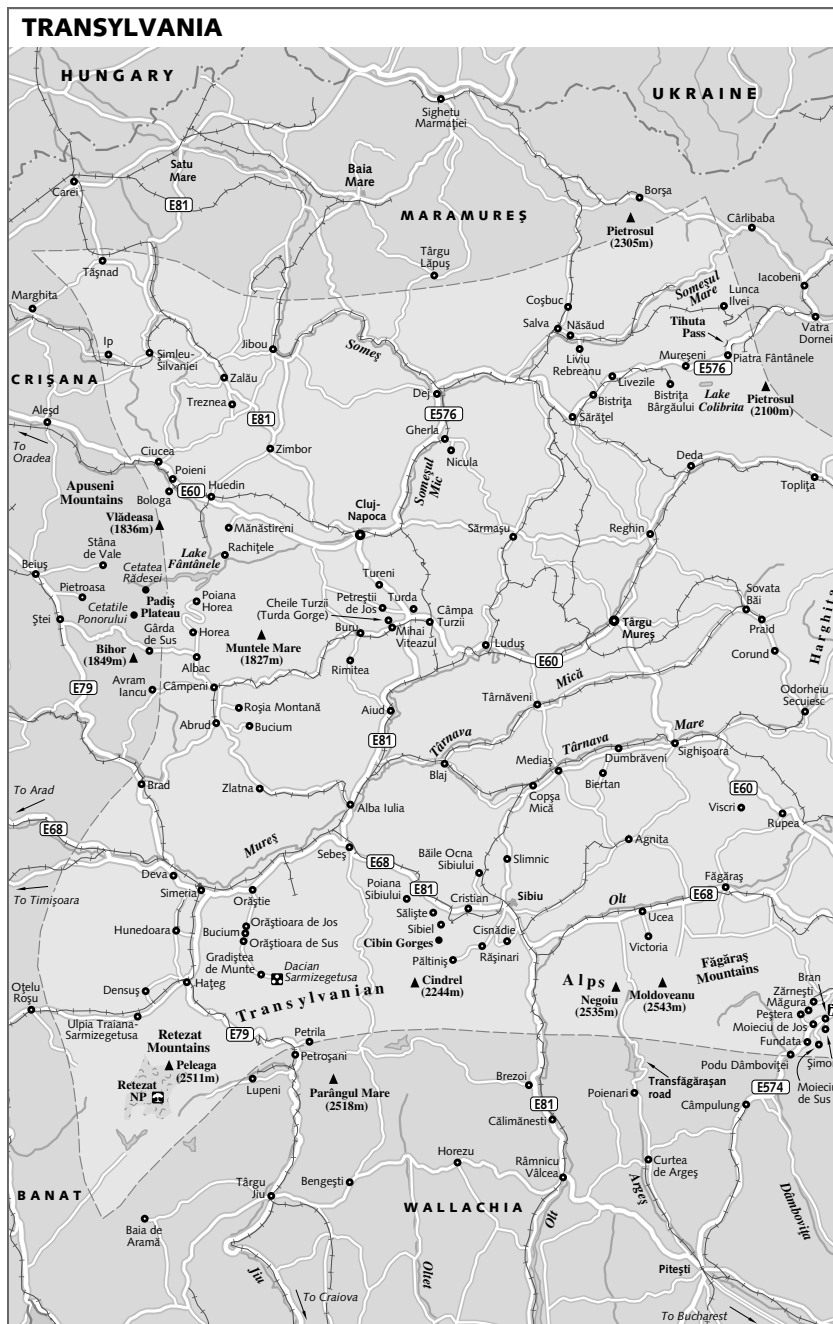
Transylvania, part of Romania only since 1918, benefits from its diverse ancestors. Saxons occupied southern Transylvanian towns, and most villages you pass are dotted with fortified churches that date back half a millennium. Going an hour north into Székely Land, where ethnic Hungarian communities are the majority, feels like going into a different country. Throughout you're likely to spot many Roma villagers – identifiable by black cowboy hats on the men and extravagant red dresses on the women – who sometimes usher passers-by in for meals.

So much is in Transylvania – it's no surprise that it's often the only part of Romania experienced by tourists.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Saxon it up in the 'big three' towns of medieval glory: **Brașov** (p127), the real Dracula's birthplace at **Sighișoara** (p143) and **Sibiu** (p153)
- Enter the **Bucegi Mountains** (p122), where novices can bike or hike the flat plateau
- Wander Saxon Land's backroads by car or bike, stopping at **Saxon fortified churches** (p148) such as Viscri, where you can stay overnight in a traditional 'Saxon bed'
- Venture north into **Székely Land** (p163), where signs are in Hungarian and towns such as **Târgu Mureș** (p171) boast Habsburg's finest architecture
- Hang out with sheperds in *agroturism* guest-houses such as **Sibiel** (p163) or the Hungarian **Huedin Microregion** (p196)





'We are in Transylvania; and Transylvania is not England. Our ways are not your ways, and there shall be to you many strange things.'

Dracula

HISTORY

For a thousand years, up till WWI, Transylvania was associated with Hungary. In the 10th century a Magyar (Hungarian) tribe, the Székelys, settled in what it called Erdély ('beyond the forest' – the literal meaning of Transylvania). In the 12th century Saxon merchants arrived to help defend the eastern frontiers of Hungary. The seven towns that they founded – Bistriţa (Bistriz), Braşov (Kronstadt), Cluj-Napoca (Klausenburg), Mediaş (Mediasch), Sebeş (Mühlbach), Sibiu (Hermannstadt) and Sighişoara (Schässburg) – gave Transylvania its German name, Siebenbürgen (both the origin and meaning of the term are disputed, but it roughly means 'seven boroughs').

Medieval Transylvania was an autonomous unit ruled by a prince responsible to the Hungarian crown. The indigenous Romanians were serfs. After the 1526 Turkish defeat of Hungary the region became semi-independent, recognising Turkish suzerainty.

In 1683 Turkish power was broken and Transylvania came under Habsburg rule four years later. The Catholic Habsburg governors sought to control the territory by favouring first the Protestant Hungarians and Saxons and then the Orthodox Romanians. In 1848, when the Hungarians launched a revolution against the Habsburgs, Romania sided with the Austrians. After 1867 Transylvania was fully absorbed into Hungary. In 1918 Romanians gathered at Alba Iulia to demand Transylvania's union with Romania.

This unification has never been fully accepted by Hungary and from 1940 to 1944 it set about re-annexing much of the region. After the war, Romanian communists moved to quash Hungarian nationalist sentiments. Currently, however, feelings of resentment have subsided somewhat and Romania's relations with its western neighbour continue to strengthen. Still, one feels an extant mistrust between the communities, and the Hungarians publish maps of the region with only Hungarian place names (even street names), as if they were not located in Romania, making things confusing for non-Hungarian tourists.

GOOD/BAD DRIVES

Dense Transylvania is plied by myriad maxi-taxi and train routes listed in this chapter. But if you're driving yourself, know that some routes are nicer than others. The main highway routes (eg Braşov–Sibiu, Braşov–Târgu Mureş, Sibiu–Cluj-Napoca, Cluj-Napoca–Bistriţa) are, unsurprisingly, rarely as nice as the, often rougher, roads off it – with the Cluj-Napoca–Bistriţa route edging out Cluj-Napoca–Sibiu for our vote for Transylvania's grimmest drive.

Some good ones, useful for pan-regional itineraries, include:

- Gheorgheni–Bicaz
- Gheorgheni–Târgu Mureş
- Sfântu Gheorghe–Miercurea Ciuc
- Sighişoara–Sibiu via Agnita
- Deva–Turda via Brad

PRAHOVA VALLEY

Wallachia turns into Transylvania in this narrow valley at the foot of the fir-clad Bucegi Mountains, as dramatic a scene as any in Romania. Everyone going from Bucharest to Braşov cuts through here; many stop. Sinaia, a king's summer retreat a century ago, is the finest town, but the real draw is up, way up, with hiking and biking trails along the flat plateau atop the mountains, and ski trails that carve down the mountain sides.

If you're looking for just a taste, it's possible to day-trip from Braşov (p127) to take a cable-car ride up and make a short hike. But it's easier if you stay a night or two.

SINAIA

☎ 244 / pop 14,640

Backed by the Bucegi, Prahova's shining star is Sinaia (see-*ni*-ya). Named for Mt Sinai and once home to Romania's first king, Sinaia boasts many century-old villas and hotels, built to impress the king's gaze. None outweighs the marvel of King Carol I's Peleş Castle, one of the region's highlights, along with the hiking, biking and skiing in the mountains above.

The setting's superb. Much of the town centre is a bit quiet (not exactly the 'Pearl of the Carpathians' it claims to be), but even

those without a car can hop in the cable car and head up to 2000m to access brilliant trails and ski runs of the impressive Bucegi Mountains (p122).

The resort earned its biblical moniker when a Romanian nobleman holidayed in Israel in 1695 and founded the Sinaia Monastery here. Sinaia eventually boomed as a major resort when King Carol I made his summer residence here in 1875. Until 1920, the Hungarian–Romanian border ran along Predeal Pass, just north.

For readers' convenience, this area has been included in Transylvania, even though Sinaia is administratively part of Wallachia.

Orientation

The train station is directly below and a couple of blocks north from the centre of town. From the station climb up the stairway across the street to busy B-dul Carol I, which leads left past hotels, banks, travel agencies and the cable car.

MAPS

For hiking maps see p122. The best map is SunCart's *Sinaia* (€2.50), which also includes Buşteni. You'll find posted city maps (with hiking routes) around town, including outside the tourist information centre.

Information**BOOKSHOPS**

Flower Power (B-dul Carol I; ☎ 8am–6pm Mon-Fri)
Carries area maps, man.

EMERGENCY

If you run into problems in the mountains or need to check weather conditions, contact **Salvamont** (☎ 313 131; Primărie, B-dul Carol I) which has an another branch at cota 2000 at the top of the chairlift.

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet Café (Str Aosta 3; per hr €0.90; ☎ 9am–11pm)
Sign points to side of building.

LAUNDRY

Eco Laundry (☎ 0788-660 788; B-dul Carol I 31; per load €2.30; ☎ 7am–11pm) Drop-off laundry behind the big grey building.

MEDICAL SERVICES

SensiBlu Pharmacy (Hotel Sinaia, B-dul Carol I 8; ☎ 8am–10pm Mon-Fri, 9am–9pm Sat, 9am–2pm Sun)

MONEY

Banca Transilvania (B-dul Carol I 14; ☎ 9am–5pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am–12.30pm Sat) Has ATM; foreign exchange service next door.

POST

Central post office (☎ 311 591; B-dul Carol I 33; ☎ 7am–8pm Mon-Fri, 8am–noon Sat)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourism information centre (☎ 315 656; CIPT _sinaia@yahoo.com; B-dul Carol I 47; ☎ 9am–4.30pm Mon-Fri, Sat 'optional') Snappy attendants soften with your persistence. Lots and lots of information and brochures and maps, but can't book rooms or arrange tours.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Dracula's Land (☎ 311 441; B-dul Carol I 14; ☎ 9am–5 or 6pm) It hides its tacky name from the street (the sign says 'Tourist Office'), but some chummy blokes inside can help find a villa or hotel room for you, arrange hiking guides or change money. Schedule depends on 'how we feel... very elastic'; Mondays, they're sometimes off fishin'. Several other agencies are around too.

Sights**PELEŞ CASTLE**

Full of pomp and brimming with confidence of a new Romanian monarchy, the magnificent century-old **Peleş Castle** (☎ 310 205; compulsory tour adult/child €3.50/1.50; ☎ 11am–5pm Wed, 9am–5pm Thu–Sun), a 20-minute walk up from the centre, is really a palace (see p138). Fairytale turrets rise above acres of green meadows and grand reception halls fashioned in Moorish, Florentine and French styles, while heavy wood-carved ceilings and gilded pieces overwhelm our wee mortal minds. Even if you're bent on chasing 'Dracula', it's hard not to get a thrill visiting this castle.

The first European castle to have central heating, electricity and vacuuming(!), Peleş was intended to be the summer residence of Romania's longest-serving monarch, King Carol I (the hand-to-hip statue of him outside looks a little sassy). Construction on the 3500 sq metre edifice, built in a predominantly German–Renaissance style, began in 1875. Some 39 years, more than 400 weary craftsmen and thousands of labourers later, it was completed, just months before the king died in 1914. King Carol I's wife Elisabetha was largely responsible for the interior decoration.

During Ceauşescu's era, the castle's 160 rooms were used as a private retreat for leading communists and statesmen from around the globe. US presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, Libyan leader Moamar Gaddafi and PLO leader Yasser Arafat were all entertained by the Romanian dictator here.

The 40-minute tour, which begins regularly, takes in about 10 rooms on the ground floor – bedrooms upstairs are off-limits. In the first Armoury Hall (there's two) look for one of the 11 medieval knight suits with the long pointed boots. Rembrandt reproductions line the walls of the king's office, while real Gustav Klimt works are in the last stop, a theatre/cinema behind the entry.

Guides will point out a secret door in the small library; all rooms have such a door apparently. Queen Elisabeta painted and wrote some 43 books in her life under a pseudonym; the paintings in the poetry room depict 'fairy-tale' scenes she wrote about in one book. In the Council Room, panels made from 14 kinds of wood bore witness to the signing of Romania's neutrality for the last two years of WWI.

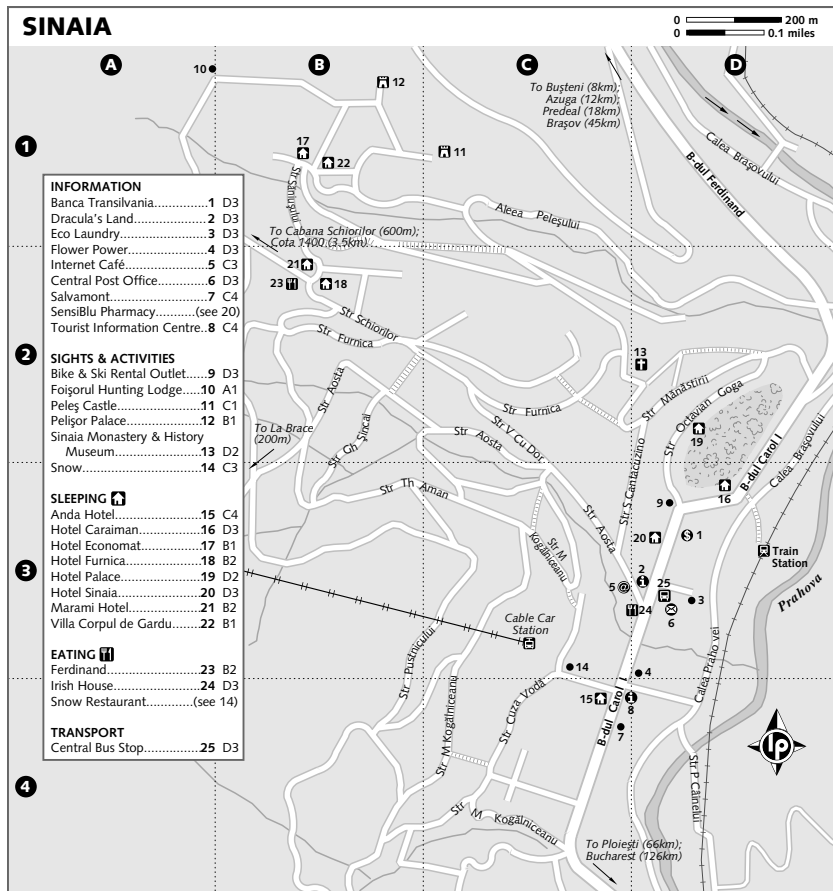
Peleş Castle was off-limits to the public from 1947 to 1975, when it was reborn briefly as a museum. Extensive renovation was completed in 1990.

Tickets are sold either at the ticket counter at the nearby Peleşor Palace or under the arches in the centre of the building where a door is signposted 'foreign languages'. Guides speak English, French, Russian and German.

PELEŞOR PALACE

About 100m uphill from the castle, the German-medieval **Peleşor Palace** (☎ 310 918; compulsory tours adult/child €0.60/0.20; ☎ 11am–5pm Wed, 9am–5pm Thu–Sun) has a hard time competing with its neighbour. King Carol I planned this house for his nephew (and future king) Ferdinand (1865–1927) and wife Marie (who didn't get on well with King C and loathed Peleş). Marie picked the design – pretty pastel decorations in simple Art Nouveau style. Most of the furniture was imported from Vienna. Marie used four apartments while Ferdinand had just one. Marie died in the arched golden room, the walls of which are entirely covered in gilded leaves.

At the western end of the Peleş estate is the Swiss-chalet-style **Foişorul Hunting Lodge**, built as a temporary residence by King Carol



I before Peleş Castle was completed. Marie and Ferdinand's son, the future King Carol II, briefly lived here with his mistress Elena Lupescu. During the communist era, Ceauşescu used it as his private hunting lodge. The building is closed to visitors.

SINAIA MONASTERY

Half way between Peleş and the centre, the **Sinaia Monastery** (Str Mănăstirii; admission by donation; ☎ 8am-8 or 9pm), home to 20-some monks, is well worth a look. Inside the gate, the large Orthodox church ('biserica mare') before you dates from 1846; two icons inside were presented by Russia's Tsar Nicholas II in 1903.

Beside the church is a small **History Museum** (Muzeul de Istorie; admission €1.20; ☎ 8am-5pm summer)

in which some of the monastery's treasures are displayed, including the first translation of the Bible into Romanian (in the Cyrillic alphabet), dating from 1668.

Back towards the mountains, a passageway leads to a smaller church ('biserica veche') from 1695. Monks retreated into the Bucegi Mountains from the 14th century but it was not until the late 17th century that they built a monastery.

The **tomb of Tache Ionescu**, the head of a transitional government for a few months in 1921-22, is in the building next to the small church. Stricken with cholera as a child, Ionescu came here. Quotations from his speeches are carved in stone on the mausoleum's interior walls.

Activities

Skiing, hiking and biking are big deals in the Bucegi.

Skiers either drive, bus or cable-car to Cota 1400, a festive scene with sleds to hire, open-air grills to snack on, a ski-hire shop (about €9 per day for skis) and a chairlift (one/five rides €2.80/10). From here you can also take the second cable car to Cota 2000 to access some 40km of wild skiing around Mt Furnica (at Cota 2000); the 2.5km Carp trail, descending from Mt Furnica to Cota 1400 is the toughest. There are also several other trails of intermediate and beginners' levels. Located on top of the Bucegi plateau above the Sinaia resort is an 8km cross-country route, as well as a 13-bend bobsled track.

In summer these trails welcome hikers, and many can be biked.

A good source of equipment and information in town, **Snow** (☎ 311 198; www.snow-sinaia.ro; Str Cuza Vodă 2a; ☎ 9am-6pm), near the cable-car station, hires skis (€10 per day) and bikes in summer. It offers ski instruction services. Check out the 1930s skis on the walls of the shop.

Another **rental outlet** (☎ 314 906; Str Octavia Goga 1; ☎ 8am-7pm) rents bikes for €2.30 per hour, €11.50 per day; skis are about €9 per day, snowboards €11.50.

Sleeping

Hotels tend to be overpriced. Travel agencies around town can find you a room in one of the countless villas (generally family vacation homes with a few available guesthouse-style rooms). Rates start at around €20 to €25 and it's really the only option for budget travellers in town.

If you want the sense of the outdoors, opt for up the hill, such as the area around La Brace restaurant (p122) or towards Peleş. The only real advantages of being near the centre are sugary treats, the cable car and the internet.

Cazare (private rooms) are cheaper, but apparently police are cracking down on independent entrepreneurs at the train station.

See p124 for some information regarding cabanas in the mountains.

CENTRE

Hotel Caraiman (☎ 313 551; palace@rdslink.ro; B-dul Carol 14; s/d/apt €33/44/61) Of the faded-glory century-old hotels – and Sinaia teems with them – we like the 1881 red-and-white Caraiman most,

for being less royal ball and more rustic and laid-back. Rooms are simple – beige carpets, tiled bathrooms with standing showers, half looking west towards the mountains over a small park.

Hotel Sinaia (☎ 302 900; www.hotelsinaia.ro; s/d from €41/50; ☎ ☎) With gum-chewing attendants and 1970s aura running rampant, the Sinaia nevertheless booms with energy – lobby internet and ping-pong, basement disco – but its staff and rooms' green carpets and wall-bolted TVs may be in need of a pep talk. Pool use is extra.

Hotel Palace (☎ 312 051; palace@rdslink.ro; Str Octavian Goga 4; 3-star s/d €42/62, 4-star s/d €58/79; ☎ ☎) There's a little bit of *The Shining* in this glorious 1911 building, with halls that stretch and stretch before you and a wide low-lit lobby lounge that is often empty. Go four-star if you stay, for more space and newer furnishings. All have new bathrooms.

Anda Hotel (☎ 306 020; www.hotelanda.ro; B-dul Carol 130; s €63-74, d €80-91; ☎ ☎) Set up for business, and rather modern for the mountains, the Anda Hotel's higher-priced rooms are worth the extra cost for more light and balconies.

UP THE HILL

Hotel Furnica (☎ 311 151; Str Furnica 50; s €19, d €26-37) Built by the Peleş architects, the century-old, faux-Jacobean 26-room Furnica gives you a sense of royalty for cheap. Rooms are clean but dated (bedspreads are thoroughly floral), with varied layouts, some overlooking the interior courtyard with restaurant.

Hotel Economat (☎ 311 151; fax 311 150; Aleea Peleşului 2; s €23-33, d €46) Right outside the Peleş gate, this place has just slightly nicer rooms in a better setting. First-time visitors approaching Peleş sometimes mistake this for the castle! The gate below actually served as the royal stables. You can stay in a few 'Villa Turistica' choices there. The best is the two-star Villa Corpul de Gardu (☎ 311 151; s/d €26/37).

Marami Hotel (☎ 315 560; www.marami.ro; Str Furnica 52; s/d/ste €50/55/60; ☎ ☎) The chalet-style frame looks a little cheap, but inside the Marami's 17 rooms are probably Sinaia's best midrange options. The vibe is slightly Art Deco, with pink-sand bedspreads and rust-coloured carpets. The 'suite' isn't much larger; stick with the regular rooms and ask for the 4th floor facing the mountains. Peleş is a 300m leafy walk away.

Eating

There are a few fast-food stands and pizza places along B-dul Carol I. The best restaurants are further up, such as Ferdinand and La Brace.

Irish House (☎ 310 060; www.irishhouse.ro; B-dul Carol I 180; mains €2-6; 🕒 10am-midnight) Guinness is on tap (€1.60), ceilings are green and the menu has a few token Irish dishes, but everything else in this two-room rustic spot is pretty much Romanian or Italian. Everyone looks little, as the tables are too high for the chairs. Irish House also has a guestroom upstairs.

Ferdinand (☎ 0722-526 110; Str Furnica 63; mains €2.50-4; 🕒 11am-midnight) On the way to/from Peleş, Ferdinand's rustic dining room is an ante-upped option; chicken in raspberry wine sauce is the house speciality.

Snow (☎ 311 198; Str Cuza Voda; mains €2.90-5.80; 🕒 8am-midnight) Near the cable car, Snow gets busiest with ski and bike rentals, but its outdoor/indoor Romanian restaurant is about as good as the centre gets. There are ham-and-cheese pancakes and a vegetarian platter (€4), plus several breakfasts (but skip the disappointing coffee).

La Brace (☎ 310 348; Str Coştilei 27; mains €3.20-9; 🕒 10am-midnight Sun-Fri, to 1am Sat) Amidst trees, and near where the cable car passes, this fun multifloor place gets busy for pizza mostly – and the oven-baked pies are well done. It's a 15-minute walk from the centre; follow the many signs.

Getting There & Away

Sinaia is on the Bucharest–Braşov rail line – 126km from the former and 45km from the latter – so jumping on a train to Bucharest (1½ hours) or Braşov (€3.60, one hour) is a cinch.

Buses and maxitaxis run every 45 minutes between roughly 7am and 10pm from the central bus stop on B-dul Carol I to Azuga and Buşteni (€0.50, 10 minutes), some all the way to

Bucharest (€3.80, 1½ hours) or Braşov (€1.40, one hour). Rates are less than the train; pay the driver when you board. There's little room for luggage usually.

BUCEGI MOUNTAINS

The Bucegi Mountains may not be part of the world traveller's everyday lingo, but they're no secret to Romanians. And for trekking they're as good as it gets, with a well-marked network of trails (some that can be biked) and many cabanas open year-round to shelter hikers and cross-country skiers. An added bonus is the flat-top plateau, above the horseshoe-shaped range that stands between Bran and Snaia.

Two problems of note: for one, the weather. As one guide told us 'You're the only thing moving up there'. When winds come you know it; winter is severe, avalanches close wild skiing options during the thaw and summer thunderstorms are common. Wind can often cause lift closures.

The other problem is crowds. In summer cable-car rides up from Buşteni (p124) and Sinaia (below) can bottleneck, particularly from Buşteni, which sometimes sees two-hour lines to go up (there are extra cars in the afternoon to bring people back).

The best hiking map by far is the Hungarian Dimap's fold-out *Five Mountains from the Carpathian's Bend* (covering the Piatra Craiului, Bucegi, Postăvarul, Piatra Mare and Ciucaş ranges, plus a Braşov city map; €2.50), with English text.

Hiking & Biking

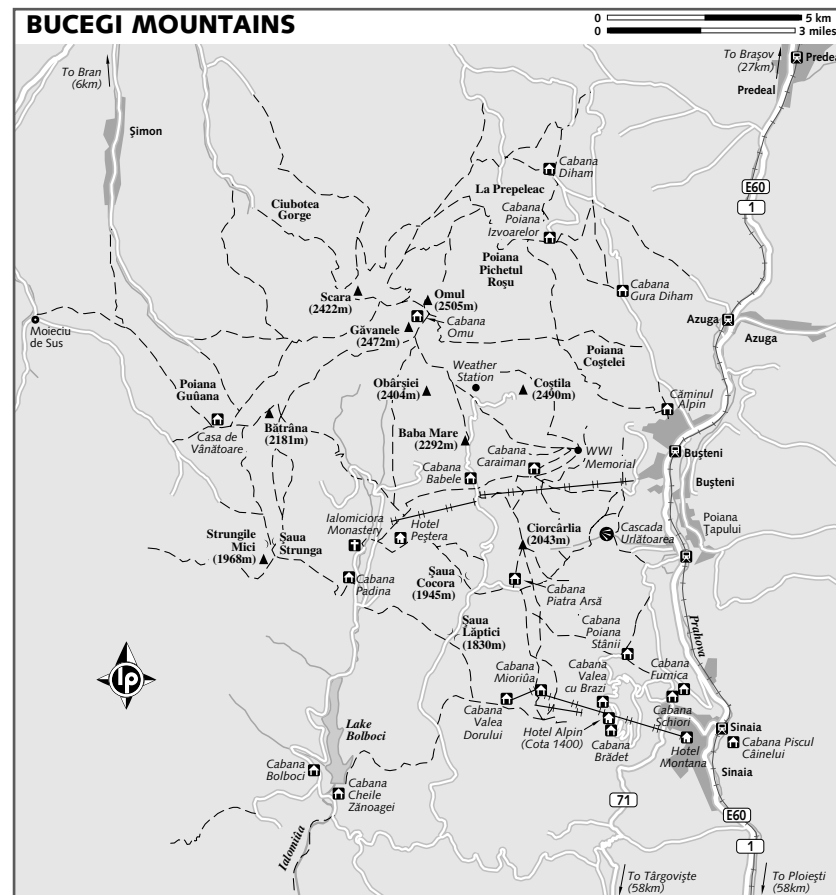
The two most common starting points are from the cable-car stations at Cota 2000 (from Sinaia) or from Cabana Babele (from Buşteni). If it's just a day trip, consider Buşteni (where the bulk of hikes are); if you want to spend a couple of days up there, many people start from Sinaia.

GETTING INTO BUCEGI

The easiest way into the Bucegi from Sinaia is up two cable-car rides: one from the centre to the Cota 1400 station, then another up to Cota 2000 station. In the centre, the 30-person **cable-car** (☎ 311 764, 311 872; to Cota 1400 adult/child one way €2.90/1.75, return €5.20/2.90, to Cota 2000 one way €5.45/2.90, return €10.20/5.10; 🕒 8.30am-4 or 5pm Tue-Sun) leaves half-hourly with two station points marked by elevation. Lines are more likely to be open in winter than summer.

Buses outside Snow, just below the station, also go up to Cota 1400 (€1.50) when full; a taxi there is about €5.75.

See above for information.



From Buşteni take the cable car up to **Cabana Babele** (2206m). From Babele a trail leads to the giant WWI memorial cross at 2284m (one hour, marked with red crosses). From here a path (red crosses) leads to the top of Caraiman Peak (2384m). On the peak the path becomes wider, turning into a trail that continues towards Omul Peak across Bucegi Plateau. It gets close to the Coştita Peak (2490m) on top of which is a rocket-like TV transmitter (out of bounds to the public); nearby is a weather station that has accommodation.

Alternatively a trail (three to four hours, blue crosses) leads from **Cabana Caraiman** (2025m), where you can pick up the trail to the WWI cross (30 to 45 minutes, red circles).

Cabana Babele is the best starting point for **biking** around the Bucegi – you can take your bike on the cable car, but have to buy an extra ticket for the space.

From Cabana Babele you can hike south following a yellow-stripe trail to **Cabana Piatra Arsă** (1950m). From here you can pick up a blue trail that descends to Sinaia via **Poiana Stăni** (three hours). An even more interesting destination is the **Ialomiciora Monastery**, accessible by trail (1½ hours, blue crosses) or via a second cable car from Babele, where you'll find a small hermitage built partially inside the Ialomîţa cave. Visitors are welcome to spend the night there; there is also the Hotel Peştera nearby.

A more ambitious expedition involves taking the cable car from Buşteni to either of the

HIKING TIMES

- **Babele to Bran** nine hours
- **Babele to Cota 2000** seven hours
- **Babele to Omu** two or three hours
- **Cota 2000 to Omu** four or five hours
- **Cota 2000 to Bran** 14 to 16 hours
- **Omu to Bran** eight hours

two cable-car stations and hiking northwest across the mountains to **Bran Castle** (p139). You can do this in one strenuous day if you get an early start from Babele, but it's preferable to take two days and free camp or spend a night at **Cabana Omu**. From the TV transmitter, there is a trail (two hours, yellow-marked) leading to Cabana Omu on the summit (Bucegi's highest point, at 2505m). North of Babele the scenery becomes dramatic, with dizzying drops into valleys on either side.

From Omu to Bran Castle is tough but spectacular – a 2000m drop through the tree line into thick forest, then onto a logging road leading to the castle (five hours, yellow triangles). Don't even think of climbing up from Bran to Omu.

A particularly nice route from Sinaia (seven to 10 hours, yellow and blue stripes) starts at either Cota 1400 or Cota 2000 at **Cabana Miorița**, to the **Cabana Piatra Arsă**, down to the Ialomiciora Monastery and then up to the Omul peak (where there's also a cabana).

Sleeping

No one hires out camping equipment, but last-second campers should be able to find cheap 'Chinese tents' (about €15) and sleeping bags (from €30) in Sinaia and Bușteni. Cabanas provide blankets. It's sometimes hard to reserve a spot in cabanas, but they'll always make space.

FROM BUȘTENI

Cabana Babele (☎ 315 304; dm/d €6/23; ☞ year-round) Perched high at 2206m, this simple hikers' refuge dates from 1937. Private doubles have private bathroom; there's a restaurant on the premises.

Cabana Omu (☎ 0744-567 290) This is a simple electricity-free refuge with beds. The nearby weather station has heat and electricity.

Another one open from May to September is Cabana Caraiman (2025m).

FROM SINAIA

Cabana Schiori (☎ 313 655; Str Drumul Cotei 7; r from €25) Walkable from Sinaia's centre, this is pretty fancy for a cabana, with a swank restaurant on site too.

Cabana Valea cu Brazi (☎ 313 605; bed €6) This is a so-so cabana at 1510m, a 10-minute walk up from Cota 1400.

Near the Cota 1400 cable-car station, Cabana Brădet was closed at research time but may reopen.

Getting There & Away

Aside from the cable cars from Bușteni and Sinaia, rough roads wind up from the south of the mountains all the way to Cabana Babele – these are for 4WD vehicles only.

BUȘTENI

☎ 244 / pop 11,790

Framed by absolutely towering peaks – the Caraiman (2384m) and Coștila (2490m) to the west are Europe's highest conglomerate cliffs – Bușteni is a bewildering mix of communist dreariness and Bucegi's greatest beauty. Still, it's a good starting point to reach Bucegi's wondrous scenes.

Most visitors keen on hitting the mountains by day, and bars or restaurants by night, will enjoy Sinaia (5km south) more, which also has a cable car accessing Bucegi's trails. Unlike Sinaia, where truck and commercial traffic is forced to go around the centre, Bușteni's central B-dul Libertății is rife with traffic and exhaust fumes.

Orientation

The train station backs onto the main street, B-dul Libertății. The cable car, Hotel Silva, post office and commercial complex are at the southern end of town (turn left from the train station, walk 200m past Hotel Caraiman, then right for 300m on Str Telecabinei).

There's a large-scale town map on B-dul Libertății in front of the post office. The best available map is Suncart's *Bușteni* (€2.50), which includes Sinaia and Bucegi Mountains.

Information

In case of emergency on the mountain, call **Salvamt** (☎ 320 048; Primărie, B-dul Libertății 91). Email emergencies are solved at **ILCOFON**

Internet (☎ 321 780; cnr B-dul Libertății & Str Fantanii; per hr €0.60; ☞ 9am-10.30pm), next to a small park, just across and south from the train station.

There are a few banks, 100m south of the train station on B-dul Libertății, including **BRD** (☞ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat).

The **post office** (B-dul Libertății 93; ☞ 7am-9pm Mon-Fri, 8am-2pm Sat) is 50m south of the train station.

Travel information is hard to come by; check at Casa Achim (see Sleeping, below).

Sights

Between the wars, Bușteni was home to Romanian novelist Cezar Petrescu (1892–1961), whose realist works attempted to reflect a 'psychology of failure' in modern Romanian life. His house is now a **memorial museum** (Str Tudor Vladimirescu 2), which was closed at research time but likely to reopen. Turn right (north) out of the train station; Str Tudor Vladimirescu is the fourth street on the left (about 500m).

Activities

To get to Bucegi Mountains' hiking, ski and mountain-bike trails, take the 25-person **cable car** (☎ 320 306; adult/child return €5.40/2.60; ☞ 8am-3.45pm Jul–mid-Sep, Tue-Sun mid-Sep–Jun), a trip in which is a major experience in and of itself. In summer it can be busy, sometimes with three-hour waits or more. Arrive early (some even queue by 6am).

From Bușteni, it's also possible to **hike** 8km south to Sinaia or 10km north to Predeal.

Hotel Silva hires skis and bikes. In summer bike-hire stands are set up on B-dul Libertății as well.

Bușteni's small ski run **Calinderu** is over a kilometre west of the train station (go south 100m, turn left after the stream at Str Valea Alba for 1km). A nine-ride lift ticket is €12, while ski hire costs €6 Monday to Friday, €12 Saturday and Sunday.

Sleeping

Those wanting to get something out of their nights tend to prefer staying in Sinaia. See opposite for cabanas accessible from the cable-car above Bușteni. In town, you'll find dozens of rooms to rent up Str Caraiman and south along Str Unirii.

Casa Achim (☎ 321 693; Str Caraiman 7; r €17) This is a so-so guesthouse between B-dul Libertății and the cable-car lift (turn right the street before Str Telecabinei). When around, the

English-speaking manager is a super source of travel information – even for drop-by visitors.

Pensiunea Cetatea Caraiman (☎ 323 222; r €17) Made up like a fricking castle, this basic guesthouse has small windows (only) to take in jagged peaks, mini-golf carpets and a little TV room. Walk south of the train station, then take the right left that winds north and over a stream; the castle is in a group of buildings to the right. It's about a 500m walk.

Hotel Silva (☎ 320 027, 321 412; www.hotelsilva.ro, in Romanian; Str Telecabinei 24; s/d from €36/51) This mammoth 1980 building lords over a hill right in front of the cable car. Rooms have gotten a fix up, with green or blue carpets and modern lounge chairs. All have balconies looking over the scene of hiker and skier swarms.

Eating

You can stock up on supplies in the commercial complex at the southern end of B-dul Libertății or at the cluster of shops at the foot of the cable-car station.

Bistro (☎ 0721-065 315; B-dul Libertății 146-148; pizzas €2.60-4.60; ☞ 8am-10pm) This is a rustic place 100m south of the train station with big windows, wood benches, €1.20 burgers and all-day omelettes.

Ristorante Falco Bianco (☎ 320 347; B-dul Libertății 109; ☞ 10am-midnight Fri-Sun, to 9 or 10pm Mon-Thu) Run by an Italian guy who likes the Stones, this two-floor tavern, south of the train station, churns out excellent, authentic pasta and pizza (word is that the British ambassador in Bucharest comes up for meals).

Getting There & Away

Bușteni has no Agenție de Voiaj CFR. Buy tickets at the train station on B-dul Libertății. Bușteni is on the main Bucharest–Cluj-Napoca line, with all local trains between Brașov and Bucharest stopping.

From Bușteni, buses to Azuga and Sinaia depart every half-hour between about 6am and 8pm from the main bus stop on B-dul Libertății. All maxitaxis heading to and from Brașov (€1.40, 50 minutes) can be flagged down on the main street.

Open-bed trucks marked 'Gura Diham' depart for Cabana Gura Diham from Hotel Miorița (just south of the train station). They run daily in summer, at weekends in winter, leaving hourly or half-hourly between 7am and 10pm from outside the train station.

PREDEAL

☎ 268 / pop 6740

The first skiing you hit heading south from Brașov, this ski resort is, at 1033m, higher than Poiana Brașov or Sinaia, but the runs aren't as long and it misses the most popular access points into the Bucegi Mountains. On occasion hordes of local kids on school camps (winter and summer) delight in Predeal, yet things seem quieter here than elsewhere and there are some good hikes. Just south of town is the official beginning of Transylvania.

Watch for Predeal's mascot, a red, yellow and blue bird named Toto.

Orientation & Information

The train station and bus/maxitaxi stop are right on the main street. B-dul Mihai Sălescu, which goes north to Brașov and south to Sinaia and Bucharest. The lifts are a 10-minute walk southeast. Some plush hotels are in the Trei Brazi district, a 20-minute walk northwest.

The friendly **Tourist Information Centre** (☎ 455 330; www.predeal.ro; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, to 4pm Sat & Sun summer, 8am-4pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat & Sun winter), in a modern building with huge glass windows in front of the train station, is a good first stop. It can offer prices of the dozens of hotels, villas and *pensiunes*, as well as a brochure with map and excellent info on hikes and bike rides.

Across B-dul Mihai Sălescu, the blue-and-white **Banca Comercială Română** (☎ 8:30am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 12:30pm Sat) has a 24-hour ATM. There is an **Internet Café** (Str Șoimului; per hr €0.60; ☎ 9am-midnight) behind the modern-looking white church, just north of the bank. Another 100m north is a post office; south of the bank is a de facto 'centre' with sports shops, cheap pizza and a travel agent.

In case of emergency, call **Salvament** (☎ 0726-686 696).

Activities

Clăbucet Zona de Agreement (☎ 456 541) runs the eight-run mountain with two chairlifts and several drag lifts. A 10-point lift ticket costs €11/7 per adult/child; the chairlifts count for two points, but the drags as one. You can hire skis and snowboards near the base of the mountain.

A good hub for winter and summer activity is **Fulg de Nea** (Snow Flake; ☎ 456 089; Str Telefericului 1),

close to the ski lift, which is Predeal's central ski school, but also offers ice skating, sleigh riding and hiking, plus biking and tennis in summer. It runs a villa.

There are several **hiking** trails in the area. The loop from near Fulg de Nea up the mountain to the southern end of Str Poliștoaca takes about two hours. Trails north of town are open for **cycling** too.

Sleeping

There are many options to stay in *cazares*. The tourist information centre can find you villas for as little as €12 or €15.

Fulg de Nea (☎ 456 089; Str Telefericului 1; r from €18) Just behind the ski centre, this 21-room villa is often filled with groups. Breakfast is not included.

Hotel Cabana Vânătorul (☎ 455 285; www.maroma.ro/cabanavanatorilor; Str Trei Brazi 3; r from €20) Some 3km northeast of the train station on the road to Trei Brazi, this is a lovely place with 24 rooms, and meat lovers will find their paradise in the restaurant.

Vila Fragilor (☎ 456 605; Str Nufarului 1; summer/winter r €23/29) This is a nicely renovated three-floor home with plain wooden floors and modern furnishings. Each of the six rooms has a TV, rug and writing desk (two share a bathroom). The top floor rooms have atmospheric wooden beams and diamond-shaped windows. There's no breakfast, internet or English, but the huge kitchen is for your use. It's across from the train station; zigzag your way up 60m behind the white church.

Hotel Carmen (☎ 456 656; Str Mihai Săulescu 121; s/d €25/37) If you're wheeling your luggage from the train station, head left 50m to get to this slightly faded, but cheerful enough, hotel with loud carpets, big wardrobes and small entries to each room. There's a travel agent here too.

Eating

Most hotels have a restaurant of sorts, and there are plenty of fast-food options along Str Mihai Săulescu. There are a few good restaurants at the southern end of B-dul Libertății (which reaches the main street 100m east of the train station), and the restaurant at Hotel Cabana Vânătorul serves tasty local fare.

Getting There & Away

The **Agentie de Voiaj CFR** (☎ 410 233, ext 194601) is inside the train station building.

Predeal is on the main Cluj-Napoca-Brașov-Bucharest line and you'll never wait long for a train heading to Brașov (€1.70 to €2.60, 40 minutes) or Bucharest (two hours). Outside, buses or maxitaxis show up about every half-hour in the train station parking lot where you can get to Brașov (€1.20, 30 minutes), Sinaia (€1.20, 30 minutes) or Bucharest (€4.30, two hours).

BRAȘOV

☎ 268 / pop 321,460

The heart and hub of Transylvania, this popular, Saxon-rich town is an inviting base with a week's worth of day trips to castles, villages and mountains. Flaunting its medieval glory, Brașov's historic centre, still largely surrounded by medieval stone walls still not pierced by new-fangled paved roads, cobbles its way around tiny alleys and baroque façades and churches with (legend goes) sword marks on its walls. One new German resident said, 'It looks just like a German town, just that it hasn't been perfected yet. It's actually dangerous to walk under some buildings. I love it.'

There are hills all around – most popularly Mt Tâmpa shooting up outside the city's medieval walls, now sporting a 'Hollywood' Brașov sign that lights up as dusk hits – and plenty of kick-back bars, open-air cafés and fine eateries serving more than pizza. It's a bit touristy – too much for some visitors – but it's hard to miss.

See Around Brașov (p136) and Prahova Valley (p118) for scores of day-trip options including that eye-rolling, must-do 'Dracula castle' in Bran.

History

Established on an ancient Dacian site in the 13th century by Teutonic knights, Brașov became a German mercantile colony in the 13th century named Kronstadt (Brassó in Hungarian). The Saxons built ornate churches and townhouses, protected by a massive wall that still remains. The Romanians lived at Schei, just outside the walls, to the southwest.

One of the first public oppositions to the Ceaușescu government flared here in 1987. Thousands of disgruntled workers took to the streets demanding basic foodstuffs. Ceaușescu called in the troops and three people were killed in the scuffle.

Orientation

Str Republicii, Brașov's pedestrian-only promenade, is crowded with shops and cafés. At its north end is B-dul Eroilor, with museums and hotels; the boulevard also links two other main thoroughfares, Str Mureșenilor (the main entry thoroughfare to the centre) to its west and Str Nicolae Bălcescu to its east. The train station is 2km northeast of the town centre, past grey block-housing neighbourhoods.

MAPS & PUBLICATIONS

Amco's *Brașov City Plan* (€3.40) is the best available map; it surely beats the glossy ad-filled *Brașov City & County Map* (€2.80). The information centre hands out a useful, free *Sam's City Guide* with maps of Brașov and Poiana Brașov.

The free, biweekly Romanian magazines *Zile și Nopti* (*Days and Nights*; www.zileșinopti.ro) and *24-Fun*, found in bars and cafés, are worth picking up for the most up-to-date listings.

Pick up the bimonthly *Brașov Visitor* (www.brasov-visitor.ro) at the tourist information centre for English articles from visitors and expats about the Transylvanian experience.

Information

Check www.brasovtravelguide.ro or www.brasov.ro for basic information.

BOOKSHOPS

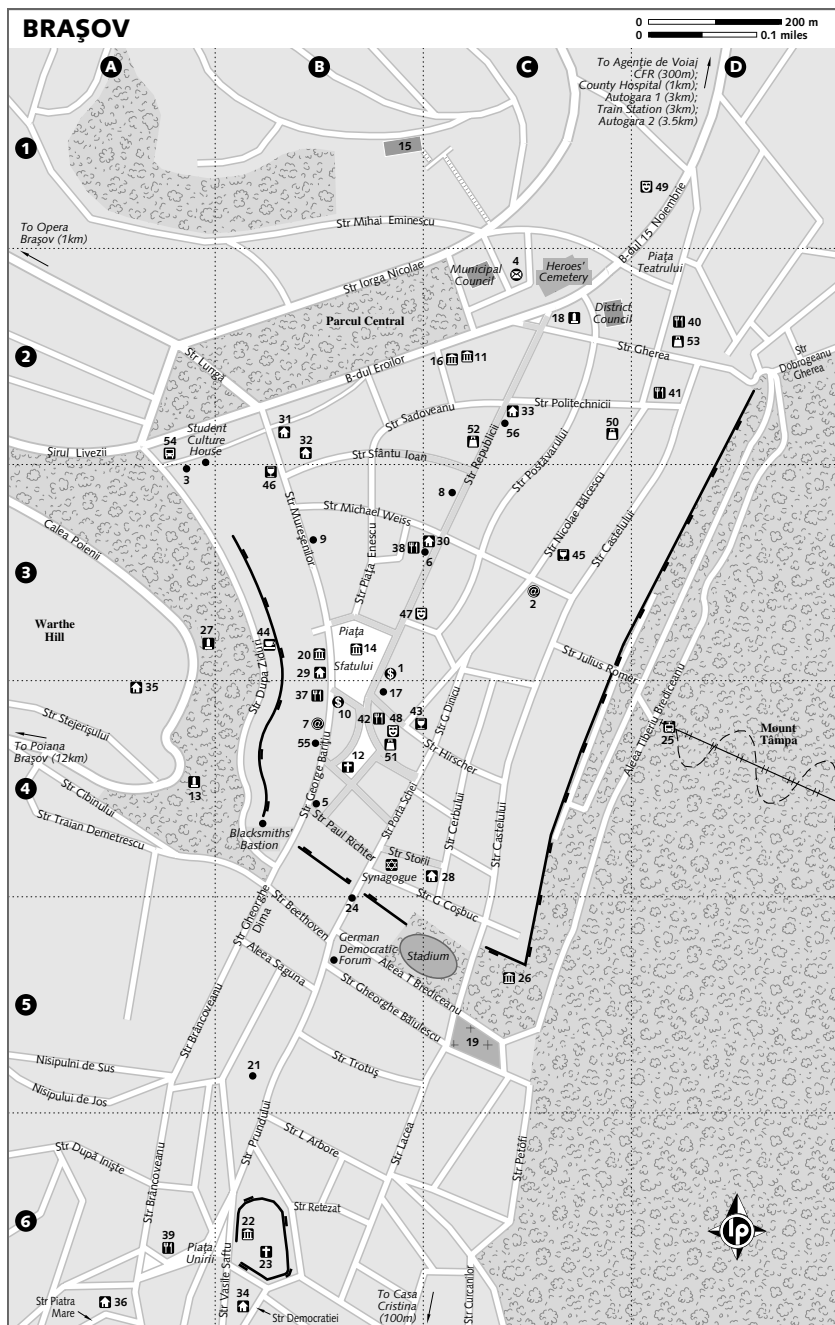
At the following you can find some Romania-themed books and maps, plus a smattering of English-language guidebooks.

Librărie George Coșbuc (☎ 444 395; Str Republicii 29; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat)

Librărie Ralu (Str Mureșenilor 12; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat, 11am-4pm Sun)

FROM BRAȘOV WITH LOVE

Between 1950 and 1960, when Romania still considered itself Moscow's buddy, Brașov was named 'Orașul Stalin', with the Russian dictator's name emblazoned into the side of Mount Tâmpa thanks to artistic deforestation. At the time, the name was sadly apt, as ruthless, forced industrialisation yanked thousands of rural workers from the countryside and plunked them down on the city in an attempt to crank the totalitarian motor of industry.



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CULTURAL CENTRES

Alliance Française (☎ 412 179; www.afbv.home.ro; B-dul Eroilor 33; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon, Wed & Fri, 1-8pm Tue & Thu) Hosts French classes and events.

British Council (☎ 419 338; B-dul Eroilor 33; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon, Wed & Fri, 1-8pm Tue & Thu) Library and English club.

EMERGENCY

Salvamoto (☎ 471 517, 0725-826 668; Str Varga 23) Emergency rescue service for the mountains.

INTERNET ACCESS

Blue Net Club (☎ 0740-839 449; Str Michael Weiss 26; per hr €0.40-0.60; ☎ 24hr)

Internet (Str Gheorghe Barițiu 8; per hr €0.60; ☎ 24hr)

LEFT LUGGAGE

Train station (per day small/big bag €0.60/1.80; ☎ 24hr) The left-luggage office is in the underpass that leads out to/from the tracks.

MEDICAL SERVICES

County Hospital (☎ 333 666; Calea Bucaresti 25-27; ☎ 24hr) Northwest of the centre.

Europharm (☎ 411 248; Str Republicii 15; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 8am-3pm Sat) Well-stocked pharmacy.

MONEY

You'll find numerous ATMs, banks and 24-hour exchange offices on Str Republicii and

B-dul Eroilor. **Raiffeisen Bank** (Piața Sfatului; ☎ 9am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, to 2pm Sat) charges 5% commission for changing travellers cheques; it's only 1.5% (US\$5 minimum) at **Banca Comercială Română** (Piața Sfatului 14; ☎ 8.30am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 12.30pm Sat).

POST & TELEPHONE

The **central post office** (☎ 411 609; Str Iorga Nicolae 1; ☎ 7am-8pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1pm Sat) is opposite the Heroes' Cemetery.

TOURIST OFFICES

In the gold city council building, the English-language speaking staff at the **Tourist information centre** (☎ 419 078; www.brasovcity.ro; Piața Sfatului 30; ☎ 9am-5pm) can point you to tour services, offer free brochures and track down hotel vacancies (there's no private accommodation though). The centre shares space with the history museum – hopefully museum attendants will lose that confused/shocked look they give to travellers seeking something called 'information'.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Some travel agencies around town are geared for getting Romanians out of the country, but there are plenty focused on Brașov too.

DiscoveRomania (☎ 472 718; www.discoveromania.ro; Str Paul Richter 1; ☎ 10am-3pm Mon-Fri) This agency (aka Aventours), led by English-speaking

BRAȘOV HIGHLIGHTS

- Mt Tâmpa (opposite)
- White Tower (opposite)
- Piața Sfatului (below)
- Auld Scots Pub burger and beer (p134)
- Black Church (right)

guides, offers tailor-made tours and oodles of information on the area. It's a great place to start for little or big things – like finding someone hiring cross-country skis in Zărnești or full-on week-long hikes with guides. Staff can help even if you're not planning to take a tour.

An Englishman runs **Roving România** (☎ 0744-212 065; www.roving-romania.co.uk), an out-of-home agency for personalised, usually small-scale tours – great for birding, 4x4 trips. Email for sample itineraries.

Sights

Brașov is an outdoor type of place, best seen by DIY rambles around its medieval core.

PIAȚA SFATULUI

This wide square is the heart of medieval Brașov. In the centre stands the 1420 **council house** (Casa Sfatului), topped by a **Trumpeter's Tower**, in which town councillors, known as centurions, would meet. Some locals swear the joint's haunted; we were warned one worker there quit after 'hearing sounds'. Apparently the tower staged countless tortures, and the square outside supposedly staged the last witch burning in Europe.

This old city hall today houses the two-floor, by-the-numbers **Brașov Historical Museum** (☎ 472 350; www.istoriebv.turistic.ro; adult/student €0.90/0.60; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun summer, 9am-5pm winter), in which the history of the Saxon guilds is recounted (in limited English); they could certainly sex up the small torture room.

Opposite is the Renaissance **Hirscher House** (built 1539-45), also known as the 'Merchants House'. It was thoughtfully built by Apollonia Hirscher, the widow of Brașov mayor Lucas Hirscher, so that merchants could do business without getting rained on. Today it shelters a gallery.

On the square's western side stands the charming **Mureșenilor House Memorial Museum** (Muzeul Memorial Casa Mureșenilor; ☎ 477 864; admis-

sion €0.60, free Sat & Sun; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat & Sun), which honours the family of Jacob Mureșan, the first editor of the Romanian-language *Gazeta Transylvania*, a political newspaper published in the 19th century. No English is spoken.

BLACK CHURCH

Brașov's main landmark, just south of the square, is the **Black Church** (Biserica Neagră; adult/child €1/0.50; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, mass 10am Sun), the largest Gothic church between Vienna and Istanbul and still used by German Lutherans today. Built between 1383 and 1480, its name comes from its appearance after a fire in 1689. The original statues on the exterior of the apse are now inside (look back after you enter) and some 120 fabulous Turkish rugs hang from the balconies (gifts from merchants who returned from shopping sprees in the southern Ottoman lands). Worshippers drop coins through the wooden grates in the floor and hope for the best.

The church's 4000-pipe organ, built by Buchholz of Berlin in 1839, is believed to be the only Buchholz preserved in its original form. Since 1891, organ recitals have been held in the church during July and August, at 6pm Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday (€1.20).

Note the scrape marks outside the church; some locals swear it's from soldiers' sharpened swords from centuries past; others say 'nah, it was just a butcher sharpening his cleaver'. Also the original construction was intended to have a far larger bell tower (funds ran out); see how small it is in comparison to the mammoth base.

BEARS!

About 5000 black and brown bears call Romania home, and many have started relocating to Brașov. In recent years, uncollected rubbish bins in Brașov's outskirts have become new feeding areas for bears, delighting some tour operations that champion 'bear-watching' tours to trash heaps. Many are against it, as it can be dangerous for bears to become accustomed to associating with the human presence and, well, it's not very 'natural'.

In 2004 a rabid brown bear killed two hikers near Brașov.

IT'S A MOBILE WORLD AFTER ALL

The only thing more complex and comical than Romania's bus service is the government-fuelled fervour at building a Disney-like Dracula Land amusement park for US\$60 million with the aim of attracting up to a million tourists a year.

It began in 2001 with thoughts of plopping the rides next to Vlad Țepeș' birthplace in Coienari, outside Curtea de Argeș, but environmental concerns and criticism from folks such as Prince Charles pushed the site to a place even less prepared to take it: medieval Sighișoara. By 2003 the government moved the site to Bucharest – 'construction will begin in three months!' it claimed – then Brașov got into the act, proposing a rival park to be called Empire Dracula in 2004.

Plans for both fell by the wayside, with everything postponed indefinitely – or at least until the next great location is found.

EAST OF THE CENTRE

Between Piața Sfatului and the Mt Tâmpa cable car is Str Storii (Rope Street), which is 1.32m by 83m – one of Europe's narrowest 'streets'. The cobbled pedestrian-only alley has been scrubbed up, with nice views of the 'Brașov' sign on the mountain, and connects Str Porta Schei and Str Cerbului.

NORTH OF THE CENTRE

Running north of the square, the pedestrianised Str Republicii provides respite from the traffic that detracts from the charm of the rest of the Old Town. At the promenade's northern end is the wooden-cross **Memorial to Victims of 1989 Revolution**. Across B-dul 15 de Noiembrie is the **Heroes' Cemetery**, a memorial slab listing 69 local victims.

A block west, the **Art Museum** (☎ 477 286; B-dul Eroilor 21; adult/child €0.90/0.60; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) and the **Ethnographic Museum** (☎ 476 243; adult/child €0.60/0.30; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun) adjoin each other. The former has a mishmash of Romanian paintings and decorative arts. The latter has laminated handouts (in English, German and French) explaining exhibits; ask for a demo of the early 20th-century eight-ribbon loom.

In 1524 a new wooden **citadel** (Cetate; admission free; ☎ 11am-midnight) was built in Brașov, on top of Citadel Hill just north, though the stone wall ruins you now see are from the 16th and 17th centuries. Today it houses a couple of beer patios.

AROUND THE WALL

Old Brașov is surrounded by a 12m-high and 3km-long 15th-century wall, built to defend the city from Turkish attacks. Seven bastions were also raised around the city at the most exposed points, each one defended by a guild

whose members, pending danger, tolled their bastion bell.

The most popular viewing area is along the western section, which runs along a stream and pedestrianised Str Dupa Ziduri north to B-dul Eroilor. A good access point is 200m south of the Black Church. Above on the hillside are two towers – the **Black Tower** (Turnul Neagru) and **White Tower** (Turnul Alba); both are rather white actually – offering nice views, particularly when the setting sun casts a golden hue on Brașov.

On the wall's southeast corner, past the **Schei Gate** (Poatra Schei; 1825), is the 16th-century **Weavers' Bastion** (Bastionul Țesătorilor; Str Castelui). Visit the **Weavers' Bastion Museum** (Muzeul Bastionul Țesătorilor; ☎ 472 368; adult/child €0.90/0.60; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun), housed in Brașov's only 15th-century building. The simple exhibits – in German and Romanian only – include a fudge-coloured model of Brașov in the 17th century, made in 1896 by a German teacher in town.

MT TÂMPA

Towering above town from the east is Mt Tâmpa, where Brașov's original defensive fortress was built. Vlad Țepeș attacked it in 1458, finally dismantling it two years later and – out of habit – impaling some 40 merchants atop the peak.

These days it's an easy, and irresistible, trip up. Many visitors go via the **Tâmpa cable car** (Telecabina Tâmpa; ☎ 478 657; one way/return €0.90/1.80; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun) offering stunning views from the top of Mount Tâmpa in a communist-era dining room. There's access to **hiking trails** up here. Walk south to reach the 'Hollywood'-style **Brașov sign**, with a viewing platform.

You can also hike to the top in an hour following zigzag trails from the cable-car station

(red triangles) or from the northeastern edge of the wall.

SCHEI DISTRICT

In Saxon Brașov, Romanians were not allowed to enter the walled city but were banished to the Schei quarter in the southwest. Entry to this quarter from the walled city was marked by the Schei Gate. Passing through it, the sober rows of Teutonic houses change to the smaller, simpler houses of the Romanian settlement.

A block east, towards Mt Tâmpa, is a **Military Cemetery**, with Iron Crosses on tombstones from fallen locals who fought for the Germans in WWI.

Further south along Str Prundului is the first **Romanian Lycée** where the first Romanian opera *Crai Nou* (New Moon), written by Ciprian Porumbescu (1853–83), was performed in 1882.

Continue south to Piața Unirii to the black-spired Orthodox Church of **St Nicholas' Cathedral** (St Nicolae din Scheii; ☎ 6am–9pm), first built in wood in 1392 and replaced by a Gothic stone church in 1495 by the Wallachian prince Nea-goe Basarab (r 1512–21), later embellished in Byzantine style. In 1739 the church was enlarged and its interior heavily redecorated. Inside are murals of Romania's last king and queen, covered by plaster to protect them from communist leaders and uncovered in 2004.

Beside the church is the two-room 1495 **First Romanian School Museum** (☎ 511 411; adult/child €0.90/0.60; ☎ 9am–5pm Tue–Sun), which packs a staggering far-reaching selection of old books and pieces, including the first Russian Bible (1581), King Ferdinand's coronation flag from 1922 (found in 2006), and 15th-century schoolbooks that warned 'he who will steal this book will be CURSED...his blood shall melt on his body...his left eye shall dry

out!' Resist the temptation then. No English; guides are available.

Activities

Hikes are everywhere – from atop Mt Tâmpa in town (see p129), Poiana Brașov (p136), Zărnești (p141) or into the Bucegi Mountains (p122). Pick up maps from Himalaya (p135) or talk with a travel agent specialising in hikes (p129).

You can also ski on day trips to Poiana Brașov (p136), Predeal (p126) and Sinaia (p118).

ECO-S Paragliding (☎ 0723-333 193; www.parapanta.ro) offers 10-day paragliding classes for €180.

Festivals & Events

The best time in Brașov is during the **Days of Brașov** festival, the first week after Easter (late April/early May), finishing with the fantastic **Juni Pageant** (see the boxed text, below).

Brașov proudly hosts other events including the **International Chamber Music Festival**, which is usually held the first week in September in various venues around town, with a final concert at Bran Castle. Since 1968, the **Golden Stag Festival** (Cerbul de Aur; www.cerbuldeaur.ro), held in late September, has put one-time subversive pop music on the stage – folks like James Brown, Joe Cocker and Ricky Martin have performed.

Enovember is an imaginative festival, held in November since 1998, that highlights traditions of Romanians and many ethnic minorities.

Sleeping BUDGET

Kismet Dao Villa (☎ 514 296; www.kismetdao.ro; Str Democratiei 2b; dm €10–11, d €24) Set up in a rather dorm-type building, the four-floor, six-room villa is a good budget choice, with video games

on the TV, playful staff and good-value day trips to Bran and area attractions. Take bus 4 from the train station to the end of the line at Piața Unirii.

our pick **Beke Guesthouse** (☎ 511 997; Str Cerbului 32; r incl likely jug of homemade wine €11–14) A lovely Hungarian-speaking couple runs this handful of simple rooms, each with its own feel and all with shared bath. Often they'll bring by a jug of homemade wine. The building has no sign – rooms are accessed from the vine-covered courtyard, shared with neighbours. No breakfast, no sign, no English. Two consecutive Lonely Planet researchers have hugged a Beke when leaving.

Hotel Aro Sport (☎ 478 800; Str Sfântu Ioan 3; s/d €11/16) Here's what Eastern European travel used to be about – old boxy rooms, a sink in the corner, a shower down the hall. It's quite clean and central though and the price is right. No breakfast.

Rolling Stone Hostel (☎ 513 965, 0744-876 970; www.rollingstone.ro; Str Piața Mare 2a; dm/d €11/35; ☎) Run by a long-time Brașov institution (Maria and Grig Bolea) – often found lingering at the train station – the Stone is a nice hostel with hidden doors opening to more dorm rooms (some in the arched attics) and a wading pool. You'll need energy to keep up with Maria and her two daughters' almost hyperactive attention. Check around before taking a tour (they're sometimes overpriced). They seem to save pennies on half-hearted breakfasts, rough toilet paper and no towels, but it's certainly homy. No internet access.

Hotel Postăvarul (☎ 477 448; fax 418 469; Str Republicii 62; s/d €19/27) Despite its 1910 German design, the gloriously faded grandeur of this 46-room hotel completes, by accident, a stereotypical vision of a 'Transylvanian hotel' – inside floors creak under green-and-white arched doors in a dated, mysterious hotel not for everyone. But rooms are vacuumed daily and have private toilets; shared showers are down the hall. Its adjoining Hotel Coroana is overpriced.

MIDRANGE

Casa Cristina (☎ 512 580, 0722-322 021; Str Curcanilor 62a; s/d €25/35) On a side street as the Schei district sneaks up into the hills, this six-room guesthouse is a homy spot, with views looking towards the centre. Three colour-themed rooms have private bathroom, plus there's a kitchen to use; breakfast is €3 extra. Staff can

point out the hike to Poiana Brașov nearby. It's south of the map extents, uphill slightly from Piața Unirii.

Montana (☎ 0723-614 534; Calea Polenii; s €42-44, d €52-54) Up above the White Tower, the Montana is a great convert of a Brady Bunch-style vacation home – a super frog-green six-room hillside guesthouse with slanted cedar roofs and seriously pastel room themes. Pay €2 more for rooms with refrigerator and balcony.

Bella Musica (☎ 477 956; www.bellamusica.ro; Piața Sfatului 19; s/d €63/77; ☎ ☎) Opened in 2005, the terrific 22-room Musica has very stylish rooms with soft lighting and textured orange walls and old-style wood desks to write poems on. Downstairs an 'invisible doorman' opens/closes the front door, which overlooks the main square. Its basement restaurant is excellent.

Casa Rozelor (☎ 475 212; www.casarozelor.ro; Str Michael Weiss 20; r €88; ☎) Tucked away in a central alley, this German-run three-room guesthouse mixes up themes (one room has an upstairs loft with red-leather sofa next to a 15th-century brick wall). There are no TVs to clutter this edgy peek into the past and there are plans to expand.

TOP END

Hotel Aro Palace (☎ 478 800; www.aro-palace.ro; Str Mureșenilor 12; new hotel s/d €117/146, old hotel €70/90; ☎ ☎) This business-oriented hotel combines history (rather dated rooms in its 'old' wing, inside a lovely 1939 Art Deco front) and modern (its other wing follows the staid 'business hotel' template to a T). All rooms are overpriced, but a pool was in the works at last pass.

Eating

New eating spots open regularly. Just off Piața Sfatului, Str Hirscher is something of a 'restaurant row', with a few pizza places, a steak house and a lively pub. Fast-food options are more readily found on the pedestrian mall Str Republicii.

ROMANIAN

Casa Românească (☎ 513 877; Piața Unirii; mains €3-6; ☎ noon-midnight) Deep in the Schei district, away from trolling tourists, this casa serves tasty *sarmalute cu mamaliguta* (boiled beef rolled with vegetables and cabbage) and a very meaty 'rustic tray' grab-bag. Live music adds to or subtracts from the experience, based on your taste.

ROMANIAN BACHELOR PARTY

A centuries-old tradition, the Juni Pageant (Sărbătoarea junilor) still colourfully unfolds through the street of Schei in late April/early May. Groups of single young men don traditional Schei armour and, sword in hand, ride from Piața Unirii, through the Schei Gate, to Piața Sfatului, followed by the married men. The parade ends up on Mount Tâmpa for several hours of energetic folk dancing.

During Saxon domination, this was the one day of the year Romanians were allowed to enter the walled city. The costumes worn are seriously ornate, some over a century old and weighing several kilograms. The tradition was not meant to ensure that the single men found potential brides, but one can imagine how many trial runs were enacted as the party wound down.

Bella Musica (☎ 477 956; Str George Barițu 2; dishes €3.40-10; ☎ 10am-midnight) Pretty much everyone's local favourite, this lovely cavernous basement restaurant of red brick and candlelight serves up a few Mexican dishes, but keeps the focus on very tasty Romanian fare; a popular starter is the meaty bean soup served in a bowl of bread (€2.10). Staff bring a 'music menu' for requests – the list includes 'best ballads' by Uriah Heap, Celine Dion, the Boss and Floyd.

INTERNATIONAL

Go to Auld Scots Pub (see Drinking, below) if you're looking for a burger.

Pizza Pasta Venezia (☎ 470 511; Str Hirscher 2; pastas & pizzas from €2.30; ☎ 11am-midnight or 1am) Wall-sized Venetian paintings and soft lighting – and cheaper prices – helps this cosy Italian restaurant fill before its similar-themed neighbours. The mozzarella-and-tomato salad seems particularly fresh.

Bistro de l'Arte (☎ 0722-219 980; Piața Enescu 11; mains €2.50-4.50; ☎ 9am-1am Mon-Sat, noon-midnight Sun) In the bottom of a cosy 15th-century building, the Bistro is the place for sit-back wine sessions, breakfasts with wi-fi for your laptop, or lively dinners with mingling Romanian couples (who sometimes come for plays). The menu drifts from French and includes daily fish dishes (€4.30), big salads (€3.60) and pasta (€3.70).

Hirscher Keller (☎ 472 278; Str Hirscher 2; mains €4.30-8.60; ☎ 9am-midnight) Gothic meets moderne in this stylish dining room that focuses on steaks – very tasty, very juicy steaks. There's a nice grilled vegetables plate with eggplant, cheese and tomato, and a wine cellar downstairs housing the luxe list of local wines. Breakfasts include €2.70 Eggs Benedict.

SELF-CATERING

Hard Discount (Str Nicolae Bălcescu; ☎ 24hr) This fully stocked supermarket is next to the indoor/outdoor fruit and vegetable market.

Drinking

CAFÉS

Cafeneaua Graft (☎ 0749-221 224; Str Dupa Ziduri; ☎ 11am-11pm) Part of the old wall lookout on the western wall, this smoky hipster spot revels in ice cream, coffee and drinks. There's an outdoor area above the wall too.

BARS

Auld Scots Pub (☎ 470 183; Str Hirscher 10; ☎ 11am-2am) Capturing local imagination, and plain

one-upping the local Irish pub, the kilts and Connery on the walls of this inviting bar can be forgiven for its tasteful sitting areas, three-board dart room and far better-than-average pub fare. Good Romanian wine comes by the glass (€2) if you wish, while pints of Ursus beer are €1.50.

Festival 39 (☎ 478 664; Str Mureșenilor 23; ☎ 10am-1am) This cosy dark-lit room has brick walls, soft music, and dozens of candles and antiques. The bar area and tables are filled with 20- and thirtysomething locals, chatting and smoking.

Crama Vinoteca (Str Castelului 106; litre of wine €1.20-3; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Fri, to 3pm Saturday) Barrels and barrels of Romanian wine, and empty litre and half-litre bottles to fill and take to your own drinking spot.

Entertainment

CLUBS

Clubs are busier outside of summer, when students roll back into town and in need of some action. Grădina de Vară is an open-air disco sometimes held on summer weekends up on the hill in the citadel.

Aquarium (☎ 0740-915 843; Piața Teatrului 1) This is a popular disco, inside the Sică Alexandrescu Drama Theatre.

OPERA & BALLET

The **Gheorghe Dima State Philharmonic** (☎ 473 058; www.sfbv.home.ro; Str Hirscher 10) has a good reputation and performs mainly between September and May, as does the **Opera Brașov** (☎ 415 990; Bisericii Române 51), which stages mainly classics. Tickets for theatrical and classical music and ballet performances can be purchased at the **Agentie de Teatrală** (☎ 471 889; Str Republicii 4; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Fri, to 2pm Sat), just off Piața Sfaturului.

THEATRE

Sică Alexandrescu Drama Theatre (☎ 412 969; Piața Teatrului 1) Come here for plays, recitals and opera year-round.

Puppet Theatre (Teatrul de Păpuși Arlechino; ☎ 475 243; Str Hirscher 10) This place stages creative shows for kids.

Shopping

The souvenir selection is surprisingly not in-your-face (yet). Try shops on Str Republicii or the shop at the Ethnographic Museum (p131).

Rom Filatelia (☎ 475 328; Str Republicii 41; ☎ 11am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat) Find a souvenir backup at this swank (almost snooty) modern stamp shop, which sells artful stamps from the 1960s to the present.

Himalaya (☎ 477 855; www.himalaya.ro; Piața Sfaturului 17; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Fri, to 2pm Sat) This great sports store has ski and hiking boots, sleeping bags, rock-climbing gear – pretty much whatever you forgot. Staff double as knowledgeable guides and they can sell you trail maps and point you to good DIY things too.

Doua Roti (☎ 0740-125 984; Str Nicolae Bălcescu 55; ☎ 8.30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) A great old-time shop selling used bikes and parts. The staff here can help you with repairs too.

Star (Str Nicolae Bălcescu; ☎ 9am-8.30pm Mon-Fri, to 8pm Sat) Four-floor department store.

Getting There & Away

Brașov is planning to have an airport built by the end of 2007.

BUS

Maxitaxis and minibuses are the best way to reach places near Brașov, including Bran, Râșnov, Sinaia, Hârman and Sfântu Gheorghe. Otherwise it's generally better to go by train as the bus situation is ever-changing.

The most accessible station is **Autogară 1** (☎ 427 267), next to the train station (reached by bus 4 from the centre), a ramshackle lot with a booming maxitaxi business (hourly jobs go to-and-fro on the Târgu Mureș–Sighișoara–Brașov–Bușteni–Bucharest route) and some long-distance buses.

From 6am to 7.30pm maxitaxis leave every half-hour for Bucharest (€5.25, 2½ hours), stopping in Bușteni and Sinaia. About four or five maxitaxis leave for Sibiu (€3.90, 2½ hours), stopping in Făgăraș town. Nine or 10 go daily to Sighișoara en route to Târgu Mureș (€5.70, four to five hours). A handful of buses go to Bistrița (€8, seven to eight hours), and also Constanța (€10) and Iași (€10).

Bus 4 reaches the centre from the train station (pre-buy your ticket). From the centre, hail a bus at the corner of Str Nicolae Bălcescu and Str Gherea.

Autogară 2 (aka 'Bartolomeu'; ☎ 426 332; Str Avram Iancu 114), a kilometre west of the train station, sends half-hourly buses to Râșnov (€0.45, 25 minutes) and Bran (€0.75, 40 minutes) from roughly 6.30am to 11.30pm; these are marked 'Moieciu–Bran'. A dozen daily buses go to

Zărnești (€0.75, one hour), fewer on weekends. Take bus 12 to/from the centre (it stops at the roundabout just north of the station).

A few daily buses leave from Autogară 2 to Sfântu Gheorghe (€1.20, 45 minutes), stopping just across B-dul Gării from the Autogară 1 (this may change). Separate, nearly hourly, buses go to Hârman (€0.40, 30 minutes) and Prejmer (€0.60, 30 minutes).

The main bus stop in town is the 'Livada Poștei' at the western end of B-dul Eroilor in front of the County Library (Biblioteca Județeană). From here bus 20 goes half-hourly to Poiana Brașov (€0.75, 20 minutes). Buy your ticket from the kiosk opposite the Student Culture House before boarding.

All European routes are handled by **Euro-lines** (☎ 475 219; www.eurolines.ro; Piața Sfaturului 18; ☎ 9am-8pm Mon-Fri, to 4pm Sat), which sells tickets for buses to Germany, Italy, Hungary and other European destinations.

TRAIN

Advance tickets are sold at the **Agentie de Voiaj CFR office** (☎ 477 015; Str 15 de Noiembrie 43; ☎ 8am-7.30pm Mon-Fri).

Sample direct train services include the following (prices are for 2nd-class seats on rapid trains):

Destination	Price	Duration	Frequency
Bucharest	€7.60	2½hr	22 daily
Cluj-Napoca	€11.70	6hr	5 daily
Iași	€10.60	8½hr	1 daily
Sf Gheorghe	€0.80-2	½hr	13-16 daily
Sibiu	€7.10	2½hr	9 daily
Sighișoara	€6.70	2½hr	14 daily

International train services include three daily trains to Budapest (€40/71 seat/sleeper, 14 hours), two to Vienna (€75/100, 18 hours) and also one daily train to Prague (21 hours) and Istanbul (19 hours).

Getting Around

Bus 4 runs from the train station and Autogară 1 through the centre, stopping at Piața Unirii south of the centre. From Autogară 2, take bus 12 or 22 from the 'Stadion Tineretului' stop on nearby Str Stadionului (just north of the bus station).

Car-hire rates are higher in Brașov than Sibiu or Cluj-Napoca. **Kron Tour** (☎ 410 515; Str Gheorghe Barițu 12; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat)

hires cars from €43 per day. **Budget** (☎ 474 564) has an office inside the Hotel Aro Palace that's sometimes staffed.

Transilvania Travel (☎ 477 623; www.transilvania-travel.com; Str Republicii 62; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat) also hires cars.

The taxi stand outside the train station has a good reputation. A couple of reputable companies include **Martax** (☎ 313 040) and **Tod** (☎ 321 111).

AROUND BRAȘOV

Though lumped together because of its proximity to Brașov, this region of castles and Saxon churches and ski lifts easily out-plays Brașov's own attractions – making it easy to stay in the area for a week or more. The most popular trip – usually done as a day trip from Brașov – is to see the 'Dracula castle' at Bran and the nearby castle in Râșnov, a simple DIY half-day trip with local buses. Many visitors prefer Râșnov, so try to fit it in.

On the third Sunday in April, in Apata village, 33km north of Brașov, you can witness the colourful Rooster Shooting (Impuscatul Cocosului), when dressed-up villagers read angry poems accusing a loud rooster of giving away their hiding place to Tartar invaders. Then they shoot it. The tradition dates from a 14th-century episode, and these days the rooster's made of wood.

POIANA BRAȘOV

☎ 268

An easy springboard for intermediate skiing or hiking on the back of the Bucegi Mountains, Poiana Brașov (1030m) is a resort, but often visited by day-trippers or the mountain-bound. Skiing is good, but has less advanced slopes than Sinaia. The cable car runs all year, leading to a panoramic view of Brașov and the surrounding Carpathians.

The newly built **St Ivan Butezatorul church** (Str Valea Dragă) in the centre is done in the Maramureș style (presumably for ski tourists who won't make it that far), and made entirely of wood and with a tall spire.

Orientation

The main road that runs through town from Brașov is called Str Poiana Soarelui, at the southern end of which is the cable-car station (Stație Telecabină). At the very centre of town

is the unmistakable Capra Neagră restaurant and casino. Just north of here Str Poiana Ursului (the so-called 'old road' to Brașov) branches off to the northeast, and the main car park, where the central bus stop is located.

Information

There is no tourist information office in Poiana Brașov; check websites such as www.poiana-brasov.ro or www.poiana.info.ro. The local **Salvamoto** (☎ 286 176; Cabana Cristianul Mare) will come to the rescue any time of the day in case of emergency.

Skiing

Best known as an intermediate mountain, Poiana Brașov's 12 runs – including two black slopes (each about 2km long) – are accessed by two cable-car lifts run by **ANA** (☎ 262 413), with a chairlift and five drag lifts higher up. The main cable car, a 15-minute walk up the road southwest from the bus stop (past the St Ivan Butezatorul church), operates all year. Another is next to Hotel Sport. To ride any of the mountain's six lifts it's €23 for 10 trips or €3.50 for one.

The ski season runs from December to March, sometimes later. Check out www.poiana-brasov.ro for ski conditions.

ANA all but runs a monopoly on the lifts and rental; you can rent from it for €12 per day, or €20 for two days. It also holds group and private lessons (it's about €20 per hour for two people) in English, French and German; check with its office situated at Hotel Sport. An alternative, **Club Rossignol** (☎ 0721-200 470; ☎ 9am-5.30pm), across from the main lift, also hires skis or snowboards for €12 per day.

Hiking

The Postăvaru Massif nestles between the Cheii Valley, Timișului Valley and Poiana Brașov, and has dozens of trails of varying levels of difficulty to choose from.

From Poiana Brașov you can hike to **Cristianul Mare** (1802m, three hours, marked with red crosses), the massif's highest peak (or just take the cable car up). From the top the trail (marked with yellow bar) leads to another (marked with red triangles), that leads east down to the road which links Timișu de Jos (on the Sinaia–Brașov rail line) with Timișu de Sus (2½ hours). Turn left for Jos, right for Sus.

You can also hike directly down to Timișu de Jos from Cabana Cristianul Mare in three to four hours. The trail is marked from the cabana with blue stripes, then blue crosses. Instead of following the blue-cross trail where the path diverges, you can continue following the blue-stripe trail, which eventually takes you over the top of Mt Tâmpa to Brașov. This trail (1½ hours) follows the old Brașov road.

From Poiana Brașov you can also easily hike to **Râșnov** (two to three hours, yellow crosses, then left on the road to the trail marked with blue stripes) or tackle the more strenuous hike to Predeal (five to seven hours, yellow stripes).

Sleeping

Most travel agencies in Brașov take bookings for hotels in Poiana Brașov. Except for a couple of weeks over Christmas and New Year, you can always find a room at the resort. Prices here are for during the peak season (between December and mid-March); prices at all but lower-end places fall by 25% or more at other times. Cheaper hotels don't raise their prices.

To get to the cheap end of the resort, follow Str Poiana Ursului away from the centre.

BUDGET

Cabana Postăvarul (☎ 0741-110 092, 101 036; r per person €9, r with private bathroom €34; ☎) At 1585m (15 minutes downhill from the lift's exodus), this cabana has a prop-your-feet-up deck with full-frontal views of Bucegi's glory. More than one skier missed half a day of skiing by lounging too long here. Rooms are simple, with two to four beds and wood-plank floors that creak. Some rooms have private bathroom. The restaurant buzzes as a skier lunch-break spot.

Cabana Critianul Mare, a chalet near the top of the slopes, was under renovation at research time.

MIDRANGE

Vila Diana (☎ 262 040; Str Poiana Ruia; s/d €52/80; ☎) If you've sworn off Swiss chalets, this eight-room guesthouse goes for a salmon-coloured nod to Miami Art Deco. The rooms are big – with cranberry carpets, peach bedspreads, work desks – plus there's a cosy basement bar, sauna and Jacuzzi. Breakfast is €5.75. It's just west of the Hotel Alpin (away from the lifts), about 150m from the bus stop.

Pensiunile Andreas (☎ 262 266; r/villa €52/155) Near the main lifts, this airy three-room villa can be rented by the room or as a whole. Two rooms share a bathroom. There's a laundry and nice TV sitting area.

Hotel Sport (☎ 407 333; www.anahotels.ro, in Romanian; s/d from €70/80; ☎) The main one of three hotels run by ANA (by the second lift), is a little faded from all the tour groups checking in over the years, but has plenty of facilities (including tennis courts) and is popular with ski teams. It also runs the two nearby hotels, the Poiana and Bradul (hidden away by a thicket of trees).

Eating

There are a few OK places on the main road in town that serve pizza or grilled meat. It's hard to beat the outdoor seating facing the Bucegi Mountains up at Cabana Postăvarul (mains €2.30 to €4), with natural teas, soups and fries, in addition to meats and cooked breakfasts.

Getting There & Away

From Brașov, bus 20 (€0.75, 20 minutes, every 30 minutes) runs from the Livada Poștei bus stop, opposite the County Library at the western end of B-dul Eroilor, to Poiana Brașov.

RÂȘNOV

Râșnov, 18km south of Brașov, doubles the castle intake for those heading out to Bran Castle. The partially restored hilltop ruins of the 13th-century **Râșnov fortress** (Cetatea Râșnov; ☎ 230 255; adult/child €2.70/1.50; ☎ 9am-8pm summer, to 6pm winter), a 15-minute walk up the steps from central Piața Unirii, feel considerably less touristy than Bran's (despite the wooden Dracula set-up for photo opps). Visitors can wander the grounds, where there's a church, jail and nice views of the mountains. A small museum includes gruesome prints of torture, plus medieval cross bows and knightly knick-knacks. There's a 17th-century, 146m-deep well built by Turkish prisoners, who were promised freedom once completed (it took them 17 years!).

The fortress was built by the Teutonic Knights as protection against Tartar, and later Turkish, invasion. Indeed, almost immediately after its completion, the fortress suffered its first Tartar attack in 1335. The fortress was abandoned in 1850.

Sleeping & Eating

Casa Contelui (☎ 0723-005 378; www.casacontelui.ro; Str Bălcescu 16; r with shared/private bathroom €23/28) Green signs from Râșnov's centre point to this lovely fenced-off six-room farmhouse/guesthouse with an English-speaking owner who can arrange local activities.

Pensiunea Stefi (☎ 231 618; www.hotelstefi-ro.com; Piața Unirii 5; s/d €23/28) Spic-and-span, this five-room guesthouse on the main square has carpeted rooms and a wading pool out back. Breakfast is €3 extra.

Pub-Castel Restaurant (Piața Unirii 9; pizzas €2-3) This web of dark-wood rooms and arched brickways hops with locals eyeing pizzas and beer.

Getting There & Away

Buses bound for Bran come within 200m of the centre of Râșnov; a few 'Râșnov' buses go through it – finishing at the edge of town.

BRAN

☎ 268 / pop 5600

First things first: Bran Castle was by no means Dracula's or Vlad Țepeș' castle, despite the image being encouraged by locals hawking bleeding-heart-bedecked 'I Love Transylvania' T-shirts and Vlad Țepeș coffee mugs. The real Vlad may have passed through here in the 15th century, but this was not his home. (For real fake-Dracula country, see p211, for the 'real Vlad Țepeș' castle, see p105, and for more on the Dracula myth, see p23). Still, the

famed Bran Castle's sharp structure, with its fairy-tale turrets rising from an enveloping rocky bluff between two bodyguard-like hills, just looks too damn vampiric to not warrant a little 'ooh' at first viewing.

The area, as the plain settles into the merger of the Bucegi and Piatra Craiului ranges, is a nice spot, but most travellers find more rewarding bases in Brașov or natural ones in hill towns beyond (particularly Moieciu de Sus). By far the bulk of her visitors see Bran as a half-day trip, along with a stop at Râșnov Castle. Daring hiking trails down from the Bucegi wind up here too.

During the 15th and 16th centuries Bran was an important frontier town.

Orientation & Information

The centre of Bran lies on either side of the main north-south Brașov-Pitești road (Str Principală), with villas, *pensiunes* and (surprisingly few) restaurants strung on and off the road. The entrance to Bran Castle, signposted 'Muzeul Bran', is on the left as you enter the town.

The bus stop is just south of the junction on Str Principală, next to the park, on the other side of which is Str Aurel Stoian. The central post is south of Bran centre, past the Vama Bran museum on the road to Moieciu. There's an **Internet dub** (Str Principală 509; per hr €0.60; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat) in the same building as the Antrec, 50m from the t-shirt stalls.

Sights

Facing the flatlands and backed by mountains, the 60m-tall **Bran Castle** (☎ 238 332; www.brancastle-museum.ro; adult/student & child €2.90/1.45; ☎ 9am-6pm Tue-Sun, noon-6pm Mon May-Sep, 9am-4pm Tue-Sun Oct-Apr) is something to see. If you can manage to avoid bottlenecks from tour groups that seem to appear from nowhere, you may enjoy the largely renovated interiors and rather claustrophobic nooks and crannies.

All is signed in English, and for the most part manages to steer clear of the 'Dracula' swipe, though some guides often play up the eerie factor of the hidden steps to the 2nd floor (overheard: 'Dracula likes to feast on young beautiful virgin women... I see no one is missing').

Built by Saxons from Brașov in 1382 to defend the Bran pass against Turks, the castle may have housed Vlad for a few nights on his flight from the Turks in 1462, following their attack on the Poienari fortress in the Argeș Valley. From 1920 Queen Marie lived in the castle, and it served as a summer royal residence until the forced abdication of King Michael in 1947. It became a museum in 1957.

Many rooms have gone through a modern redecoration and look as if they are inhabited by rich eccentrics. Much of the original, fabulous furniture imported from Western Europe by Queen Marie is still inside the castle. A fountain in the courtyard conceals a labyrinth of secret underground passages.

Everyone seems to ignore the photo/video fees of €2.60/5.20.

Free guided tours are not regularly scheduled, but you're likely to stumble on one in English. Your ticket for the castle includes entrance to the open-air **village museum**, with a dozen traditional buildings at the foot of the castle.

The **Vama Bran Museum**, down the hill behind the castle (accessible by road too), was closed for renovation at research time. In the past, ticket entry included this small collection of archaeological pieces from the former customs house.

Opposite the former customs house are some remains of the old **defensive wall**, which divided Transylvania from Wallachia (best viewed from the soldiers' watchtower in the castle). On the southern side of the wall is an endearingly petite stone **chapel**, built in 1940 in memory of Queen Marie. The church,

KEYS TO THE CASTLE

After 60 years in communist/government hands, Bran Castle's keys were handed back to a relative of the original owners in 2006 – Dominic Habsburg, Queen Marie's grandson. Dominic, a New York-based architect (not a vampire), told the *Guardian* that the Dracula connection with the family castle was 'not OK'. Habsburgs never have any sense of fun.

It's expected the castle will remain open as a museum.

now boarded up, is a copy of a church in the queen's palace grounds in Balchik, Bulgaria (formerly southern Dobrogea). A **memorial tomb** where the queen's heart lies has been carved in the mountain, on the north side of the wall.

Festivals & Events

The three-day **Sâmbra Oilor**, held in late September/early October, is a huge pastoral festival celebrated to welcome the sheep home from the hills.

Sleeping & Eating

Bran's pack of villas and *pensiunes* grows every year, and you'll see dozens of *cazare* signs in private homes if you need something cheaper. See www.ruraltourism.ro for detailed descriptions of several *pensiunes* in Bran. Surprisingly, there's not much choice for eating in Bran.

Antrec (☎ 236 340, 0788-411 450; www.antrec.ro; Str Principală 509; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat) The home base of this nationwide organisation arranges accommodation in 4000 (and growing) private homes, starting at around €25 per room per night. It's a good idea to call or email in advance, as we've found the office hours are rarely adhered to.

Vila Bran (☎ 236 866; www.vilabran.ro; Str Principală 238; r €29-40) Bran's best spot, albeit a slightly cheesy one, brims with energy. This 58-room, hilltop five-building complex looks straight on to the castle. It caters to conferences and groups – with three restaurants, activities including a zip line over a creek(!), an indoor basketball court with 'slide' into nearby playhouse(!); and a petting zoo of two deer saved from dinner tables (one eats the shed roof!). Ask for room 5 for the best views, and avoid

WHAT'S A CASTLE?

With medieval fortified walls and towers dotting its hilltops, Transylvania is full-blooded castle country. Or is it?

Many castle historians hilariously entangle themselves over the definition, prompted by 'sham castles' that 'use the c word' to help market their sites. Others insist it must be a residence, others don't care – as long as it's fortified...and, um, not too big.

Criticising the 'preposterous erections of the 20th century', historian Sir Charles Oman snapped in his 1926 book *Castles* that a castle 'is a military structure larger than a tower but smaller than a fortified town'. (Naturally!) Others argue the definition has fractured over the years, like the double-use of the French chateau for a big home or fort.

And what about Transylvania? Most of Romania's alleged castles date from the 15th and 16th centuries, slightly trailing the heyday of much of Europe. Bran's, built in the 16th century as a defence against Turks, is – by Oman's (and many others') strict definition – a castle. Râșnov's hilltop fort and Hunedoara's Corvin Castle (p181), built for military defence in the 14th century, surely are too. A fanciful, unfortified summer residence for a 20th-century king, Peleș Castle is not. The Hotel Castel Dracula in Bărgău Valley (p211), of course, is just an '80s tourist hotel with a fake coffin room and overpriced food. Good thing Sir Oman didn't live to see it.

By the way 'fortress' is a whole new debate. Don't ever get between enraged historians in that particular battle.

DRACULA VS VLAD!

We'll never know who'd win in a fight (well, it *is* easier to bite than impale in the confines of a ring...), but here's a comparison between the very-real Vlad Țepeș (1431–76) and his later incarnation, Dracula.

Transylvanian?

Drac: Yes, Bram Stoker puts his home in the Bărgău Valley near Bistrița, northeast of Cluj-Napoca.

Vlad: No, his real home is south of the Carpathians in Poienari, Wallachia.

Fearful feasts?

Drac: Yes, he ate people.

Vlad: Yes, he apparently ate steaks while captives wriggled on rectum-to-underarm stakes.

Bad breath?

Drac: In Jonathan Harker's words, 'his breath was rank' (congealed blood in the gums does that).

Vlad: Not sure, but he looked like a flosser.

Bi-curious?

Drac: Yes! The giveaway is when the fanged fluid-changer stops promiscuous female demons from devouring Jonathan Harker and cries out 'this man belongs to me!' – indeed.

Vlad: Probably (note his handle-bar moustache).

How did he die?

Drac: Wooden stake through the heart, followed by decapitation.

Vlad: No one's sure, but he may have died in battle or been assassinated by rival nobles; although eventually, Turks decapitated his body.

rooms 3 or 4 (which are past the 'bon voyage' sign). Rooms are rather basic, but are clean and have TV.

Popasul Reginei (☎ 236 834; www.popasulreginei.ro; Str Aurel Stoian 398; d €35; 🚻) This 16-room villa-style hotel, across from the north end of the castle, is a plain, clean-tiled affair run by a peppy English-speaking manager (who is occasionally clad in a pink ski suit). The restaurant takes over the pool area at lunch, when hundreds of daytrippers come in and out to feast on some pretty good Romanian fare.

Cabana Bran Castle was closed for renovation at research time, but should now be open for business. The cabana is on a hillside about 600m from the castle (access via Str Aurel Stoian, a turn-off roughly where Str Principală begins to curve around the castle; a sign leads 50m past the yellow-painted hospital).

Getting There & Away

Bran's an easy DIY day trip from Brașov. Buses marked 'Bran–Moieciu' (€0.70, one hour) depart every half-hour from Brașov's Autogară 2. Return buses to Brașov leave Bran

every half-hour from roughly 7am to 6pm in winter, and 7am to 10pm in summer. All buses to Brașov stop each way at Râșnov.

From Bran there are about a dozen buses daily to Zărnești (€0.70, 40 minutes), and a few to Pitești originating from Brașov.

AROUND BRAN

Perfect for leisurely drives past farms, shepherds and haystacks along ridges in the green hills, the villages south of Bran are enchanting in their rural attractiveness. Villas bring in business – check with Antrec in Bran or the great site www.ruraltourism.ro for options – but for the most part the wild landscape remains untouched. Be sure to stop for fresh cheese, as it and wool weaving remain vital parts of villagers' daily life here.

Some 3km southeast along a dirt track from Bran is the village of **Șimon**, with shoulder-to-shoulder villas and hiking trails leading into the Bucegi Mountains. **Mama Cozonacilor** (☎ 0745-151 424; www.branturism.ro; r €20) is a pleasant 25-room complex backed by a steep rising hill; staff arranges activities for all (including the frequent groups that check in).

Moieciu de Jos, 4km southwest of Bran on the road to Câmpulung, is known for its cheese with a pine aroma. It celebrates a **summer festival** at the end of June. From Moieciu de Jos, a dirt track leads northwest to **Peștera**, named after the village's 160m-long cave said to be full of bats. From Peștera, it's an easy 6km ride/hike north through **Măgura to Zărnești**.

A few kilometres southeast of Moieciu de Jos is **Cheia**, home to one of the region's few intact 19th-century painted churches. Wool has been manufactured in this village since the Middle Ages. Continuing south along the upper course of the Moieciu River, you reach **Moieciu de Sus**, with another pretty village church. Hiking trails into the **Bucegi Mountains** are marked from here.

Staggering views of the mountains unfold along the road signposted to Câmpulung, proffering a breathtaking panorama of rolling green hills and farmhouses teetering on ridge tops at 1290m before reaching the minuscule **Fundata**, 25km south of Bran, where you can cross-country ski or bike. On the last Sunday of August this village holds the fascinating **Mountain Festival** (Nedeia Muntelui), bringing together local artisans.

Continuing south along the same road, you come to **Podu Dâmboviței**, home to the Peștera Dâmbovicioarei. This 870m-deep cave is not particularly noteworthy but the drive to it is. Sheer rock faces line either side of the road, as do villagers, who frequently stand on the roadside selling homemade cheese (*cașcaval de casă*), sausages, smoked and dried meats, plus fresh milk.

ZĂRNEȘTI

☎ 268 / pop 26,500

This windswept and rather down-and-out town at the edge of the lovely, rugged Piatra Craiului National Park gives off a bit of a Twilight Zone vibe (maybe because one of Romania's largest arms manufacturers is based here). If only Nicole Kidman had hung around a little – or at all – when she was a couple of kilometres away filming *Cold Mountain*. (One *pensiune* owner lamented, 'She had a special bus to sleep in; we didn't see her.') Locals are particularly nice (10am beer-drinkers went out of their way to help us find things) and Zărnești provides an excellent springboard to nearby hikes.

Orientation & Information

Buses stop at a roundabout, near the post office and about 100m past the city hall and centre along Str Metropolit Ion Mețianu. The train station is about 1km east (before) the city hall.

BCR (Str Metropolit Ion Mețianu 8; 🕒 8.30am–5pm Mon–Fri, to 12.30pm Sat) has a 24-hour ATM. You'll find an area map posted outside the nearby city hall. Nearby are small food shops and internet access.

The closed information centre (a pink building 50m east of the city hall) now houses **Salvamont** (☎ 0722-553 121; Str Metropolit Ion Mețianu 17; 🕒 8am–5pm), the scraggly local rescue team who can help point your way (in English).

The supremely helpful **Piatra Craiului National Park Office** (☎ 223 165; www.pcr.ai.ro; Str Raului 27; 🕒 8am–5 or 6pm Mon–Fri) is in a black-log cabin about 2km towards the mountains and west of the centre. It offers guide maps and can arrange bear-watching tours (from about €50) or guides (from €22 per day). Go up the stairs in the back building. Call ahead to arrange services at weekends.

Sleeping

There's also been a recent boom in guesthouses in the village of Mogura, 8km west.

Cabana Gura Raului (☎ 0722-592 375; s/d €8.60/17.20) A bit wobbly, but set at the outset of Zărnești Canyon at the end of town (follow Str Raului 500m past the national park office), this fading cabana offers 17 boxy rooms – clean, pink walls, two beds, shared bathrooms. The bar downstairs serves some food. The grounds are a little trashy.

Pensiune Fabius (☎ 0722-523 199; Str Dr Senchea 7; r €19) Run by a lovely family (which includes *two* priests), the five-room Fab in town offers nice semi-rustic rooms with TV and private bath, and can arrange activities and meals (€7.20, breakfast €2.90). They speak English, French and German and have a small backyard, a ping-pong table, billiards and outdoor seats. The priests don't mind if you get blitzed. From the bus stop, go a block on Str Baiulescu, then right on Str Dr Senchea (about 50m total).

Getting There & Away

The bus stop is surprisingly active. There are 14 daily buses leaving on most hours weekdays to Autogară 2 in Brașov (€0.70, one hour), about half that at weekends. About five or six daily buses head to Bran (€0.70, 40 minutes).

Five daily trains link Brașov with Zărnești (about €1, 50 minutes), stopping at Râșnov on the way.

PIATRA CRAIULUI NATIONAL PARK

Climbers, hikers and lovers of grandiose scenery rave about Piatra Craiului and its twin-peaked Piatra Mică ('Stone of the Prince' – no jokes), marked by a large stone cross, and La Om (2238m) – which offers climbers one of Romania's greatest challenges. The 25km-long range covers 14,800 hectares from Zărnești down to Podu Dâmboviței and rises from the ground in near-vertical limestone towers.

The national park office in Zărnești offers information on the diverse levels of trails, guides and trail maps. Dimap's 1:70,000 *Piatra Craiului/Bucegi/Postăvarul/Piatra Mare Ciucaș i* (€4.25) has less detail.

In May/June and September, Piatra Craiului receives heavy rainfall. Summer storms are frequent and in winter much of the mountain cannot be accessed. Avalanches are common.

Hiking

Day-hike loops from Zărnești are an option. For one that takes four to six hours, follow blue stripe markers south of town, past Cabana Gura Râului through the **gorge** where Jude Law got himself shot in *Cold Mountain*; the trail then veers northwest to **Cabana Curmătura** (☎ 0745-995 018; r per person €6), where you can follow yellow vertical stripe markers back to Zărnești. An alternative return splinters east on the blue-dot trail up **Piatra Mică** (a 1816m peak).

Several trails meet up behind Cabana Curmătura, from where you can follow a blue-stripe trail in a looping direction west and north to **Colțul Chiliilor** peak (1125m, two hours). The blue-stripe trail back to the northwestern edge of Zărnești from here is relatively flat (about two hours).

More experienced hikers eye the tougher stuff, back on the western side of the range. You should have a guide who knows the area (ask at the park office or in Brașov). From northwestern Zărnești, a road marked with red-stripe signs goes 11km to 849m **Cabana Plaiu Foi** (r per person €11). It's best to hike as the road's pretty rough. From the cabana, a very difficult trail (red stripes, four hours) goes up limestone cliffs to **La Lanturi** (or 'to the chains', as you'll need cables to navigate some of the narrow canyon walls). Nearby is the vigorous climb up **La Om**.

Getting There & Away

By far the best access point to the park is from Zărnești. If you're hiking from Bran, the quickest route is along the gravel road to Predulut, through the village of Tohanița.

NORTH OF BRAȘOV

After the dramatic approach to Brașov from Bucharest, things flatten out to the north, where you'll see little towns marked with a Saxon church. Good day-trip fodder lies out here – Hărman, Prejmer and up in Székely country Sfântu Gheorghe (p164) – all of which can be combined on a day trip, with a bit of effort, on public transport.

Hărman

Quiet Hărman (Honigburg in German – literally 'honey castle'), 12km north of Brașov and 7km from Prejmer, is a small Saxon village with a 16th-century peasant **citadel** at its centre. Inside the thick walls is a 52m weathered **clock tower** and a 15th-century **church** (admission by donation; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-5pm Tue-Sun summer, 10am-4pm winter). Hit the bell near the 'Bitte Läuten' sign on the door to the left of the main door if the gate's locked. The colourful houses facing the main square are typical of the Saxon era, with large rounded doors and few windows.

A block northwest of the church, the surprising two-room **Country Hotel** (☎ 367 051; www.thecountryhotel.info; Str Mihai Viteazu 441; r/apt €60/100; 📺 📶) isn't in the country, but the converted 100-year attic is a great rustic-meets-modern base. Bedrooms, which can be hired separately, are hard-wood affairs with nice private bathrooms and exposed wood beams above the white-washed walls. The (private) common area has blue-velvet sofas and chairs facing the TV and traditional wood-fuelled oven. The fenced-off German Shepherds may bark at your Speedos if you dip in the small swimming pool.

Frequent minibuses and maxitaxis leave from Brașov's Autogară 2 and 3 here (€0.60, 20 minutes). If you're planning to visit Prejmer on the same trip, begin at the Autogară, then take a Brașov-bound bus and exit at the Hărman stop (it's a 20-minute walk from the highway to the church on the lone entry road).

You can also come by train; walk 200m northeast, cross the highway, then walk 2km to the centre.

Prejmer

Several kilometres off the main highway north from Brașov, Prejmer (Tartlau) is an unspoiled Saxon town, first settled in 1240, with a picturesque 15th-century **citadel** (admission free; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 3pm Sat summer, to 3pm Mon-Sat winter) surrounding the 13th-century **Gothic Evangelical church** in its centre (near where the minibuses stop). The fortress was the most powerful peasant fortress in Transylvania – and it has much more to investigate than the similar one in Hărman. Its 272 small cells on four levels lining the inner citadel wall were intended to house the local population during Turk sieges. You can walk up to the storage space, a dark high-ceiling 'attic' that runs around the complete complex. In parts were storage spaces for each peasant family, who were required to keep most of their goods here in case of attack. You'll also see open-hole toilets (no walls, as Saxons didn't blush), as the walls were built outward to allow refuse to drop freely to the ground (or on Turks' heads). The building's 4.5m thick outer defensive walls were the thickest of all the remaining Saxon churches. Underground tunnels were finally closed off in the 1970s. These fortified churches are listed collectively as Unesco World Heritage sites.

At research time, a tourist information centre was in the works, about 50m south of the citadel.

Frequent minibuses and maxitaxis leave from Brașov's Autogară 3 (€0.60, 30 minutes). Unfortunately there was no transport between Prejmer and Hărman. It's also possible to take the train from Brașov. The closest station is the Ilieni stop; walk south on Str Nouă for 500m, turn left on Str Alexandru Ioan Cuza; turn left at the end to reach Str Școlii on the right. The citadel is straight ahead. It's sure easier to bus there.

Vama Buzăului

☎ 268

If you're looking for a slice of traditional life, some hiking and very fresh cheese, this one-time customs point – now a rambling riverside village, 45km southeast of Prejmer by backroads – is that. **Agroturism** has moved in (there is a handful of *pensiunes*), but life remains quite old-school – a short-lived sculpture festival was aborted in 2006, after farmers complained that the creations scared their cows! It's possible to hike to the mountains

just south, and the community is lobbying to make the area a national park.

A good guesthouse is **Pensiunea Floera** (☎ 288 547; d €14), a homy *pensiune* with rugs on the floor and keep-it-real vibe; says the owner, 'I never thought about changing anything.' Please don't!

It's possible to bus to Întorsura Buzăului, 6km north; otherwise you'll need your own wheels to get here.

SAXON LAND

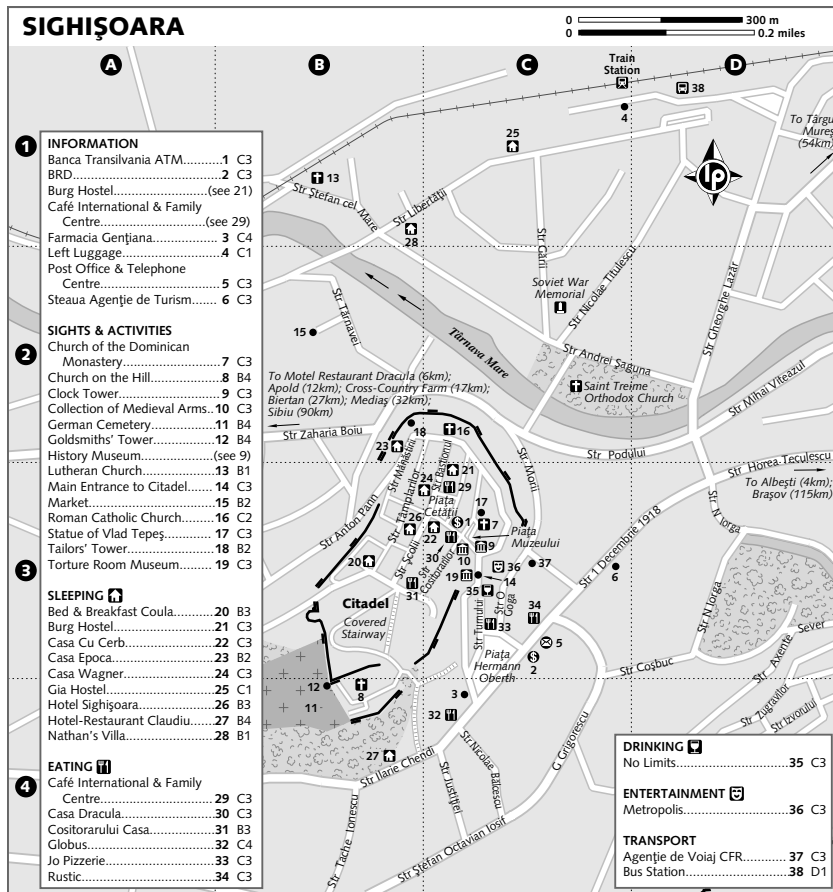
No trip to Transylvania is complete without a ramble through the valleys and medieval villages and fortified churches in the area Saxons colonised from the 12th century. The area lies north of the Carpathians, between Transylvania's 'big three': Brașov (p127), Sighișoara and Sibiu (p153). In 2007, Sibiu's role of EU 'capital of culture' (along with Luxembourg) has prompted an expansive – and expensive – touch-up of the German-style city, while Sighișoara's evocative cobbled citadel remains a stand-out of Transylvania. The best way out of the region – if your timing's right – is a drive over the twists-and-turns of the Transfăgărășan Road (p154), one of communism's brightest (only?) achievements.

SIGHIȘOARA

☎ 265 / pop 32,290

Dracula was born here. And for many visitors to this dreamy, medieval citadel town, seeing where Dracula, well Vlad Țepeș actually, made his first steps is enough to justify a quick visit. But it's hardly the end of Sighișoara, with half-a-millennium-old townhouses of bright colours overlooking hilly cobbled streets and church bells that clang in the early hours. Cute museums uncover some colourful (and treacherous) local history. The low hills that flank the town lead to pastures and forests, which are home to traditional villages that conjure past eras, as well as Saxon villages (such as Biertan and Vișcri) you can bike, hike or drive to. Yes, bus tours come in and out in summer, and even some visitors feel that a day's enough – but some days are better than others.

Settled by the Romans, the town was first documented as Castrum Sex. Saxon colonists settled here from the 12th century and built it into a thriving crafts and trading town; today, there are fewer than 500 Germans here.



Sighișoara (Schässburg in German, Segesvár in Hungarian) is in the midst of rejuvenation, prompted by a sudden influx of German investment, resulting in painted houses and new hotels and sidewalk cafés. Prince Charles, also, has played a part, rolling up his sleeves to assist with the Mihai Eminescu Trust (www.mihaieminescutrust.org), formed during the communist era to save the destruction of rural architecture.

In 2006, the municipality hired an 'announcer' – an artist/musician/teacher with traditional outfit and snareless drum to pat-pat-pat 'announcements' in various languages to passers-by (a practice borrowed from the citadel's olden days). A sample greeting: 'the gates of the citadel are open for you...welcome!'

The week-long Medieval Festival of the Arts in late July is more of a wild drinking party than anything cultural, but the colourful costumes are pretty to look at, especially through a beery daze.

For more on the Dracula myth, see p23.

Orientation

Follow Str Gării south from the train station to the unmistakably Soviet-era war memorial, where you turn left to the St Treime Orthodox church. Cross the Târnava Mare River on the footbridge here and take Str Morii to the left, then keep going all the way up to Piața Hermann Oberth and up into the citadel. Many of the facilities you'll want are found along a short stretch of Str 1 Decembrie 1918.

MAPS

Cartographia publishes the highly detailed, excellent *Sighișoara* fold-out map (€2.80), covering the city and environs.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

Sighișoara is almost internet-free. If you can handle Christian pop, the basement of **Café International & Family Centre** (per hr €0.60; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat summer, 1-7pm Mon-Sat winter) is a good spot. There are also slow connections at **Burg Hostel** (per hr €0.60; ☎ 7am-midnight).

LEFT LUGGAGE

The **train station's information shed** (per day €0.90; ☎ 24hr) can hold your bags.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Farmacia Gențiana (Piața Hermann Oberth 45; ☎ 8am-8pm)

MONEY

There are numerous exchange offices lining the city's main street, Str 1 Decembrie 1918. **Banca Transilvania** (btwn Piața Cetății & Muzeului) Just an ATM and the only bank option in citadel. **BRD** (Str 1 Decembrie 1918, 20; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri) 24-hour ATM.

POST & TELEPHONE

The **post office** and **telephone centre** (Str 1 Decembrie 1918, 17; ☎ 7am-8pm Mon-Fri) share the same funny yellow-panel building.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Surprisingly, Sighișoara has no tourist information. Hotels and guesthouses can negotiate 'good' taxi drivers for a return trip to Biertan for around €17 to €20.

Café International & Family Centre (☎ 777 844; Piața Cetății 8; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat summer, 10am-6pm Mon-Sat winter) A multifunction non-profit agency (see also p147) founded by Nazarenes from Massachusetts. Doubles as a tourist office in summer (only); knows a lot

COMBO TICKET

It's not made clear, but you can visit the History Museum, the medieval arms collection, and the Torture Room Museum for a combined ticket price of €2.15 (about the same price as the student discounts for all three).

about the city, can arrange 1½-hour walking tours, hire bikes and can point you to an organic apple orchard in the hills outside town. Sales of local crafts go to help local homeless children and the elderly.

Steaua Agenție de Turism (☎ 772 499; Str 1 Decembrie 1918, 10; ☎ 9.30am-4pm Mon-Fri) Staff sells an ad-filled map of town, finds private accommodation (€10 per person per night) in the residential area northwest of the citadel, and sells fishing supplies.

Sights

Most of Sighișoara's sights are clustered in the compact old town – the delightful medieval **citadel** – perched on a hillock and fortified with a 14th-century wall, to which 14 towers and five artillery bastions were later added. Today the citadel, which is on the Unesco World Heritage list, retains just nine of its original towers (named for the guilds in charge of their upkeep) and two of its bastions. You'll have more than a couple of chances to get Dracula t-shirts and locally made brandy these days.

Entering the citadel, you pass under the massive **clock tower** (Turnul cu Ceas), which dates from 1280 and once housed the town council. Formerly the main entrance to the fortified city, the tower is 64m tall, with sturdy base walls measuring an impenetrable 2.35m. Inside, the 1648 clock is a pageant of slowly revolving 80cm-high figurines, carved from linden wood, each representing a character from the Greek-Roman pantheon: Peace bears an olive branch, Justice has a set of scales and Law wields a sword. The executioner is also present and the drum-player strikes the hour. Above stand seven figures, each representing a day of the week.

Inside the tower is the great little **History Museum** (☎ 771 108; Piața Muzeului 1; adult/child €1.50/1.10; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon, 9am-6.30pm Tue-Fri, 9am-4.30pm Sat & Sun mid-May–mid-Sep, 9am-3.30pm Tue-Fri, 10am-3.30pm Sat & Sun mid-Sep–mid-May), with small rooms that wind up to the 7th-floor look-out above the clock. On the 1st floor, don't miss the small exhibition on local hero Hermann Oberth; there are some English translations (as well as the sketch of Oberth's 'space suit'). A couple of floors up are 18th-century gingerbread wood blocks, a local tradition that dates from 1376. Above you can see the clock's famed figures, as well as the clanking innards behind.

Under the clock tower on the right (if heading out of the old town) is the small, dark

LOCAL SPACE CASE

Cobblestones and Dracula we can understand, but what does Sighișoara have to do with space exploration? Heaps, it turns out. If it wasn't for one of Sighișoara's most beloved residents, space might still be 'out there'. Though he was born in Sibiu, Hermann Oberth (1894–1989), considered one of the fathers of modern astronautics and rocketry, is revered as a local boy (don't remind anyone that he only spent a few years here as a child).

Inspired by Jules Verne as a skygazing tyke, he started to design space rockets at the age of 14. Later, when studying medicine and physics in Munich, he wrote prolifically about the possibility and mechanics of space travel. Most of his dissertations were dismissed by the scientific community, but in 1929 he had what ended up being his big break: his designs were used to build model spaceships for the kitschy Fritz Lang film *Woman on the Moon*. That year, the German army launched a rocket research program. Hmm...

During WWII, he codeveloped the infamous V2 rocket for the Germans, then continued research in the US before retiring and publishing books on alternative energy sources and space exploration.

There is a Hermann Oberth Space Museum near Nuremberg, if you'd like to continue your Oberthian journey around Europe.

Torture Room Museum (admission €0.60; ☎ same as History Museum), which shows how fingers were smashed and prisoners burned with coals. The 'Spanish boot' was a happy little foot-crushing device. If it's closed, ask at the medieval arms collection for entry.

Towards Piața Cetății on the left, the small **collection of medieval arms** (adult/student €0.90/0.60; ☎ same as History Museum) has four rooms devoted to medieval helmets, shields, cross-bows, maces (aka 'whips for fight') and cannonballs. Somehow an illustration of Napoleon made the cut too.

Facing the museum is the 15th-century **Church of the Dominican Monastery** (Biserica Mănăstirii), which was closed for renovation at research time. The Gothic church became the Saxons' main Lutheran church in 1556. Classical, folk and baroque concerts have been held here in the past. Hidden away behind it is a **statue of Vlad Țepeș**, showing the legend with a bewildered look and his trademark circa-1981 porno moustache.

Speaking of which, continuing west towards Piața Cetății, you come to the site where Vlad Țepeș was born in 1431 and reputedly lived until the age of four. The pretty, all-renovated **Casa Dracula** is now a restaurant (see Eating, p148). Bubble-burster: the building is indeed centuries old, but has been completely rebuilt since Vlad's days.

The quiet, medieval **Piața Cetății** is the heart of old Sighișoara. It was here that markets, craft fairs, public executions, impalings and witch trials were held.

From the square, turn left up Str Școlii to the 172 steps of the **covered stairway** (*scara acoperită*), which has tunnelled its way up the hill since 1642, to the 1345 Gothic **Church on the Hill** (Biserica din Deal; ☎ mid-Apr–Oct), a 429m Lutheran church and the town's highest point. Facing its entry – behind the church when approaching from the steps – is an atmospheric, overgrown **German cemetery**.

Also behind the church are the remains of the **Goldsmiths' Tower**. The goldsmiths, tailors, carpenters and tinsmiths (the only craftsmen to have their guilds and workshops inside the citadel) existed until 1875.

From the church, head back down the hill, cross Piața Cetății, then head down Str Bastionul. At its northern end, are the **Roman Catholic church** (1896) and the **Tailors' Tower** (Turnul Cizmarilor).

Apart from their two churches in the citadel, Sighișoara's Saxon community had a third **Lutheran church**, deliberately sited well outside the city walls. The tin-spined church, sitting inauspiciously at a rail crossing just west of the train station off Str Libertății ('if that sermon don't knock the devil outa'em, the rattle of the trains will!'), was used in the 17th century as an isolation compound for victims of the plague and later of leprosy.

It's worth visiting the **market** on Wednesday and Saturday when Roma and villagers from outlying regions come into town on their horse-drawn wagons to sell their wares.

The drive to **Apold**, 12km south, is quite lovely.

Activities

The **Café International & Family Centre** (p145) rents bikes in summer, as do **Gia Hostel** and **Bed & Breakfast Coula**.

Cross-Country Farm (☎ 0744-500 457; www.cross-country.ro), 17km west of town, offers six-hour horse rides past traditional villages for €35 per person, or €45 for a lone rider. There are wagons for beginners and guides speak English.

Sleeping

IN THE CITADEL

Burg Hostel (☎ 778 489; www.ibz.ro; Str Bastionului 4-6; dm/s/d €7.25/11.50/17.25) Perhaps more focused on its basement lounge (rock music, internet) and restaurant, this very clean, slightly sterile hostel has nice rooms of various bed counts – all with their own private bathroom. Breakfast is €2.80.

ourpick Bed & Breakfast Coula (☎ 777 907; Str Tâmplariilor 40; r €15) Those looking for a homey budget base in the citadel will enjoy this place, an unsigned 400-year-old home run by an English-speaking family who can help arrange Saxon Land church trips, rent out bikes and sit with you at the family table in the big kitchen. There are six rooms (only one's in use in winter), and a vine-filled backyard with views to the hills northwest.

Casa Cu Cerb (Stag House; ☎ 777 349; Str Școlii 1; s €35/d €40-50; ☎) First thing you see walking in this all-restored 1693 building is Prince Charles' mug – he stayed here a few days in 2002. It's a good choice, on the main plaza, with spacious rooms with white-washed walls, cast-iron bed frames and rattan rugs by the TV sitting area. No breakfast.

Casa Wagner (☎ 506 014; www.casa-wagner.com; Piața Cetății 7; s €40/d €45-50/ste €70) This 22-room beauty on the main square has a mix of rooms; singles are a bit cramped, but some of the others sprawl, with extras like wrought-iron candle holders, armoires, chests and antique benches. There's a back terrace and wine cellar that opens after 7pm or so. The ground-floor restaurant is quite good, often with live music in the evenings.

Casa Epoca (☎ 773 232; www.casaepoca.ro; Str Tâmplariilor 4; s/d/ste €40/50/75; ☎) On a quite central side street, the modern take on this building's 1678 roots evokes a pleasing, rustic vibe. The owner made many of the nine rooms' charmingly unfinished antique-style pieces, such as a kid's bed in a nook in the suite. Shoe-makers' stools look over a subterranean courtyard.

Hotel Sighișoara (☎ 771 000; www.sighisoarahotels.ro; Str Școlii 4-6; s/d/apt €45/55/75; ☎ ☎) Tour groups seem to gravitate to this fine 29-room hotel with arched ceilings over cranberry carpets in faintly historic, mostly modern rooms. The basement wine cellar is a cavernous hang-out spot, as is the back courtyard terrace and beauty salon.

OUTSIDE THE CITADEL

Nathan's Villa (☎ 772 546; www.nathansvilla.com; Str Libertății 8; dm/d €8/20) This traditionally popular choice (with free laundry and a bar) stays open from April to November only. It's 200m west of the train station.

Gia Hostel (☎ 772 486; giahouse@myx.net; Str Libertății 41; dm/r from €8.60/23; ☎) It backs onto the train tracks in a slightly dodgy area (about a 15-minute walk to the citadel), but this nine-room hostel has lots of good services (bike hire, car hire for €35 per day and internet access) and is good for an in-and-out, one-night stop. The rooms are a bit of a rush-job, with slapped down carpets, but two 'red rooms' go for the valentine effect. A new kitchen was in the works at last pass.

Hotel-Restaurant Claudiu (☎ 779 882; www.hotel-claudiu.com; Str Iariei Chendi 28; s/d incl breakfast €32/37; ☎) In a pinch, this 12-room modern spot, 100m west of buzzing Piața Hermann Oberth isn't bad. Rooms are boxy and rather uninspiring, but they're clean and come with private bathroom and breakfast.

Motel Restaurant Dracula (☎ 772 211; www.dracula.ro; r €35 & 43; ☎) On the bend of a creek, this 37-room three-complex resort on the edge of Daneș village, 7km west of town, has modern, comfy rooms with private bathroom and TV. The best are the top-floor, wooden-floored jobs in the old building – the new one (at €8.60 extra) ain't worth the extra shine in the bathroom tile. There's a pool, horses to ride, outside seating to eat brekky, and a five-room complex by a pool 5km away. It's slightly goofy (there's a painting of a hairy vampire attacking a woman), but pretty relaxing. A taxi ride here is about €4.

Eating

Cositorarului Casa (Str Cositorarilor 9; sandwiches €0.75; ☎ 9am-10pm) Near the citadel wall, this indoor/outdoor café focuses on sweets, coffee and brandy – but has a few sandwiches.

Jo Pizzeria (Piața Hermann Oberth; mains €1.75-5.75; ☎ 10am-midnight) Jo's huge terrace overlooks the busy square, with old tower views. The

setting's great but the pizza's just OK. Focus on beer and ice cream (€1.75).

Café International & Family Centre (☎ 777 844; Piața Cetății 8; snacks €2-3.50; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat summer, 10am-6pm Mon-Sat winter) This two-room café, with chairs spilling onto the square in summer, is the perfect lunch spot, with daily made, mostly vegetarian fare, including quiche (€2), lasagne (€3) and lemon meringue pie (€0.85). No alcohol is served but you can bring beer to the outside tables.

Rustic (Str Decembrie 1, 7; mains €2.90-7.20; ☎ 8am-midnight) Wide-open windows hardly make a dent of light in this dark wood-and-brick 'man's man' bar-restaurant down from the citadel. Eggs are served all day, plus the usual grilled meats.

Casa Dracula (☎ 771 596; Str Cositorarilor 5; mains €4.30-8; ☎ 10am-midnight) The food can't compete with the restaurants in Casa Wagner or Hotel Sighisoara, but this three-room candlelit, totally remade restaurant is too tempting to pass by – breaded brains or juicy grills of pork or beef in Dracula's first home? Or maybe just a red wine in the bar.

The daily **market** (Str Târnavei) has a good selection of fruits, vegetables and cheese. **Globus** (Str Ilarie Chendi 4; ☎ 24hr) is a small, but well-stocked grocery store.

Entertainment

Occasional classical concerts are held in the city's churches; check for posted adverts.

No Limits (☎ 518 961; Str Turnului 1; ☎ 8pm-4am) This slightly upmarket disco is to the right of the arched entry to the citadel, just below the Clock Tower. It borders on tackiness but gets steamy on weekends.

Metropolis (☎ 0740-025 907; Str Turnului; ☎ 10pm-late) Down the zigzag footpath left of the clock tower (from inside the citadel), this cavernous pink-walled joint has a large stage for jam sessions and themed dance nights. Stop by if you hear rehearsal and see if the manager's practising band has decided on a name yet.

Getting There & Away

About a dozen trains connect Sighisoara with Brașov (€3 to €8, two hours), nine of which (none of the slow ones) go on to Bucharest (€8 to €12, 4½ hours). Five daily trains go to Cluj-Napoca (€7.40 to €10, 3½ hours), while three passenger trains go to Odorheiu Secuiesc (€1, 1¾ hours).

You'll need to change trains in Mediaș to reach Sibiu (€1.85, 2½ hours), but the four daily trains are timed for easy transfers. Three daily trains go to Budapest (€38, nine hours), and the night train has a sleeper (from €50).

Buy tickets at the **train station** (☎ 771 886), which is a shambles, or at the central **Agentie de Voiaj CFR** (☎ 771 820; Str Goga 6a; ☎ 8am-3pm Mon-Fri).

Next to the train station on Str Libertății, the **bus station** (☎ 771 260) sends buses of various size and colour to Bistrița (€4.30, three hours, three daily), Budapest (€20, eight hours, two weekly), Făgăraș (€3.40, three hours, one daily), Odorheiu Secuiesc (€1.75, 2½ hours, one daily) and Sibiu (€3.50, 2½ hours, five daily). Maxitaxis pass by every couple of hours for Târgu Mureș (1½ hours) and Brașov (2½ hours). There are regular services to Daneș and Mediaș.

Getting Around

Taxis greet incoming trains; it should be about €1.50 to reach the citadel. Cars have to pay €2.90 to get in the citadel – taxis do not.

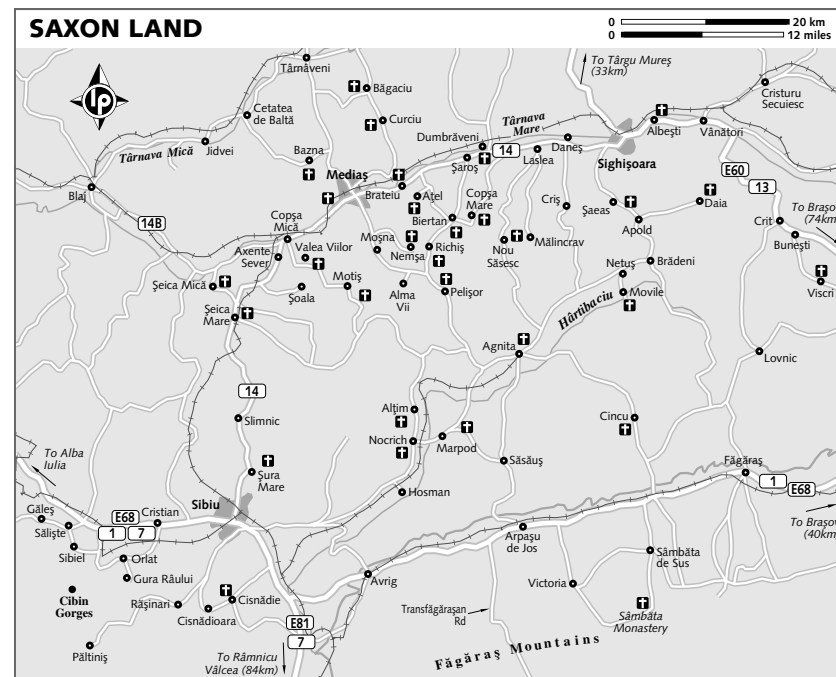
Gia Hostel (p147) hires cars for €35 per day. **Mokai Rent a Car** (☎ 777 113, 0744-605 816; www.rentacar.sighisoara.com) charges about €40 per day, but often seems to need several days to track one down.

FORTIFIED SAXON CHURCHES

One of Romania's highlights is here in the belly of Saxon Land (aka the Târnavă plateau) – stretching more or less 120km between Hwy 1 (between Brașov and Sibiu) to the south, and Hwy 13 (Brașov to Sighisoara) and Hwy 14 (Sighisoara to Sibiu) to the north. The rolling hills here are filled with fortified Saxon churches in towns that can easily feel lost in centuries past. Bus service is practically non-existent; visitors come by hire car, taxi, bike or tour bus. If you get stares as you pull in, don't take it personally – they're just wondering who are the folks with a car!

A couple of highlights get nearly all the visits, notably Biertan and Viscri. It's best to just explore, particularly on weekends, when churches are usually open. On other days you may have to track down the caretaker to get entry (which is often possible).

Bring your own food or eat in Biertan or Mediaș – you won't find sushi bars (or any restaurant) in places like Ațel. Public transport here is limited – part of the charm is driving on your own.



Much of the restoration in the area has been carried out by the Mihai Eminescu Trust.

History

In 1123 Hungarian King Geza II invited Saxons – mainly from the Franken region in western Germany – to settle here. In the 15th and 16th centuries, following the increased threat of Turkish attacks on their towns, the settlements were strengthened with bulky city walls and fortified churches. Defensive towers in the churches served as observation posts. Town entrances were guarded with a portcullis that could be quickly lowered.

Many Saxons left Romania during the communism period; some towns' villas became homes for the Roma population.

Biertan

☎ 269 / pop 1500

The undisputed king of the FSCVs (unofficially, Fortified Saxon Church Villages), and still far from developed, lovely Biertan (Birth-äl is the Saxon name), 27km southwest of Sighisoara, is home to the region's grandest Saxon doublewalled church, which offers

some tasty views over terraced hill tops lined with vineyards. Plus you can have lunch.

Biertan hosts a Saxon Festival in mid-September.

SIGHTS

Biertan's fantastic 15th-century **church** (admission €1.30; ☎ 10am-7pm Apr-Oct, closed Nov-Mar) was the site of the Lutheran bishop from 1572 to 1867 and has been listed as a Unesco World Heritage site since 1993. Its Viennese-style altar (1483–1550) has 28 panels and its three rings of walls stand up to 12m tall. This is the only fortified church in the region that holds regular services (once a month).

Near the altar in the church is the sacristy that once held treasure behind its formidable door with an even more formidable lock: it has 19 locks in one, and is such a marvel of engineering, it won first prize at the Paris World Expo in 1900. Inside the grounds are many buildings of interest, including a small bastion, which is famous in local lore: couples wanting a divorce were supposedly locked in here for two weeks as a last attempt to resolve differences. There was only one bed and one

set of cutlery. The method has been so successful that only one couple decided to go through with divorce in 400 years!

You can't climb the towers, but there are plenty of views over the walls.

SLEEPING

There are a dozen guesthouses around town – not all are signed.

Pensiune Omi (☎ 868 119; Str Vlaicu 1; r incl breakfast €10) Above an old-time pharmacy in a 16th-century home on the main road 50m south of the central square, this simple three-room *pensiune* has homy rooms with shared bathrooms – and one TV that the first arrivals get dibs on.

Casa Dornröschen (☎ 244 165; www.biertan.net; Str Gheorghe Cosbul 25; s/d/tr €19/29/39) These rather modern rooms are just behind the back citadel wall.

EATING

Unglerus Medieval Restaurant (Str 1 Decembrie, 1; mains from €4; ☎ 10am-10pm supposedly daily) Heart-shaped eggs over polenta surrounded by a moat of stewed meats – that's the average fare at this three-hall Gothic eatery, which is also your only choice in town. Eggs are served all day. Find it next to the church fort entry.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Four daily buses connect Biertan with Mediaş (€1.20, 40 minutes). You should be able to hire a taxi from Sighișoara for about €20 for the day.

Around Biertan

Five kilometres south of Biertan is the small village of **Richiș**, likewise dominated by a fantastic stone church with a brook running by. From Biertan you can also head east for 3km along a dirt track to **Copșa Mare** (Grosskopisch), a quaint town in a tight valley. The church there dates from the early 14th century and was fortified to fend off Turkish and Tartar invasions in the 16th century, but failed to fend off Székely troops, who attacked the village in 1605 and pillaged the church.

A rough dirt road leads northwest from Biertan to **Ațel** (Heteldorf), but it's far easier to reach by looping back via the main highway. The church here, dating from the 14th century, was heavily fortified in 1471. In 1959 the northern tower was levelled to uncover a secret tunnel leading to a neighbouring farmstead.

Mediaș

Industry lives! Mediaș' dusty, hopeless-looking factories and power plants are a visual turn-off for new arrivals, but its centre scrappily evokes the town's medieval past and it's not a terrible base for Saxon Land day trips.

The fortified cream-coloured **Evangelical Church of St Margaret** (☎ 10am-3pm Mon-Fri) dominates the old town, just east of Piața Regele Ferdinand I. A church was built here in the 13th century, but this one was built in 1447. Note the altar, dating from 1485, which is considered one of Transylvania's most precious pieces of medieval Saxon art.

On Mediaș' central square, the new **Hotel Traube** (☎ 844 898; hotel.traube@dafafora.ro; Piața Regele Ferdinand I 16; s/d/apt €46/57/130; ☎ ☎) has modern rooms in a bright yellow historic building – the apartment is massive, with a piano and towering wood-beamed ceilings.

It has little food, but the **Art Café** (Str Duca 44; ☎ 8am-midnight Mon-Fri, 10am-midnight Sat & Sun), a few blocks west (on the highway), occupies a medieval citadel tower. You can also find pizza on Piața Regele Ferdinand I.

Mediaș' bus station (300m west of the centre) sends four daily buses to Biertan and six to Sibiu. The train station, 100m west, has left-luggage facilities and trains to Sibiu, Cluj-Napoca and Sighișoara.

Around Mediaș

Bazna (Baassen in German), a small village first settled in 1302, is northwest of Mediaș (head north towards Târnăveni for 10km then west for another 5km). Its late-Gothic St Nicholas' Church was built at the start of the 16th century on the ruins of a 14th-century original. Its highlight is the three pre-Reformation bells (1404) in the church tower. From 1842 onwards the village developed as a small spa resort, following the discovery of natural springs, which released sulphurous gases.

Back on the Târnăveni road, go another 5km north, then take the road to 'Deleni' for 6km to reach **Băgaciu** (Bogeschdorf in German). The pre-Reformation, late-Gothic altar in its church, restored in Vienna in 1896, is considered to be the best-preserved Saxon church altar. Heading 4km south along the dirt track from here, **Curciu** (Kirtsch in German) has a decorative stone frieze above its 14th-century church's west door lined with apes and other animals.

ROMANIA'S UGLIEST TOWN

If you've had enough of Transylvania's gorgeous self, stop in at **Copșa Mică** (pop 5200), 13km west of Mediaș. Blackened, rotting factory shells litter this haggard, one-time filthy industrial town, which serves as the junction between Sibiu and Sighișoara.

Throughout the communist period, carbon black factories spewed out soot all year until 1993; lead levels in factories often broke 1000 times the acceptable level. Evidence was everywhere: sheep wool and hanging laundry was blackened, the town recorded Europe's highest infant mortality rates, and two-thirds of children who survived showed signs of mental illness.

Euro-standard filters are now used on the metal works plant, and white snow was seen for the first time in decades. Cleaner now, it's still a sad place (no offence to the locals).

About 10km south from Mediaș on the way to Agnita, is **Moșna** (Meschen in German), with a 15th-century church built in late-Gothic style and an eight-storey bell tower.

About 5km south of Copșa Mică along a dirt track is **Valea Viilor** (Wurmloch in German). The village, dating from 1263, has a quaint fortified church, which was raised at the end of the 15th century and is surrounded by 1.5m-thick walls. The building is on Unesco's list of World Heritage sites.

Șeica Mică (Kleinschelken in German), first settled in 1316, is 3km west of a turn-off 11km south of Copșa Mică on the road to/from Sibiu. The village was engulfed by fire several times during the 16th century, but remarkably its local church, built in 1414, survived. Its beautiful baptismal font is late-Gothic (1447) in style and cast from iron.

Viscri

pop 450

Happy to play second fiddle to Biertan, locals in this quiet, fantastically Saxon town (about 30km southeast of Sighișoara) hope the 7km bumpy dirt road (it feels much longer than 7km) that keeps most tour buses away never gets paved. Up from town is a fortified church that Saxon colonists wrested from its Székely builders in 1185.

Attached to the one-room **fortified church** is a dark tower, with a rather frightening, open, creaking stairway leading to the top; if that's too scary, you can climb the bastions for lovely views of the Viscri valley too. It's recognised as a Unesco World Heritage site. About 25 Saxons still live in town.

None of the 10 (and counting) Viscri *pensiunes* have signs yet. Arrange a room in a traditional Saxon home by calling **Carolina Fernolend** (☎ 0740-145 397; Str Principala 13), who speaks English and can arrange accommoda-

tion for about €20 per person including meals and homemade wine. Plan ahead in July and August and ask for a traditional room, with a 200-year-old 'Saxon bed', which is an oversized cabinet with a pull-out mattress! Carolina can help arrange hikes and trips to visit shepherds or unlock the church. Most places have pit toilets – this is real-deal Saxon living. Shortly before our visit, allegedly, the Duke of Luxembourg got pissy about the conditions for his royal bowel movement.

You will need your own transport to get here.

FĂGĂRAȘ MOUNTAINS

☎ 268 / pop 40,100

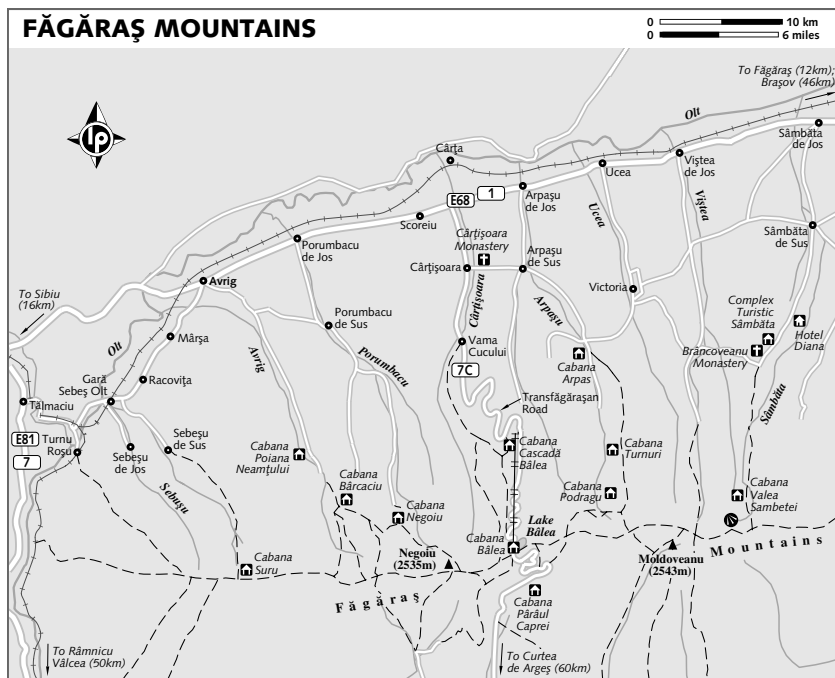
Looking over bucolic Saxon Land and the zooming-by traffic of Hwy 1 between Brașov and Sibiu, the Făgăraș Mountains look like an evil, impenetrable wall of doom, something like a *Lord of the Rings* outtake. The Transfăgărășan Road – a real Transylvania highlight for those hiring wheels – sometimes opens only in early June, after the last of the snows melt from the road, closing by early October. Hikers with gusto (and strong knees) prefer mountain hikes here to the rest of Transylvania.

Access points from the north – namesake town and Victoria – are situated outside the mountains and lack any sort of mountain-air quaint punch.

Făgăraș

☎ 268 / pop 35,400

Not pretty, but lively in its own way, Făgăraș (fuh-guh-nash) town is 25km east of the start of the Transfăgărășan Road, but has more services than any access point north of the mountain range. Maxitaxis stop on the main road, B-dul Unirii (a '70s-modern functional strip of white buildings), a block southeast of



the historic centre (Piața Republicii), where you'll find a bank and internet access, and 1km north of the train station and a very quiet bus station.

SIGHTS

The only attraction is a real-live, moat-surrounded castle, a block north of the roundabout, which houses the **Valeriu Literat Făgăraş Museum** (☎ 211 862; adult/student €1.20/0.30; 🕒 8am-6pm summer, to 4pm Tue-Sun winter). The collection spans the town's history, highlighted by the 20th-century sculpture of local artist Virgil Fulceia. The castle was originally built in the 13th century, but what you see dates from the mid-17th century.

SLEEPING & EATING

A hotel was under construction at the north-western edge of the roundabout at last pass. The best of the few present options is **Pensiunea Diana** (☎ 216 887; www.pensiuneadiana.ro; Piața Republicii; d €23-34/tr €40), a 15-room guesthouse with standard rooms facing the main square.

The best restaurant in town is **The Corner** (☎ 210 361; B-dul Unirii 1; mains €3.40-5.80; 🕒 10am-

midnight Mon-Sat, 2-11pm Sun), a modern pea-green place with castle views on the southwestern corner of the roundabout.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

From the roundabout (near the Universal Negoiu store, aka 'Big Store'), microtaxis go to Braşov (€2.10, one hour) and Sibiu (€2.10, one hour). Just east of the castle entrance, one daily bus leaves for Sâmbăta de Sus (€1.10, 40 minutes) and Victoria (€1.40, one hour). Făgăraş' train station sends half a dozen daily trains to Braşov and Sibiu, stopping at Ucea on the way. Taxis linger at the roundabout.

Victoria

☎ 268 / pop 10,900

Built to house a new breed of chemical factory workers in communist times, Victoria will disappoint travellers looking for an alpine flavour to their mountain base. Its rows of matching housing blocks jolt those who've been travelling untouched Saxon towns to the north. But it's friendly, and the best close base to the Transfăgărăşan Road.

HIKING FROM VICTORIA

If coming by train, one of the best stations to get off at is Ucea (59km from Sibiu), from where you can catch one of seven daily buses to **Victoria** or walk the 6km. From Victoria you can hike to **Cabana Turnuri** (1520m) in about six hours. The scenery is stunning once you start the ascent. The next morning head for **Cabana Podragu** (2136m), three or four hours south.

Cabana Podragu is a good base if you want to climb **Mt Moldoveanu** (2543m), Romania's highest peak. It's a tough uphill climb, but the views from the summit are unbeatable. Otherwise, hike eight hours east, passing by Mt Moldoveanu, to **Cabana Valea Sambetei** (1407m). From Cabana Valea Sambetei you can descend to the railway in Ucea, via Victoria, in a day.

On the central square, **Hotel Central** (☎ 241 609; www.hotelrestaurantcentral.ro; Str Libertății 20; r/apt €29/46) is a 24-room makeover of a '70s beast. Staff (if you can speak with them) can arrange pick-up from Ucea or tours into the mountains. It's standard but fine. There are *cazare* options available for less. The Central has a restaurant. Its DJ area is decorated with bear pelts and taxidermy flourishes.

Victoria is a walkable 6km south of the Ucea train station, which sees four or five trains between Sibiu and Braşov. A lone bus connects Victoria with Făgăraş. Buses supposedly meet all trains at Ucea. The bus station is at the southwestern edge of town, 200m along the looping road from the hotel.

Sâmbăta

At the foot of the mountains (20km by paved roads from Victoria, or 10km by dirt road), the Sâmbăta complex is home to one of Romania's wealthiest monasteries and a key access point for Făgăraş hikes. Ceauşescu liked it enough to build a villa here on the monastery grounds.

Popular with Romanians, the lavish 1696 **Sâmbăta Monastery** (aka Brâncoveanu Monastery; ☎ 241 237; admission free; 🕒 8am-6pm) is named for its original founder, Wallachian prince Constantin Brâncoveanu (r 1688-1714), who built the Orthodox monastery at the 16th-century site. Seen by the Habsburgs as the last bastion of Orthodoxy in the Făgăraş region, the

monastery was practically destroyed. Now 40 monks live here.

In 1926 restoration work started on Sâmbăta's ruins, finishing in 1936. Its fame today is derived from its workshops of glass icons, run by the monastery's monks, residents since the early 1990s. There is a **glass icon museum** (🕒 8am-5pm Mon-Sat, 2-4pm Sun May-Oct), with lovely examples of 18th-century glass icons and other relics.

SLEEPING

There are several signed *pensiunes* with rooms for around €25.

Complex Turistic Sâmbăta (☎ 241 927; per person €10; 🕒 May-Sep) Just south of the monastery entrance, this plain collection of a dozen cabanas – with open-air bar-restaurant – is a popular start/stop point for Făgăraş hikers.

Academia Sâmbăta (☎ 241 494; r from €20) The monastery's slick rooms are in an adjoining complex with marble entry.

Hotel Diana (☎ 241 900; www.hoteldiana.ro; s/d €37/43) This is a pale-yellow hotel with 40 business-oriented rooms. It has a fitness centre, sauna and deck restaurant.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The complex isn't convenient to train or bus stations. Sâmbăta is 9km south of Sâmbăta de Sus village, where roads go west to Victoria, or north to Sâmbăta de Jos village on Hwy 1 and on to Făgăraş (26km northeast of Sâmbăta de Sus).

SIBIU

☎ 269 / pop 170,000

Trailing Sighişoara, Braşov and Cluj-Napoca in travellers' appeal, Sibiu was once the king of the Transylvanian Saxon towns, serving as capital and dominating cultural activity. It still revels in the latter. Now, Sibiu is an EU-designated 'Capital of Culture' (along with Luxembourg), with year-long events putting lovely Sibiu on the map for even more visitors. The town is certainly enchanting enough on its own, with a just-scrubbed centre, newly cobblestoned squares and pedestrian malls, and the unique 'eyelid' rooftop windows looking over pastel-painted buildings.

Founded on the site of the former Roman village of Cibinium, Sibiu (Hermannstadt to the Saxons, Nagyszében to Hungarians) has always been one of the leading cities of Transylvania. During the peak of Saxon influence,

THE LONG & WINDING ROAD

Built out of Ceaușescu's fanatic zeal to conquer nature, the Transfăgărășan Road (the 7C), Romania's highest asphalted road, provides an unforgettable experience behind the wheel. Boldly charging up and down one of Romania's highest mountains, this two-lane road sometimes has the narrowest of shoulders separating it from the edge of a cliff. Driving its length is an adventure in itself, with breathtaking scenery around every one of the dozens of twists and turns.

Why A Road?

The road – probably Ceaușescu's most (only?) celebrated project – was built in the 1970s over the course of 4½ short years (main stretches of it could only be worked on in the summer months). While the scheme fits well within Ceaușescu's overall megalomania, he also had more practical reasons for building it. Though other routes east and west of here cut an easier north-south route, he thought it wise to secure the Carpathian crossing at the traditional border between Wallachia and Transylvania, just in case the Soviets invaded (as they had Czechoslovakia in 1968).

And so the decree was ordered, and monumental work began: on the northern side alone, six million kilograms of dynamite were used to blast out 3.8 million cu metres of rock. Unofficially, 38 overworked soldiers died in accidents during its hasty construction. It was opened with great fanfare on 20 September 1974.

The Drive

Running from Pitești via Curtea de Argeș in the south to Hwy 1 in the north (118km in all), the Transfăgărășan Road is most commonly accessed from the northern end, where a 35km drive will take you up to the haunting glacial Lake Bâlea (2034m), where even in midsummer there is snow.

Sibiu had some 19 guilds, each representing a different craft, within the sturdy city walls protected by 39 towers and four bastions. Under the Habsburgs from 1703 to 1791 and again from 1849 to 1867, Sibiu served as the seat of the Austrian governors of Transylvania. Much remains from this colourful history. In 2000 Johannes Klaus of the German Democratic Forum was elected mayor and has remained hugely popular ever since, placing the city once again under German leadership.

Orientation

The heart of Sibiu is three interlocking squares, Piața Mare, Huet and Mică. The pedestrianised Str Nicolae Bălcescu is the main artery running northeast into Piața Mare. The lower Old Town lies to the north of the main square.

MAPS

There are several fold-out city maps available including *Amco's Sibiu City & County Plan* (€3.40) and Stiefel's *Sibiu* (€2.50).

Information

The free biweekly *Șapte Seri* (www.sapteseri.ro) is a helpful Romanian listings booklet.

BOOKSHOPS

Librăria Humanitas (☎ 211 434; Str Nicolae Bălcescu 16; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Fri, 11am-5pm Sat) Best bookshop in town, with lots of maps.

Librăria Schiller (Piața Mare 7; ☎ 8am-3pm Mon-Fri) Good source for maps and many German-language titles on area history.

CULTURAL CENTRES

American Centre & Library (☎ 216 061; B-dul Victoriei 5-7)

British Council Centre & Library (☎ 211 056; bcu.britanica@ulsibiu.ro; B-dul Victoriei 5-7; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon, Wed & Fri, 11am-8pm Tue & Thu) Organises events and has a reading room.

German Cultural Centre & Library (☎ 216 062, ext 124; B-dul Victoriei 5-7; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Thu, to 4pm Fri)

EMERGENCY

Salvamont (☎ 216 477, 0745-140 144; Str Nicolae Bălcescu 9; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri) Provides 24-hour emergency rescue service for hikers and skiers in trouble.

INTERNET ACCESS

Click (Str Ocnei 11; per hr €0.45; ☎ 9-2am Mon-Fri, 10-2am Sat, 2pm-2am Sun)

Schuponet (Str Lupas 21; per hr €0.45; ☎ 24hr)

Starting from Hwy 1 in the north, the drive gets interesting at Km12, when the road starts to sharply incline and begins a series of jagged turns through the lush forest. Deer are now more of a worry than cows or horse-drawn carts.

As you keep climbing, the trees start to shrink and thin out, their lifting veil replaced by unfolding views of sheer rock face. By Km20, your ears are popping. At Km22, you arrive at the *cascada* (waterfalls). The 360-degree panoramic views here are stunning; walls of mountains surround the area, and the distant waterfalls' slash of white appears like a lightning bolt in a grey sky. There are souvenir stands, a restaurant and the **Cabana Bâlea Cascada** (☎ 524 255), as well as a **cabale car** (one way €2.90; ☎ 8am-5pm), which whisks you up to Lake Bâlea. Alternatively, follow the scenic blue-cross trail (2½ hours).

The remaining 13km up to Lake Bâlea is a maze of razor-sharp zigzags hanging over precipices framing breathtaking views.

The climax is Lake Bâlea, hovering like a mirror among the rocks, sometimes shrouded by clouds that come billowing over the peak above it. **Cabana Bâlea** (☎ 524 277) is here, one of the pricier cabanas in Romania, but one of the nicest as well. There's a decent restaurant and a few souvenir stands. The temperature here is easily near zero, even if it's steaming hot at the foot of the mountain, and the vegetation is minimal and miniature.

No public transport follows this route, which is closed from October to May (roughly). Some bikers and hikers walk up the road, but it's a maniacal venture, not to mention hazardous for the cars that must already be driven at a snail's pace.

After an 887m-long tunnel through rock under the Paținu ridge, the road descends the (less impressive) south side along the Argeș Valley. After re-entering forest, just when you think the fun is over, the road suddenly hugs the shores of the picturesque Lake Vidraru and crosses a 165m-high arched dam (1968). Beyond the lake, just off the road, is the Poienari Citadel, the real Dracula's castle (where Vlad Țepeș ruled; see p105).

LEFT LUGGAGE

Train Station (per day €0.85; ☎ 24hr) In 'ticket shed' across from station.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Farmasib (Str Nicolae Bălcescu 53; ☎ 7am-9pm Mon-Fri, 8am-9pm Sat & Sun)

Nippur-Pharm (Str Nicolae Bălcescu 5; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-2pm Sat)

MONEY

ATMs are located all over the centre as well as in most hotels. The **Banca Comercială Română** (Str Nicolae Bălcescu 11; ☎ 8.30am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, to 12.30pm Sat) changes travellers cheques and gives cash advances.

POST

Post office (Str Mitropoliei 14; ☎ 7am-8pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1pm Sat)

TOURIST INFORMATION

For information on Sibiu's role as a 'cultural capital of Europe' in 2007, check www.sibiu2007.ro.

A pioneer in self-organisation, the can-do **Tourist Information Centre** (☎ 208 913; www.sibiu

.ro; Piața Mare 2; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm Sun) is slated to take over a primo spot in the ground floor of the new city hall for 2007 – that's true commitment to helping travellers. Staff provides events calendars and bus schedules, and can also book accommodation. It plans to have free exhibitions and project 24-hour videos of attractions in and around Sibiu.

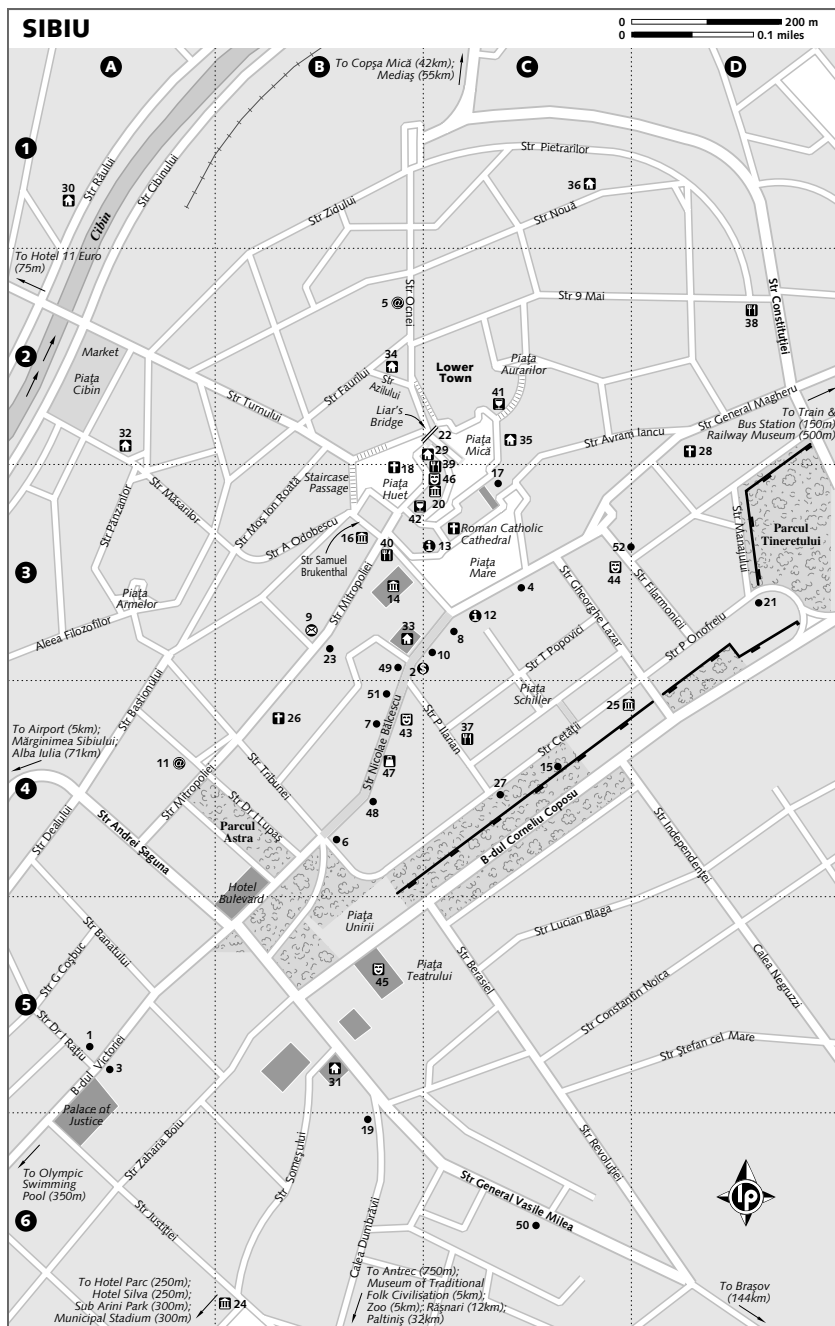
TRAVEL AGENCIES

Carpathian Active Travel (☎ 0727-851 466, 101 167; www.reky-travel.de; Piața Mare 12; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-3pm Sat May-Oct) Well-organised travel agent geared mostly to German visitors. Offers day trips to hang with shepherds or to Biertan (around €40 per person, including guide, transport and lunch).

Casa Luxemburg (☎ 216 854; www.kultours.ro; Piața Mică 16; ☎ 9am-9pm) Travel agent offering loads of city tours (€6 to €15) and day trips (€25 to €50); has a useful free map of the centre too.

Sights

Visitors with only a day should be able to fit in a look-see around the Old Town and a trip out to the Museum of Traditional Folk Civilisation (p158), 5km south.



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AROUND PIAȚA MARE

The centre of the old walled city, the expansive Piața Mare is a good start for exploring Sibiu. Climb to the top of the former **Council Tower** (Turnul Sfătuului; admission €0.30; ☎ 10am-6pm), which links Piața Mare with its smaller sister square, Piața Mică. Clock clanks inside the white tower (1588) add to the views. It was originally built in 1370, but collapsed during a 1586 earthquake (killing a mural painter).

The **Brukenthal Museum** (☎ 217 691; Piața Mare 4-5; adult/child €1.80/0.90; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) is the oldest (and likely) finest art gallery in Romania. Founded in 1817, the museum is in the baroque palace (1785) of Baron Samuel Brukenthal (1721-1803), former Austrian governor. There are excellent collections of 16th- and 17th-century Flemish, Italian, Dutch and Austrian paintings, including a giant painting of Sibiu from 1808. The floor filled with folk art, Romanian art and silverware was under renovation at research time.

Perhaps the square's most impressive building, however, is the new **city hall** (Banca Agricola; Piața Mare 2). Just west of here is the lovely **Primăria Municipiului** (1470), now the **City History Museum** (Str Mitropoliei 2), which was closed at research time but planned to re-open by mid-2007.

Nearby, on Piața Huet, is the Gothic **Evangelical Church** (☎ 9am-3pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat, 11am-4pm Sun), built between 1300 and 1520,

its great five-pointed tower visible from afar. Don't miss the four magnificent baroque funerary monuments on the upper nave on the north wall, and the 1772 organ with 6002 pipes (it's Romania's largest). The tomb of Mihnea Vodă cel Rău (Prince Mihnea the Bad), son of a certain Vlad Țepeș, is in the closed-off section behind the organ (ask for entry; it's the first of 67 tombstones). This prince, who ruled Wallachia from 1507 to 1510, was murdered on the square in front of the church after attending a service in March 1510. You can climb the **church tower** (admission €0.90) – ask for entry at Casa Luxemburg.

Housed in the nearby Piața Mică pharmacy (opened in 1600), the **Pharmaceutical Museum** (☎ 218 191; adult/child €1.20/0.60; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) is a three-room collection packed with pills and powders, old microscopes and scary medical instruments (such as a 17th-century bone saw). Some exhibits highlight Samuel Hahnemann, a founder of homeopathy in the 1770s (Romania was one of Europe's first countries to legitimise the use of giving small doses of a disease's symptoms in order to fight the disease itself).

Named for a 19th-century collector from Sibiu, the great **Franz Binder Museum of World Ethnology** (☎ 218 195; Piața Mică 11; adult/child €1/0.45; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun) has an unexpectedly rich collection of North and Central African pieces (including a 2000-year-old mummy), picked

up by Franz during his 10-year stay in Egypt and Sudan. Temporary exhibitions include displays of Inuit art from Nunavut, Canada.

Heading northeast from Piața Mică, you come to the **St Ursuline Church**. Founded by Dominican monks in the 15th century, it was later transformed into a school, then turned over to the Ursuline order in 1728.

LOWER TOWN

To reach the lower town from Piața Mică, you can walk along the road that goes under the **Iron Bridge** (1859). The bridge's nickname is Liar's Bridge, after the tricky merchants who met here to trade and the young lovers who declared their 'undying' love on it.

While the lower town has less sights per se, it makes for a great strolling area. Here you can see many houses sporting eyeball-style windows popping out of red-tiled rooftops, a style particular to Sibiu. Enchanting courtyards and decorated garage doors and gates are also plentiful, particularly around little **Piața Aurarilor** (Goldsmith's Square).

STR MITROPOLIEI & OLD CITY WALLS

Str Mitropoliei extends southwest from Piața Huet. The standout feature is the 1906 **Orthodox Cathedral**, a miniature copy of Istanbul's Hagia Sofia. The street is lined with memorial plaques to Romanian notables who stayed there, however briefly. The **Memorandumists plaque** (Str Mitropoliei 19) honours the Transylvanian leaders of the Romanian National Party who addressed a memorandum to the emperor Franz Joseph in Vienna in 1892, calling for an end to discrimination against Romanians. In an apt response, 29 of their members were convicted of agitating against the state and imprisoned.

The influential Transylvanian Association for Romanian Literature & Culture, known as Astra, was founded in 1861 at Str Mitropoliei 20, in protest at the intense Magyarisation of Transylvania in the mid-19th century. Astra's nationalist calls for Romanians to stand up for their liberty and identity were voiced in *Tribuna*, Transylvania's first Romanian newspaper, written and printed in Sibiu from 1884. The group is memorialised by **Parcul Astra**, the quiet park near the end of the street.

CITY WALLS

South of Piața Mare, Str Cetății lines a section of the old city walls, constructed during the 16th century. As in Brașov, different guilds

protected each of the 39 towers. Walk north up Str Cetății past a couple – the **Potters Tower** (Turnul Olarilor) and **Carpenters Tower** (Turnul Dulgherilor) – to reach the **Natural History Museum** (☎ 213 156; Str Cetății 1; adult/child €1.45/0.60; ☎ 9am–5pm Tue–Sat), an average collection of stuffed animals that dates from 1849.

Further north, the street curls around the **Haller Bastion**, which was named after the 16th-century city mayor Petrus Haller. When Sibiu was hit by the plague, holes were drilled through the walls to enable corpses to be evacuated more quickly from the city. The bastion was consequently dubbed the 'gate of corpses'.

OUTSIDE THE CENTRE

The so-called **Railway Museum** (Muzeul Locomotivului cu Abur; Str Dorobanților 22; admission negotiable; ☎ approx 7am–3pm Mon–Fri) is an open-air collection of a couple of dozen old trains right off the tracks. Don't pay any more than the posted €0.45 ticket price. Alternatively, the friendly depot worker in the hut next door happily explains (in limited English) how trains are managed and maintained; sit with him and chat a while. Get there by walking south from the train station; it's across the tracks, 300m south.

A 15-minute walk southwest of the centre, the **Museum of Hunting Arms & Trophies** (Muzeul de Arme și Trofee de Vânătoare; ☎ 217 873; Str Școala de Înot 4) was under renovation at research time, but should have its collection of stuffed heads ready to devour by now. At the southern end of this street is the 21-hectare **Sub Arini Park** filled with tree-lined avenues, beautifully laid-out flower beds, a tennis court and swimming pool (open from May to September). There is also a **Municipal Stadium**, where Sibiu's football team plays.

Sibiu's top highlight is some 5km from the centre. The large **Museum of Traditional Folk Civilisation** (Muzeul Civilizației Populare Tradiționale Astra; ☎ 242 599; Calea Rășinarilor 14; adult/child €3.50/1.75; ☎ 10am–6pm Tue–Sun, to 8pm in good weather) is a sprawling open-air museum with 120 traditional dwellings, mills and churches brought from around the country. Many are signed in English, with maps showing where they came from; they're situated in a lovely forest around a lake. There's also a nice **gift shop** (☎ 9am–5pm Tue–Sun) and **restaurant** with creek-side bench seats. Trolleybus 1 from the train station goes there (get off at the last stop and keep walking for under 1km, or take the hourly Rășinari

tram for a couple of stops), though it's an easy and pleasant bike ride there too.

Activities

Explorer Sport (☎ 216 641; Calea Dumbrăvii 14; ☎ 9am–8pm Mon–Fri, 10am–2pm Sat) is a sport shop that rents bikes (about €5 a day), skis in winter, sells packs and boots, and repairs bikes.

Festivals & Events

Sibiu's cultural richness dates from its days as the Saxon capital. Some highlights include:

Mayfest (1 May) Sibiu's remaining 5500 German-speaking Saxons flock to Dumbrava forest for pagan frolicking and beer bingeing.

Sibiu Jazz Festival (May) In 2005 Sibiu resurrected its week-long jazz festival (www.sibiu jazz festival.com), which died, along with its first founder, in the early 1990s.

International Theatre Festival (May/Jun) See www.sibfest.ro.

International Country & Folk Music Festival (Jul) **National Festival of Folk Traditions** (early Aug)

Displays of craft traditions at Astra (aka Museum of Traditional Folk Civilisation), which holds many summer events.

International Opera Music Festival (late Sep) www.filarmonicasibiu.ro.

International Astra Film Festival (mid-Oct) Bi-annual event held on even-numbered years. See www.astrafilm.ro.

Sleeping

Sibiu's Old Town is sadly underrepresented by accommodation options, and the for-2007 hotel boom has eyed far less appealing areas outside the centre. At research time **Hotel Boulevard** (Piața Unirii 10) was undergoing a massive, long-overdue renovation. Check www.sibiu2007.ro for updates on accommodation.

Also, ask the tourist information office about the University of Lucian Blaga dorms around town, which it is planning to open for about €10 per person.

If you hang out at the bus or train station long enough, you're likely to get an offer of a private room. You can also call **Tourism & Hospitality** (☎ 0722-551 073; r €28), which books central rooms.

Antrec (☎ 233 503; turism@turism.sobis.ro; Str Gala Dumbrăvii 101; ☎ 9am–5pm Mon–Fri) arranges rooms in *pensiuene*-style accommodation in the countryside for €12 to €17 per person per night (including breakfast); call ahead.

BUDGET

Old Town Hostel (☎ 216 445; www.hostelsibiu.ro; Piața Mică 26; dm/d €11.50/26) In a 450-year-old build-

ing with spacious dorm rooms looking over a main square, this simple hostel has the most atmospheric location in Sibiu. Dorms are better than the private room (which has four beds and no window). Breakfast is not included, but you can use the kitchen (plus there's table football!). Lots of transport and day-trip information is available, as is laundry service (€2).

Hotel 11 Euro (☎ 222 041; www.11euro.ro; Str Tudor Vladimirescu 2; s/d €22/33) The name's a lie – unless you count divisibles. This 27-room hotel (a former clothing factory) is slightly stranded, about 500m northwest of the centre, but has perfectly passable, if cheap rooms. Second-floor ones have the best views. Breakfast is €2.

Hotel Halamadero (☎ 212 509; Str Măsarilor 10; d/tr with shared bathroom €23/31.50) This friendly, family-run four-room deal is in a slightly unglamorous patch of the Lower Town. Rooms are old-school, with TV and three or four beds. The family runs a beery patio café that's nice but no breakfast is served.

Hotel Podul Minciunilor (☎ 217 259; www.hotel-ela.as.ro; Str Azilului 1; d/tr €27/36) Located half a block from Liar's Bridge in Lower Town, this six-room guesthouse (run by the people behind Pensiunea Ela) is a bit cuter from the outside than the inside, but has basic clean rooms with TVs and a communal refrigerator. No breakfast is served.

our pick Pensiunea Ela (☎ 215 197; www.hotel-ela.as.ro; Str Novă 43; s/d €29/37) One of Sibiu's best deals, this Lower Town guesthouse has just nine rooms, all clean and comfy, if a little small. Owners care for every detail (you're asked to remove your shoes in the room), and Lassie the German Shepherd is a sweet, quiet guy. A central courtyard isn't a bad sitting spot, though the breakfast is probably not worth €5. Laundry is available for €7.50.

MIDRANGE

Casa Luxemburg (☎ 216 854; www.kultours.ro; Piața Mică 16; s/d/tr €33/57/77) It's a little dormy, but this six-room job overlooks the Evangelical Church and Piața Mică.

Gasthof Clara (☎ 222 914; Str Răului 24; s/d €45/56) It's on an unappealing, dusty street, but all that evaporates once you're inside this cheerful six-room guesthouse with a terrace restaurant. The owner sometimes tells communist jokes.

Hotel Silva (☎ 243 985; www.hotelsilvasibiu.com; Aleea Eminescu 1; s/d €53/69) The Silva is a chalet-style hotel overlooking green Sub Airini Park.

Rooms are modern, but a recent renovation didn't cull the must. Half the rooms have balconies.

Hotel Continental (☎ 218 100; www.continentalhotels.ro; Calea Dumbrăvii 2-4; s/d €56/77; ☒ ☒) Grey, grey, grey on the outside, this 13-floor, 182-room hotel is plain but quite well maintained inside, and rooms have nice views. It's on a busy street, five minutes from the Old Town. Word is that Ibis may take it over by 2008.

Hotel Împăratul Romanilor (☎ 216 500; Str Nicolae Bălcescu 2-4; s/d €56/78) Inside the green-tea exteriors, this hotel (founded in 1555 as a restaurant, rebuilt in 1985) looks fussy Louis XIV-style at first glance, but nicks on window ledges and scuffed carpets reveal that it's disappointingly maintained. A new heyday is sure to come: it's the only hotel in the centre.

Hotel Parc (☎ 424 455; www.hotelparcsibiu.ro; Str Școala de Înot 1-3; s/d €58/73; ☒ ☒) This former grey blob 1.5km southeast of the centre went and did itself up, with a fresh gold exterior and 59 fully modern (if slightly unexciting) interiors. West-facing rooms get free views of the football games in the neighbouring stadium.

Eating

Sandwich & More (Str Brukenthal; sandwiches €0.90; ☒ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat) This window spot serves fresh veggie sandwiches and Asian-style pastas. It's by far Sibiu's best fast-food option.

Grand Plaza (Str 9 Mai 60; mains €2.30-3; ☒ 10am-11pm Mon-Sat) Not far from the train station, this simple and busy Romanian restaurant passes on the gimmicks and focuses on tasty Romanian food, which the locals file in for. Grilled meats are about €2.80, soups €1 to €1.80 and a Bulgarian salad costs €1.80.

Crama Sibiul Vechi (Str Ilarian; mains €2.30-6; ☒ noon-midnight) This popular, evocative brick-cellar spot off the main crawl reels in locals for its tasty Transylvanian armoury of mutton, sausages, beef and fish. There's live music most nights.

La Piazzetta (☎ 230 879; Piața Mică 15; pizzas & pastas €3.15-5.70) Facing the square, this pizzeria is livelier than most, with smokers and passive smokers eating sizeable pizzas at red-checkered tables in the peach-walled interior or outside when the weather's nice.

Drinking

Piața Mică is the drinking HQ for Sibiu.

Go In (Piața Mică 10; ☒ 9am-3am) The Go In is a traditional-style bar with lots of 20-something

couples sharing tables over cocktails and beer.

Kulturkafe (Piața Mică 16; ☒ 10am-3am Mon-Fri, 1pm-3am Sat, 3pm-3am Sun) This place has the best table spots on the square.

Chill Out (Piața Mică 23; ☒ 10am-2am) Local students hightail it to this fun, loud, enigmatic cellar club with a well-lit room and a dark one, where themed nights and DJs rule the roost (one time it was pitch dark, with smooching couples dancing and a guy flashing a torch on the scene – now that's entertainment).

Art Café (☎ 0722-265 992; Str Filarmonicii 2; ☒ 8am-2am Mon-Sat, 10am-2am Sun) Saxon intellectuals and goofing teens discuss the world at side-by-side tables in this small café (coffee, beer, mixed drinks), which sometimes stages jazz and dance events. It has a very open vibe.

Entertainment

CINEMAS

Studio Astra (Piața Mică 11) This place screens alternative art films; it also hosts the annual International Astra Film Festival in October.

THEATRE & CLASSICAL MUSIC

Agencie de Teatrală (☎ 217 575; Str Nicolae Bălcescu 17; ☒ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri, 11am-3pm Sat) Tickets for major events are sold here.

Filharmonic (☎ 210 264; www.filarmonicasibiu.ro; Str Filarmonei 2) Founded in 1949, this has played a key role in maintaining Sibiu's prestige as a main cultural centre of Transylvania.

Radu Stancu State Theatre (☎ 210 092; B-dul Spiteilor 2-4) Plays here are usually in Romanian, with occasional productions in German on Wednesday. It hosts the International Theatre Festival in May/June.

Shopping

Franz Binder Museum Gift Shop (☎ 218 195; Piața Mică 11; ☒ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun) This shop stocks lots of traditional pieces, which make good souvenirs.

Antik (☎ 211 604; Str Nicolae Bălcescu 23; ☒ 10am-6pm Mon-Fri, to 2pm Sat) This is the best place to pick through old German knick-knacks.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Tarom (☎ 211 157; Str Nicolae Bălcescu 10; ☒ 9am-12.30pm & 1.30-5pm Mon-Fri) offers daily service to/from Munich (€280 return), plus five weekly flights to Vienna (€300) and three to Bucharest (€60/100 one way/return).

Carpatair (☎ 229 161; www.carpatair.ro), which has an office at the airport, offers service to Germany and Italy via Timișoara.

Austrian Airlines (www.aua.com) also flies between Vienna and Sibiu.

BUS

The **bus station** (☎ 217 757; Piața 1 Dec 1918) is opposite the train station. Daily bus and maxitaxi services include the following:

Destination	Price	Duration	Frequency
Alba Iulia	€3.40	2hr	10 daily
Brașov	€4.30	2½hr	13 daily
Bucharest	€8.50	5½hr	4-5 daily
Cluj-Napoca	€6	3½hr	9 daily
Deva	€4.50	2½hr	3-4 daily
Sighișoara	€3.50	2hr	4 daily
Timișoara	€9	6hr	2 daily
Târgu Mureș	€3.70	2½hr	13 daily

Three or four daily minibuses to Râșinari and Pălținiș (€1.15, 1¼ hours) leave from the roundabout in front of the train station, and buses to Cisnădie leave every half-hour from platform 9. Another microbus heads west a few times daily, stopping in Săliște (€0.30), 4km from Sibiul, and ending in Jina (€1.80).

Eurolines (☎ 213 536; sibiu@eurolines.ro; B-dul Vasile Milea 13; ☒ 9am-8pm Mon-Fri, to 4pm Sat) sells tickets to many European destinations.

Several international buses leave from the lot next to Hotel Parc, 2km southwest of the centre.

TRAIN

Sibiu lies at an awkward rail junction; often you'll need to change trains. But there are three daily direct trains to Brașov (€6.75, 2½ hours); three to Bucharest (€14, five hours) and Timișoara (€14, five hours); and one early morning one to Arad (€10.80, five hours). To get to/from Sighișoara or Cluj-Napoca, you'll have to change at Coșca Mică or Mediaș (about nine or 10 trains daily). For Alba Iulia, you have to change at Vințu de Jos.

Buy tickets at the **Agencie de Voiaj CFR office** (☎ 216 441; Str Nicolae Bălcescu 6; ☒ 7.30am-7.30pm Mon-Fri).

Getting Around

Trolleybus 1 connects the train station with the centre, but it's only a 450m walk along Str General Magheru.

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Sibiu airport (S8Z; ☎ 229 161; Hwy Alba Iulia 73) is 5km west of the centre. Trolleybus 8 runs between the airport and the train station.

TAXI

There's a taxi stand at the west end of Str Nicolae Bălcescu. To call a taxi dial ☎ 953.

CAR RENTAL

Toro (☎ 232 237; www.tororent.ro; Str Filarmonica 5; ☒ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat) rents Dacias from €30 to €38 per day.

Advantage (☎ 216 949; www.patricia-rent.ro; Apt 5, Str Nicolae Bălcescu 37; ☒ 9am-8pm Mon-Fri, 11am-6pm Sat) has Dacias from €49 per day, or €10 less daily if you're renting for a week or more.

AROUND SIBIU

☒ 269

Many visitors fail to capitalise on Sibiu's great nearby attractions – quiet villages and hiking trails past glacial lakes. It's possible to hike across the Cindrel Mountains on a day trip, or rent a bike and go on trails from Pălținiș.

About 16km north of Sibiu, towards Saxon Land, in the town **Slimnic** is a great hilltop 15th-century fortified church that's fun to ramble around.

South of Sibiu

See Sibiu's transport section for bus service information.

CISNĂDIE

Forking west of the road to Pălținiș, about 12km south of Sibiu, is the Saxon fortified church of Cisnădie (Heltau in German, Nagydisznód in Hungarian). Work started on defensive walls around the church in 1430 but they were destroyed by a Turkish attack on the town in 1493. Ask in the village for the key to the bell tower, which looks over the town's red roofs.

RĂȘINARI

On the way to the Cindrel Mountains, the charming, rather well-to-do shepherd village of Râșinari, 12km south of Sibiu, is famed for its local carpentry, sheep farming and a lively Saturday market. This is also the birthplace of Romanian poet and politician Octavian Goga (1881–1939). The market lines one of the two small rivers running through town, around the centre; where the road forks (near the gold town

hall and post office, just east of a small bridge), there's an information board with a town map of 11 local sites and day-hike information.

West of the centre (follow the signs), the small **Ethnographical Museum** (Str Grădinița De Copii 2) was under renovation at research time. 'It may move', a neighbour told us with an unsure shrug.

Across the stream, about 300m southeast of the city hall (veer left after the Orthodox Church up the hill), is the four-room, unsigned **Cioran Pensiune** (☎ 557 170; Str Emil Cioran 1503; r€20), at the home of an English-speaking family; breakfast is €3.

CINDREL MOUNTAINS

Not high on most travellers' lists, these lovely mountains – topped with Mt Cindrel (2244m) and Mt Frumoasa (2170m) – shelter two large glacial lakes, with excellent well-marked trails cutting across. Visitors could start from Pălteniș and make their way overland to Mărginimea Sibiului as a day hike.

From **Pălteniș**, some trails are perfect for mountain biking too. You can rent bikes from the Pălteniș reception centre and pick up trail maps.

There's a 4km trail to **Șanta**, where there's a refuge for campers to spend the night. The most popular route (3.5km, red circles) descends to the **Cibin Gorges** (Cheile Cibinului). From here the trail goes northeast, past **Cibin River** to **Cabana Fântânele**. The next day, continue in the same direction to **Sibiel** village (three to 3½ hours, blue crosses). Alternatively, follow another blue-cross trail to the neighbouring village of **Fântânele**. From Sibiel you can also take a 2½-hour walk to **Cetea Sibiului** – it starts from the stream at the western end of the village.

Heading back south from Cabana Fântânele, a trail (red crosses and blue circles) cuts down a valley to **Șaua Șerbăneii**, where you pick a separate trail leading to the **Cânaia refuge** (7½ to eight hours for the whole trip, blue circles).

More adventurous alpinists should follow the trail from **Cabana Pălteniș** south, past the Cânaia refuge (5½ to 6½ hours, red stripes) to the summit of **Mt Cindrel**. Heading northwards, red stripes also indicate the way to **Rășinari** village (six to seven hours), with its Cabana Mai.

Of all fun things, hourly (at most) tram 1 connects Rășinari with the southern part of Sibiu (take bus 1 from the train station to reach the tram). Yay, trams!

PĂLTINIȘ

Southwest of Rășinari, the road climbs up steeply, reaching after 20km the humble ski/summer resort Pălteniș. The collection of villas isn't all that much to see, but they are surrounded by hiking trails into the beautiful, forested Cindrel Mountains (also known as the Cibin Mountains).

Pălteniș hosts several interesting events: the **Snow Festival** (Sarbatori Zapezii), held in mid-April, includes soapbox derbies and build-your-own-sleigh competitions. In August, there's the **Mountain Days jazz festival** on the first weekend followed by the national off-road car rally.

Pălteniș' **Reception Centre** (☎ 574 035; www.scpaltinis.com; ☎ 8am-10pm) sells Cindrel trail maps, has an internet connection (per hour €1.70) and rents bikes (per hour €1.45) and skis. It also can book rooms in one of the handful of villas here, including the 57-room **Casa Turistilor** (s/d €24.50/34.50), with a fitness centre and a Jacuzzi (€1.40). Breakfast costs extra.

By the ski lifts is the scrappy **Cabana Pălteniș** (☎ 0724-313 909; r per person with shared/private bathroom €10/14.50).

Halfway back towards Rășinari, **Curmătura Ștezii** (☎ 557 310; curmatura@hotmail.com; Km17; r/cabin €23/12) is a happy little lodge with heaps of pelts and an appealing streamside location. There are trails nearby and a good restaurant. Breakfast is extra.

Mărginimea Sibiului

The villages in the so-called Mărginimea Sibiului ('borders of Sibiu') represent the heart and soul of traditional rural (ie Romanian) Transylvania. Scattered throughout the region west of Sibiu, they have preserved an old way of life: here you see not only the ubiquitous horse and plough, but also artisans engaged in woodwork, carving and weaving. Painting icons on glass and colouring eggs are pastimes here as much as surfing the internet is in Bucharest, and the local cuisine includes a tasty shepherd's polenta (with loads of fresh cream and milk).

It's great to ramble around by bike – get a map to take quiet backroads from Sibiu, as the Sibiu–Alba Iulia highway is flooded with traffic.

Look up www.ruraltourism.ro for details (and photos) of many guesthouses in the area.

CRISTIAN

Lying 10km west of Sibiu is Cristian (Grossau in German, Kereszténysziget in Hungarian). This dusty village was settled by Saxons in the 14th century and is therefore not part of Mărginimea Sibiului, technically. Red-roofed houses and vibrant washed walls are overshadowed by a grandiose fortified church in the centre of the village. Sometimes visitors can climb the tower of the church for an aerial view. Local history is covered in the petite village **museum** (Muzeul Sătesco; ☎ noon-5pm Tue-Sun), next to the local prefecture in the centre of the village.

Also, watch out for storks – the town is known for its big stork population.

GURA RÂULUI

Just 9km south (via Orlat) is Gura Râului, a sleepy town with a massive dam several kilometres south. **Pensiune Tepeș** (☎ 572 324; Str Principala 958; r per person €8) is one of a couple of dozen *pensiunes* in town; this one has a lovely backyard with chickens and gardens looking towards a mountain. Breakfast is €3, three big meals cost €13. After you enter the town, veer right at the fork in the road (with the crucifix altar) for about 1km.

SIBIEL

It's easy to settle in to wee Sibiel, just a few kilometres south of Săliște on the highway, but tucked out of sight and feeling worlds away. At the eastern edge of town, past the tree-lined stream and many century-old villas, is the **Zosim Oancea Icons Museum** (☎ 553 818; admission €0.85; ☎ 8am-8pm), one of Romania's largest icon museums, with some 700 icons collected by a priest who spent 17 years in prison during the communist reign for his religious deeds. Hiking trails loom in the hills to the east – follow the river upstream.

Firmly gripped by all things bucolic and peaceful, the highly recommended **Mioritica** (☎ 552 640, 0740-175 287; coldeasv@yahoo.com; r from €15; ☎) is 'paradise' to Sorian, the English- and German-speaking owner of this remarkable streamside four-room guesthouse. Three bridges go over the roaring stream, and a garden includes exhibitions of found objects that Sorian, a local history teacher, rescues from the

ages (including a 'nostalgic' creekside exhibition of communist relics; 'it's important to remember your past', Sorian explains). Meals are provided, and he can point you to hiking trails, nearby villages and the icon museum in town. Sometimes local musicians drop by to play for drinks. It's located towards the hills, upstream from the village centre, and you'll find it hard to leave.

AROUND SIBIEL

From Sibiel, head 6km north to Săliște, another quaint village rich in local folklore. In Gașeș, 2km west of Săliște, is a small ethnographic and art museum. It is at the southern end of the village, across the bridge opposite a salami factory. A dirt track leads from Gașeș to Poiana Sibiului, famed for its fantastic coloured eggs, which are decorated with bright, geometric motifs.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

See p161 for bus details for the region. Local trains from Sibiu to Sebeș stop at Cristian (15 minutes), Sibiel (25 minutes), Săliște (35 minutes) and Miercurea Sibiului (1¼ hours).

SZÉKELY LAND

Technically it's wrong to call this central patch of Transylvania on the eastern realms of the Carpathians 'Hungarian Transylvania', but going around much of Székely Land (Țara Secuilor in Romanian, Székelyföld in Hungarian) it can feel that way. So near to Saxon towns Brașov or Sighișoara, the pulse and nomenclature and spirit of many towns – such as Odorheiu Secuiesc (Székelyudvarhely in Hungarian) and Miercurea Ciuc (Csikszeregreda in Hungarian), where ethnic Hungarians comprise the majority, or the even-split of Târgu Mureș (Marosvásárhely in Hungarian) – feel almost foreign. Some of it comes from the enthusiasm given to guests, as many Transylvania itineraries head between Cluj-Napoca and Sibiu, missing this lovely area altogether. Plus, we find the food in the area to be particularly tasty.

That should change: in 2006 budget airline Wizz Air started service from Budapest to Târgu Mureș, the region's largest city; while friendly Odorheiu Secuiesc and Sfântu Gheorghe make great day trips from Sighișoara and Brașov, respectively.

The area is home to many Székelys, ethnic Hungarians who live and communicate almost exclusively in their Hungarian dialect. Highly organised as a group, they publish their own local booklets and maps (often with place names written in Hungarian only) and have nourished a flourishing cultural life. Yet this is mainly since 1990, as during the communist regime their population tended to be either roundly ignored or actively suppressed.

A good deal of tension still exists between Romanians and Hungarians, who battled each other during WWI and WWII. Some claim it's just politicians making the swipes, but mention of Székely Land or ethnic Hungarians not learning Romanian language in some parts of Romania brings out verbal editorials, as does any notion of Romania's treatment of the Hungarians in the 20th century for many locals here. One local defended a grandfather who shot at Romanians in WWII ('It was war'), then wondered why Romania never apologised for culling the spoils of victory, ie Transylvania. In Târgu Mureş, main Orthodox church you can see a peasant Jesus dressed in Romanian costume being tortured by nobility in Hungarian costumes. Statues of Romulus and Remus stress Romania's Latin roots, purposefully placed during communist times to undermine the Hungarians' claim. Things haven't settled. Tread lightly on the subject and you'll have no problems.

You could consider travelling with a Hungarian phrasebook here, but you'll find that most people know Romanian or some English.

History

The origins of the Székely (see-kay) people are disputed. Debates rage as to whether they are descendants of the Huns, who arrived in Transylvania in the 5th century and adopted the Hungarian language; or whether they are Magyars who accompanied Attila the Hun on his campaigns in the Carpathian basin and later settled there. Three 'nations' were recognised in medieval Transylvania: the Székelys, the Saxons and the Romanian nobles.

During the 18th century the Székelys suffered at the hands of the Habsburgs, who attempted to convert this devout Protestant ethnic group to Catholicism. Thousands of young Székely men were conscripted into the Austrian army. Local resistance throughout Székely Land led to the massacre of Madéfalva

in 1764, after which thousands of Székelys fled across the border into Romanian Moldavia.

Following the union of Transylvania with Romania in 1918, some 200,000 Hungarians – a quarter of whom were Székelys – fled to Hungary. It was during this period that the Székelys composed their own national anthem ('As long as we live/Peoples of Hungary/our spirit shall not be broken... Let us inherit our nation, the land of the Székely...'), in which they beg God for help in the survival of Transylvania. Today, many Hungarian tourists flock to the area, especially to the 'capitals' of Odorheiu Secuiesc and Miercurea Ciuc, to experience pastoral customs considered 'authentic' and already lost in their motherland.

Maps

Cartographia's *Tara Secuilor, Székelyföld, Székely Land* map includes a detailed map of the region, complete with lengthy historical explanations in Hungarian.

SFÂNTU GHEORGHE

☎ 267 / pop 66,380

Only 32km north of Braşov, Sfântu Gheorghe (Sepsiszentgyörgy in Hungarian), is the gently sloping banks of the Olt River, in more 'housing blocks built in communist fervour' than a traditional Transylvanian-Hungarian stronghold. That said, this chummy town with a Hungarian majority (reading its own Hungarian daily newspaper, *Háromszék*, and attending one of Romania's two Hungarian State Theatres) makes for a fascinating day trip from Braşov.

First documented in 1332, Sfântu Gheorghe developed as a cultural centre for the Székelys from the 15th century onwards, when it became a free town. It was left devastated by Turkish attacks between 1658 and 1671, and a plague in 1717. Today its museum is the region's best place to investigate Székely culture.

A fun time to be around is during the three-day St George Days Fair, ending on the last Sunday in April.

Orientation

The bus and train stations are a 25-minute walk east of the centre along Str 1 Decembrie 1918, which begins at the stations and veers right (past Str Jozef Bem, at the St George Statue) one block before it hits the north end of Central Park at Piaţa Libertăţii. From there,

Str Libertăţii begins southward, turning into Str Kós Károly after 300m.

Information

Banca Comercială Română (Str Jozef Bem; ☎ 8.30am-6pm Mon-Fri, to 12.30pm Sat) Opposite IT&T, a couple of blocks east of Central Park.

International Tourism & Trade (IT&T; ☎ 316 375; Str Jozef Bem 2; it&t@honoris.ro; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) Travel agent offers day trips, rents cars and can fix you up for the night in Ceausescu's former hunting lodge, Arcus Castle, 3km south of town (about €90).

Tourist Information Bureau (☎ 316 474; www.sep-siszentgyorgy.ro; Str 1 Decembrie 1918, 2; ☎ 7.30am-3.30pm Mon-Wed, to 5pm Thu, to 2pm Fri) Offers useful free city map and guesthouse listings. Can point you to bike rentals.

Sights

About 200m south of Central Park, the **Székely National Museum** (Székely Nemzeti Múzeum; ☎ 312 442; Str Kós Károly; adult/child €0.40/0.20; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun) is housed in a building which is itself a masterpiece, designed by leading Hungarian architect Kós Károly between 1911 and 1912 (he designed many of the buildings around Central Park too). The three floors of exhibits are unfortunately not signed in English and sit under buzzing fluorescent lights. There's a war-torn Hungarian flag from the 1848 revolution, plus 17th-century knight suits, a cheerful stuffed boar in the animal room (the lynx looks like a dick though) and lots of Székely crafts and costumes. Outside are a few traditional gates and wooden houses.

A couple of blocks south (just behind a tennis club) is an interesting **outdoor market**. We have a soft spot for the **St George Statue** (Str 1 Decembrie 1918), a modern addition that one local likened in disgust to 'a mosquito being attacked by a dinosaur'.

North of the centre, following Str Kossuth Lajos and crossing a bridge over the Debrén River, you'll come to the **Fortificaţă Reformată church**, in whose cemetery you can also see some lovely examples of traditional Székely wooden crosses and graveposts.

Sleeping

The tourist information centre can point out guesthouses to you.

Sugas Hotel (☎ 312 171; www.sugaskert.ro; Str 1 Decembrie 1918, 12; s/d/apt €38/44/63; ☎ ☑) Hidden behind some historic central buildings, the 28-room Sugas has bold graphic designs in its

comfy rooms, with headboards and wardrobes in Székely traditional style. Its restaurant is a big hit with townies too.

Eating

Tribel (cnr Str 1 Decembrie 1918 & Piaţa Libertăţii; mains from €1.20; ☎ 7am-10pm Mon-Fri, 9am-10pm Sat & Sun) Quite homy for a fast-food spot, this place is half pizza-bar, half pick-and-point cafeteria (good for fish, chicken, potatoes and salads).

Szentgyörgy Pince (St George Cellar; ☎ 352 666; St Gábor Áron 14; mains €2.80-5; ☎ 9am-midnight) Through a tunnel of the gold building facing the heroic statue of Mihai Viteazul (at the northern end of Central Park), this basement spot offers the Székely slant to Transylvania cooking – a few spicy goulashes and lots of grilled meats.

Getting There & Away

The bus station is 50m north of the train station. Microbuses and maxitaxis go along Str 1 Decembrie 1918 (stops are marked); some finish at a stand north of the market. Frequent services go to Braşov (€1.20, 40 minutes) and Covasna (€1.20, 40 minutes). There's also service to Miercurea Ciuc, Piatra Neamţ and Târgu Neamţ.

Buy train tickets at the **Agentie de Voiaj CFR** (☎ 311 680; Str Mikó Imre 13; ☎ 8am-3pm Mon-Fri). From Sfântu Gheorghe three trains daily go to Covasna (€0.70, one hour) and 16 to Braşov (€0.80, 30 to 45 minutes), with eight stopping in Hărman (€0.70, 30 minutes).

SPA TOWNS

COVASNA

The curative powers of mineral waters in the area around Sfântu Gheorghe – such as the 'Fairy Queen Valley' (Valea Zanelor) in Covasna (Kovácszna in Hungarian), 28km east – draw an older steady crew of visitors seeking cures for what ails them. Up towards the hills in Covasna, **Hotel Montana** (☎ 067-340 290; Str Toth 23; from €16) evocatively feels like stepping into a colour-faded *National Geographic* article from 1979, with lots of old-timers in robes awaiting treatments.

Check www.turismcovasno.ro for more information.

See above for information on transport here.

BĂILE TUŞNAD

About 40km north of Sfântu Gheorghe (en route to Miercurea Ciuc), more peaceful

Băile Tușnad, in the volcano-made Harghita Mountains, features pools and springs in a lush valley. An InfoTur stand has listings of 15 *pensiuines* in town (about €12 to €18 per person); the nearby **Centrul de Informare Eco-Turistica** (☎ 9am-2pm Mon, Wed & Fri), 100m north of the bus station, offers accommodation information too.

Across the street is a **pool** (♾ daily Jun-Sep). It's possible to hike 40 minutes up the path behind the train tracks to cliff-top **Stâncă Soimilor** for a valley view.

About 24km southeast, St Anne's Lake is a pretty spot with boats and picnic grounds (no accommodation). An annual pilgrimage is held there on 26 July.

One hotel is **Astoria** (☎ 266 335 04; www.laculciucas.ro; Str Otului 102; r €20), run by the folks who opened the great lakeside Lacul Ciucaș restaurant down from the main road.

Buses between Miercurea Ciuc and Sfântu Gheorghe stop here.

MIERCUREA CIUC

☎ 266 / pop 42,000

Known as being Romania's coldest city, or for its nationally loved Ciuc (pronounced chook) beer or the town's hockey fascination, Miercurea Ciuc (Csikszereada in Hungarian) is a friendly, if rather dishevelled, historic city, where the population is over 80% ethnic Hungarian. If you're heading to Bicaz Gorges or Lacu Roșu in Moldavia, it's a useful stop-off, although few make this area a destination of its own.

Founded during the reign of Hungarian King Ladislaus I (r 1077–95) around a castle that the king built for himself, Miercurea Ciuc quickly developed into a prosperous commercial centre and the hub of Székely Land cultural activities. Ceaușescu left an imprint in the 1970s and '80s, knocking down century-old Habsburg buildings for a grey civic centre that takes up a chunk of the town's heart.

Traditional Székely villages such as **Lelicen** (4km southeast), **Misentea** and **Ciucșangeorgiu** (another 2km and 4km south), and **Armaseni** (2km north of the latter along a dirt track) lie within easy reach of Miercurea Ciuc.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet (cnr Str Petőti & Tudor Vladimirescu; per hr €0.30; ♾ 10am-midnight)

LEFT LUGGAGE

Train station (per 24hr €0.80; ♾ 24hr)

MONEY

Banca Comercială Română (Kereskedelmi Bank; ☎ 271 766; cnr Str Kossuth Lajos & Str George Coșbu; ♾ 8.30am-6pm Mon-Fri, to 12.30pm Sat)

POST

Post office (Str Kossuth Lajos 3; ♾ 7am-8pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-1pm Sat)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist information centre (☎ 317 007; www.szereda.ro; Room 20, Piața Cetății 1; ♾ 8am-3pm Mon-Fri) Hidden-away information office on 1st floor of city hall. Hands out free town map and may help with area info. 'Not many people visit', one employee lamented at last pass.

Sights

CITY CENTRE

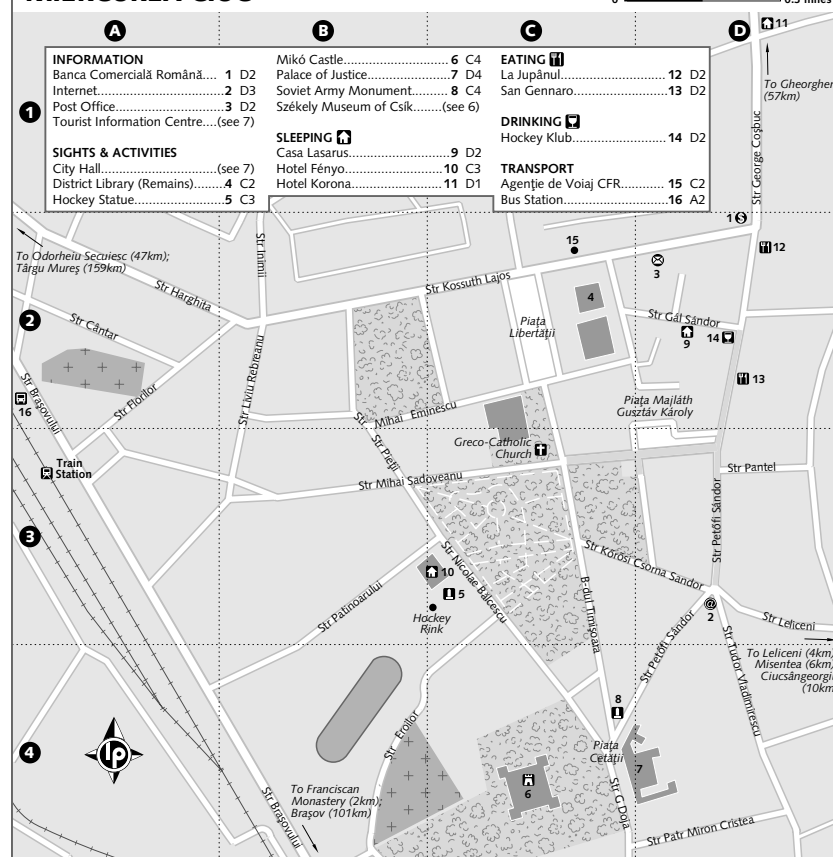
Miercurea Ciuc's centrepiece, and proud source of the Ciuc beer logo, is its **Mikó Castle**, which today houses the impressive **Székely Museum of Csik** (Csiki Székely Múzeum; ☎ 311 727; adult/student €1.40/0.70; ♾ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun). Built from 1623 to 1630, the castle was burnt down by Tartars in 1661 and rebuilt in 1716. It later played a role as defence for the Habsburg empire, housing the first Székely infantry in 1849. The museum, with labels in English, shows old weaponry (eg a three-bladed spring-action knife) and regional costumes and artefacts. In the back lot are a couple of relocated traditional buildings.

The **Palace of Justice**, built in 1904, and the baroque **city hall** (1884–98), both built in an eclectic style, and a **Soviet Army Monument** are on the opposite side of Piața Cetății.

Several blocks north, via B-dul Timișoara, is the city's **Civic Centre**, with a 'Pyongyang Square' feel; original houses were knocked down in 1976–77. One still standing is the canary-yellow, regal building from 1903, where the **National Bank of Romania** managed to survive – just. In 1984 the entire building was uprooted from its foundations and moved 128m east on rollers to make way for the **district library**, which has since been demolished.

Miercurea Ciuc is something of a hockey town. Its team frequently clashes against Steaua of Bucharest – many build it up as a Hungarian versus Romanian grudge-match. There's a heroic **hockey statue** in front of the town's rink, next to Hotel Fényo.

MIERCUREA CIUC



FRANCISCAN MONASTERY

Two kilometres south of the centre in the Șumuleu district (Csiksomlyó in Hungarian) is a fine **Franciscan monastery**, built in 1442 by Iancu de Hunedoara (János Hunyadi), governor of Hungary from 1446 to 1452, to commemorate his great victory against the Turks at Marosszentimre.

The monastery today is the site of the city's main tourist draw, the **Pentecostal Pilgrimage**. About 300,000 Székelys flock here on Whit-sunday (late May/early June) to celebrate their brotherhood.

Sleeping

Casa Lasarus (☎ 325 446; www.lasarushostel.ro; Str Gál Sándor 9; dm €8.60; ♾) This hostel has eight

spotless rooms, each with four beds, TV and private bathroom, and is the cheapest place in town. It's located on the 2nd floor of this religious organisation's offices. A kitchen is available.

Hotel Korona (☎ 310 993; Str Cosbuc 38; s/d/apt €26/43/52) This Habsburg-era building has been revamped with eight comfortable mustard-coloured rooms and lots of space. Free breakfast is served in a good restaurant downstairs.

Hotel Fényo (☎ 311 493; www.hunguest-fenyo.ro; Str Nicolae Bălcescu 11; s/d €57/67; ♾) Sitting near the citadel, this is a lovely place with 92 comfortable, business-friendly rooms and pluses like internet connection. Some rooms are equipped for wheelchair-bound guests.

Eating & Drinking

The eating/drinking strip for Miercurea Ciuc is the pedestrian mall Str Petőfi Sándor.

San Gennaro (☎ 206 501; Str Petőfi Sándor 15; pastas & pizzas €2-4; 🕒 9am-midnight) This three-part Italian restaurant is the most popular of the pedestrian mall sidewalk eateries. The food's fine and the setting's great.

La Jupănul (☎ 0744-386 346; Str Coşbul 18; mains from €2; 🕒 9am-11pm) Cosy and popular with lively 20-something snackers and drinkers, this traditional restaurant has bench seats, hanging knick-knacks, painted wooden floors and good food (pork schnitzels, chicken breast etc).

Hockey Klub (Str Petőfi Sándor; beer €0.75; 🕒 9am-midnight) This well-lit bar-restaurant sells more beer than food, and has enough displayed hockey jerseys and pennants from around the globe (including US minor league team Oklahoma City Blazers) to keep the chit-chat puck-oriented.

Getting There & Away

The **Agentie de Voiaj CFR** (☎ 311 924; 1st fl, Str Kossuth Lajos 12; 🕒 7.30am-2.30pm Mon-Fri) sells advance tickets. From Miercurea Ciuc there are 10 trains to Braşov (€2 to €4, two to 2½ hours) via Sfântu Gheorghe (€1.30, 1½ hours); three continue to Bucharest. There are also 11 daily trains to Gheorgheni (from €1.30, one hour), and one daily train to Budapest and Iaşi.

The **bus station** (☎ 324 334; Str Braşovului 1) is 50m north of the train station. A couple of daily buses go to Braşov (€2.80, two hours), three to Gheorgheni (€1.40, 1¼ hours), plus a handful to Sfântu Gheorghe, five weekly to Odorheiu Secuiesc, and five weekly to Budapest (for Budapest info call ☎ 372 311).

GHEORGHENI

☎ 266 / pop 20,000

The small town of Gheorgheni (gore-gen; Gyergyószentmiklós in Hungarian), 45km north of Miercurea Ciuc, has few sites of interest, but it makes an interesting quick break (particularly to see Lázareza's castle) on the way to or from Lacu Roşu and the Bicaz Gorge, 26km east (p269).

Banks and hotels line the central Piaţa Libertăţii. **TourInfo** (☎ 364 568; Str Balcescu 11; 🕒 9am-5pm Mon-Fri), about 250m northwest of Piaţa Libertăţii, sell maps (€0.40) and helps with transport times.

Sights

The **Tarisznyás Márton County Museum** (Városi Tarisznyás Márton Múzeum; ☎ 365 229; Str Rácóczi 1; adult/student €0.90/0.45; 🕒 9am-5pm Tue-Sun), 400m east of Piaţa Libertăţii, is in an 18th-century Armenian trade house and well worth a visit to see the intricately carved wooden fence posts, craft-workers' tools, and other artefacts of Magyar and Székely culture.

It backs onto an **Armenian Church**, which dates from the 17th century, when many Armenians lived in town.

Just 6km north of Gheorgheni on the road to Topliţa is the tiny village of **Lázareza** (Gyergyószárhegy in Hungarian). Dating from 1235, the predominantly Hungarian village is dominated by its 16th-century **castle** (admission €1.15; 🕒 9am-5pm Tue-Sat), on the rim of green forested hills. It was to Lázareza Castle that Gábor Bethlen, later to become prince of Transylvania (r 1613-29), came seeking solace following the death of his son in 1590. There's a small museum and views of the area and the neighbouring monastery from the bastions.

Sleeping & Eating

Lázár Panzió (☎ 364 446; www.lazarpancio.ro; Str Fűrődö 3; s/d €20/28) New and central, this seven-room guesthouse is in a three-storey building with white-picket fence surrounding a courtyard bar-restaurant. It's about 30m west of Piaţa Libertăţii.

Rubin Hotel (☎ 365 554; www.rubinhotel.ro; Str Gábor Áron 1; s/d/ste €25/30/45; 📺) A little plain but certainly comfortable, the 18-room Rubin is another central choice – and the only place in town that crafts 'white swan' towels on rose-coloured bedspreads.

In Lázareza village, there are about 20 *penziunes*, some with signs. One good one is **Emma Pap** (☎ 352 700; emitur@gmail.com; Str Szini; r per person incl meals €17); follow the 'information' signs.

Pizza Bank (Str Două Poduri 2; pizzas from €2; 🕒 10am-late) This place has pretty good pizzas and cold beer in a weird century-old building, 200m southeast of Piaţa Libertăţii.

Getting There & Away

The **bus station** (☎ 364 722) and **train station** (☎ 364 587) are 1.5km west of the centre via Str Gării. Three daily buses go to Braşov (€2.30, 2½ hours); one to Târgu Mureş (€4.60, four hours), continuing to Cluj-Napoca; three to Lacu Roşu (€1, one hour); and one to Odorheiu Secuiesc (€3.20, 2¼ hours). Trains on

the rail line between Braşov and Satu Mare stop here. There is no public transport to the stations, so many people lug their bags out there by foot.

ODORHEIU SECUIESC

☎ 266 / pop 37,500

Of all Székely Land, nowhere is more 'Hungarian' than little Odorheiu Secuiesc (or as locals prefer, Székelyudvarhely). About 97% of the locals are ethnic Hungarians, and this lovely, prosperous town ('a car for every three residents', one local boasted) feels like a different country from Sighişoara, 1½ hours' drive south. Surrounded by small hills, and inhabited by spirited, very welcoming locals, stepping into Odorheiu Secuiesc feels like the Eastern Europe of 1990, in the sense that locals may stop you to chat, absolutely charmed by your presence. Perhaps you'll bump into the teenager who introduced locals to dreadlocks, as we did.

Politics is often a part of conversation, and you're more likely to hear about the tensions between Romanian and ethnic Hungarian politicians here than elsewhere in Székely Land.

Settled on an ancient Roman military camp, Odorheiu Secuiesc developed as a small craft town between the 11th and 13th centuries. The Craftmen's Market, held in the citadel in mid-July, carries on the town's tradition of craft guilds set up by King Matthias Corvinus in 1485.

Orientation

The train and bus stations, reached via Str Bethlen Gábor, are a 10-minute walk north of the centre; the bus station is 100m southwest of the train station (west of the tracks). Street names – all names actually – get two names here – Hungarian and Romanian. We've included varying Hungarian names on the map in parentheses.

MAPS

Odorheiu Secuiesc (€1.75) published by Geocart can be bought at Herr Travel.

Information

There are ATMs and banks along Str Kossuth Lajos.

BOOKSHOPS

Corvina bookshop (☎ 217 637; Str Cetăţii (Var Ut) 2; 🕒 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat) Stocks maps and Hungarian-language books.

INTERNET ACCESS

Korona Panzió (see p170; per hr €0.60; 🕒 10am-11pm)

POST OFFICE

Post office (Str Kossuth Lajos 35; 🕒 7am-8pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1pm Sat)

TOURIST INFORMATION CENTRE

TourInfo (☎ 217 427; www.tourinfo.ro; Piaţa Márton Áron 6) The office was closed during research time, but planning to open at this location.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Herr Travel (☎ 102 342; www.guide2romania.ro; Piaţa Márton Áron 2; 🕒 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) Ambitious agency arranges car service, biking, caving and culture tours around region, or walking tours in town (a one-hour looksee at otherwise-closed public buildings is €4 per person and well worth it); rents Dacia Solenzas (from €20 per day).

Sights

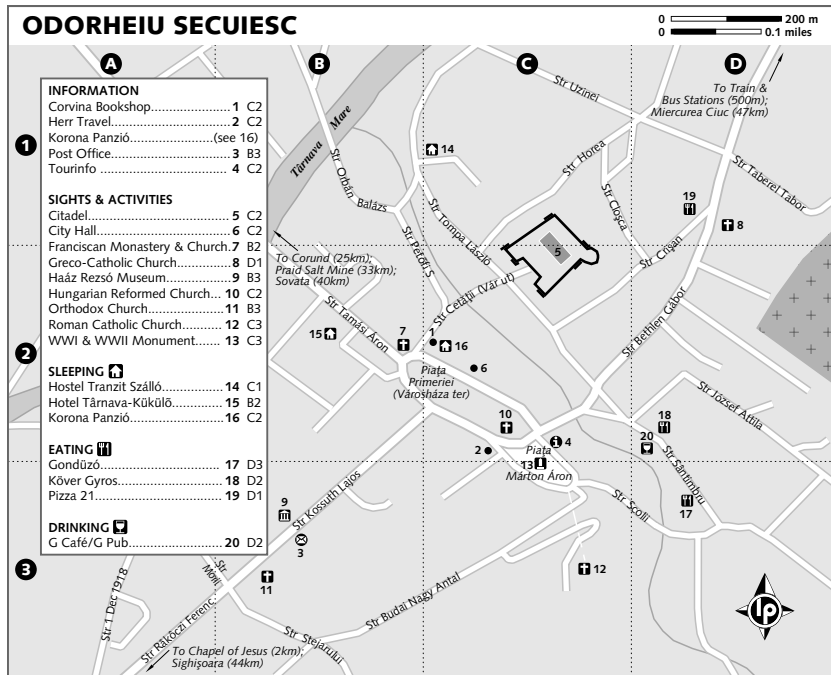
Odorheiu Secuiesc is more about being here, mingling with locals at a place like G Café than sightseeing. But there's enough to look at to occupy a good afternoon, or you can take up Herr Travel on one of their interesting walking tours.

At the western end of the main square, Piaţa Primeriei, stands the **Franciscan Monastery & Church** (Szent Ferencrdi Templom és Kolostor; ☎ 213 016; Piaţa Primeriei 15; 🕒 10am-6pm Tue-Sun), built from 1712 to 1779. Walk east past the impressive **city hall** (1895-96) to the 18th-century baroque **Hungarian Reformed Church** (Református Templom).

Behind the Hungarian Reformed Church is Piaţa Márton Áron. Just below the steps leading to the town's first **Roman Catholic church** (Római Katolikus Plébániatemplom; built 1787-91) is a statue of the square's name-sake bishop, who received a life sentence for promoting Hungarian rights during the communist era. At the head of the park is a **WWI & WWII Monument**.

Odorheiu Secuiesc's medieval **citadel** (*vár*), built between 1492 and 1516, is almost fully intact today, and houses an agricultural college. Visitors can freely stroll the grounds around its inner walls.

South of the main square is the **Haáz Rezsó Museum** (Str Kossuth Lajos 42), which was in the process of moving to this new location at research time. The museum explains the town's colourful history.



The town's best church lies 2km south of the centre on Str Bethlen Gábor. The small fortified **Chapel of Jesus** (Jézus kápolna; Str Bethlen Gábor) is one of the oldest architectural monuments in Transylvania, built during the 13th century. The chapel gained its name from Székely warriors who, during a Tartar invasion, cried to Jesus for help. It's usually locked, but you can ask for entry at house No 143 on the main road next door.

Sleeping

Herr Travel can arrange a room in university housing (pricey at €16 per person including meals).

Hostel Transzit Szálló (☎ 213 755, 217 798; www.top.net.ro/tranzit; Str Tompa László 36; s/d with shared bathroom €8.60/14.30, with private bathroom €11.50/20) This hostel has a kitchen and seven simple clean rooms.

Korona Panzió (☎ 218 061; www.koronapanzio.ro; Piața Primeriei 12/2; s/d €21/32; 📶) No doubt this is the best deal in town. The simple rustic style fits the country villa theme. The in-house restaurant serves up good dishes, and the bar is a popular hang-out for locals. There's free internet access in the morning (only for guests).

Hotel Tárnava-Kükülö (☎ 213 963; www.kukullo.ro; Piața Primeriei 16; r €52-57; 📶) This standard business hotel's restaurant and bar (with free wi-fi access) teems with local life. Rooms are nothing special – carpeted floors, all the usual fittings (satellite TV, mini bar, phone, work desk). There's a small fitness centre.

Eating & Drinking

There are some fast-food joints along Str Bethlen Gábor north of Piața Márton Áron.

Köver Gyros (Str Sântimbru; gyros €1.60-3; 📶 9am-11pm) This walk-away stand serves Odorheiu's juiciest, tastiest fast food.

Pizza 21 (Str Crișan; pizzas from €2.50 📶 10am-midnight) This cute pizzeria, a couple of blocks north of the centre, is Odorheiu's favourite.

Gondüzo (Str Sântimbru; mains €3.50-6; 📶 10am-midnight) For traditional Hungarian fare, this plainly formal spot offers a widely varied menu that delivers the goods, such as a roasted chicken breast with stewed fruit and rice. Selfless research methods attest to the delicious ice-cream-covered sponge cake, which should be shared. Vegetarians may have to stick with salads.

our pick G Café/G Pub (Str Sântimbru; 📶 7.30am-11pm Mon-Fri, 9am-midnight Sat & Sun) This two-part bar-club gets our bet for Transylvania's best bar. Up top the crowd is 30-something, with jazz or live music soundtracking beer and cocktail drinkers in a parlour-style room with old newsprint and photos on the walls. Downstairs it's a bit edgier – graffitied walls – and younger people (sometimes staying till 2am). It's OK to bring in a gyro from Köver across the street.

Getting There & Away

Transport into Odorheiu is a little limited. From the **bus station** (☎ 217 979; Str Târgului 10), 100m southwest of the train station, there is only one daily bus to Sighișoara (€2, 1½ hours), five to Sovata (€2.25, one hour), seven to Miercurea Ciuc (€2 to €3, one hour), four to Târgu Mureş (€3, two hours) and a few to Budapest (€35, 12 hours). A few Hungarian-bound bus companies include **Csavargó** (☎ 249 253) and **Scorpion Trans** (☎ 218 495).

The **Agentie de Voiaj CFR** (☎ 213 653; Str Bethlen Gábor 63; 📶 5.30-6.30am & 7.30am-2.30pm Mon-Fri) is at the train station. Only three daily trains clank out towards Sighișoara (1½ hours) – at research time they left at 6am, 2.30pm and 10.20pm.

Check with Herr Travel about renting a car.

ODORHEIU SECUIESC TO TÂRGU MUREŞ CORUND

Known for its green, brown and cobalt-blue pottery, the small village of Corund (Korund), 25km north of Odorheiu Secuiesc, is sometimes called the 'souvenir village'. Lines of open-air stands sell cowboy hats, sombreros, tablecloths and, of course, pottery.

Buses to Sovata go through here from Odorheiu Secuiesc.

PRaid

Some 8km further north on the road to Sovata, Praid is home to a **salt mine** (☎ 240 200; www.salinapraid.ro; Str Állomás 44; adult/child €2.90/1.90; 📶 7am-6pm summer, 9am-2.30pm winter), a bizarre underground world with sculpture, swing sets, slides, a café selling soda and beer, and internet access(!). Locals come for extended underground treatments for bronchitis and other respiratory illnesses at the base, 120m below the surface. A bus leads down dark tunnels – it's almost apocalyptic.

There's a saltwater outdoor **pool** a couple of hundred metres west of the entrance.

SOVATA

This leafy, slightly faded, but fun lake resort town, 40km north of Odorheiu Secuiesc and 60km east of Târgu Mureş, has attracted vacationers to its reputedly curative waters since the early 19th century. Its most popular lake is saltwater **Lacu Ursu** (Bear Lake; 📶 mid-Jun-Sep), so-named for its shape – and the actual bears berry-picking in the hills to the north. It's also about 45°C, and apparently Europe's biggest heliothermic lake. Many of the villas are 100 years old; some can be rented out by the week or longer.

Sovata Tourist Information Centre (☎ 265 577 421; www.sovatatravel.ro; 📶 9am-9pm Jun-Aug, to 5pm Tue-Sat Sep-May), 3km northeast of the crossroads and 750m from Lacu Ursu, helps find homes, hotels and *pensiunes*. It rents bikes for €6 per day. Profits support a local orphanage.

Past the lake as the road winds, **Teleki** (☎ 0265 577 625; www.tok.ro; Str Tandiflor 147; dm/d €5/32; 📶) is a simple green villa hotel with nice rooms and great staff; ask for 'royal' on the top floor for a balcony. Breakfast is €3 extra.

Hotel Eden (☎ 0265 570 505; www.holiday-sovata.ro; Str Cireșului 2; chalets from €16), off the road near Lacu Ursu, is a group of chalets and a lodge surrounded by forest.

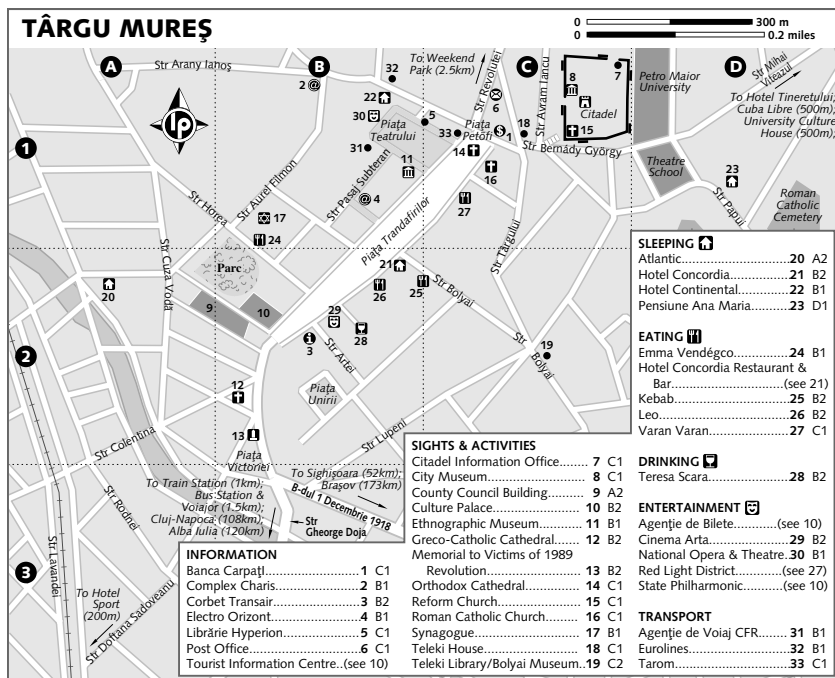
Five minibuses connect Sovata with Odorheiu Secuiesc (€2.25, one hour), and four with Sighișoara (about €3, 2½ hours).

TÂRGU MUREŞ

☎ 265 / pop 150,000

Lively if not jaw-dropping in beauty, Târgu Mureş – with its nearly even Hungarian and Romanian populations, as well as a sizeable Roma population – offers a different slice of Transylvania, past and present. Buildings in its centre sport a more colourful, even flamboyant, Habsburg spirit, with tiled rooftops of government buildings jutting over heroic statues and floral paint-jobs in well-maintained interior spaces. In July 2006 budget airline Wizz Air (www.wizzair.com) began service from Budapest, so more travellers are likely to treat this friendly central Transylvanian town as a hub. It's well worth poking about for a day.

Named literally for a 'market' on the Mureş River, Târgu Mureş (Marosvásárhely



in Hungarian, Neumarkt in German) was first documented as 'Novum Forum Sicolorum' in 1322. It developed as a leading garrison town and later as an important cultural and academic centre. In 1658 it was attacked by Turks, who captured 3000 inhabitants and transported them back to Istanbul as slave labour.

During the Ceaușescu regime, Târgu Mureş was a 'closed city', with all ethnic groups other than Romanians forbidden to settle here, in an effort to dilute the Hungarian community.

In 1990 Târgu Mureş was the scene of bloody clashes between Hungarian students, demonstrating for a Hungarian language faculty in their university, and Romanians who raided the local Hungarian political party offices. The Romanian mob attempted to gouge out the eyes of playwright András Sütő, who remains blind in one eye. The violence was apparently stirred up by the nationalist political group Vatra, which paid Romanian peasants from outlying villages to travel to Târgu Mureş, and armed them with pitchforks and axes. Officials later scapegoated local Roma in their investigation of the conflict.

Today Hungarian seems to be undergoing a renaissance in Târgu Mureş, with many local songs being in Hungarian only or in both languages. Carnival comes on the last weekend in June, when the city hosts its Târgu Mureş Days. Felsziget Festival (www.felsziget.ro) is a big five-day rock/DJ festival at the end of July.

Orientation

To make the 15-minute walk into town from the train station, exit the station and head straight to Str Gheorghe Doja, turn right and walk 1km straight up to Piața Victoriei, Unirii and Trandafirilor, the main thoroughfare where most hotels and travel agencies are. The citadel is just northeast of Piața Trandafirilor.

From the bus station, turn right along Str Gheorghe Doja and follow the street north 1.75km to Piața Trandafirilor.

MAPS

SunCart's 1:15,000 *Târgu Mureş* (€2.30) is a nice map of the city and region, but the freebie offered at the Tourist Information Centre is just as good for getting around town.

Information

BOOKSHOPS

Librărie Hyperion (Piața Teatrului; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat) Down steps on north side of square; carries Lonely Planet guides.

INTERNET ACCESS

Complex Charis (cnr Str Arany Ianoş & Str Aurel Filimon; per hr €0.60; ☎ 9am-9pm Mon-Fri, 3-9pm Sat, 6-9pm Sun) A Christian organisation with a slick reading room with computers to check email.

Electro Orizont (☎ 268 806; Piața Teatrului 12; per hr €0.45; ☎ 8am-10pm Mon-Fri, 9am-10pm Sat & Sun) Barebone internet spot off small alley south of square.

LEFT LUGGAGE

There's left luggage at the bus station and train station (per day €1 or €2, depending on size).

POST

Post Office (☎ 213 386; Str Revoluției 1; ☎ 7am-8pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1pm Sat)

MONEY

ATMs are easy to find in the centre, including at **Banca Carpați** (cnr Piața Trandafirilor & Str Mihai Viteazul; ☎ 8.30am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-12.30pm Sat).

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourism Information Centre (☎ 365 404 934; www.cjmures.ro/tourism; cnr Piața Trandafirilor & Str Enescu; ☎ 8am-8pm Tue-Thu, to 4pm Mon & Sat) Occupying the enviable corner spot of the Culture Palace, this superbly run centre offers free maps and information on the region. Its website lists lots of accommodation and getting-around info too.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Corbet Transair (☎ 268 975; www.corbet-transair.ro; 2nd fl, Piața Trandafirilor 33; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) This busy travel agency can arrange trips to Roma villages to hear live music, (expensive) car rental and a wealth of adventure trips around the area – though it sometimes is quick to suggest Sighișoara or Sibiu. The office is upstairs through first door to right in central courtyard.

Sights

PIAȚA TRANDAFIRILOR & AROUND

The lively, long central **Piața Trandafirilor** is filled with heroic statues, open-air cafés and restaurants, and plenty of stuff to see.

By far Târgu Mureş' top attraction dominates the square's southwestern corner, the **Culture Palace** (Palatul Culturii; ☎ 267 629; cnr Piața Trandafirilor & Str Enescu; adult/student €1.40/0.70; ☎ 9am-6pm Tue-Sun),

the city's beloved landmark. Built in 1911–13, the secessionist-style building is unlike anything you'll find around Transylvania. Inside its glittering, tiled, steeped roofs are ornate hallways, colourful walls, giant mirrors imported from Venice, and an often-used concert hall (with a dramatic 4463-pipe organ), not to mention several worthwhile museums (all included in the entry price). The best is the **Hall of Mirrors** (Sala Oglinzi), with 12 stained-glass windows lining a 45m hallway – a tape in various languages explains the Székely fairy tales each portrays. The **Art Museum** (2nd floor) houses many large late-19th- and early 20th-century paintings; the **Archaeological Museum** (1st floor) explains Dacian pieces found in the region (English subtitles).

Next door is the **County Council Building**, with a tiled roof and bright green spires. Its 60m watchtower *may* open for visitors, but presently the only glimpse of the building you can get is the grand, colourful entry with hand-painted ceilings and stained glass facing the grand staircase upstairs.

Close by on Piața Unirii, just past the Romanian Orthodox Greco-Catholic Cathedral, is a **Memorial to Victims of the 1989 Revolution**, made of five connected wood crosses in tribute to the eight locals killed here.

Heading halfway down Piața Trandafirilor, the side-street Str Bolyai leads east to the interesting **Teleki Library/Bolyai Museum** (☎ 261 857; Str Bolyai 17; admission by donation; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Fri, to 1pm Sat & Sun), a two-part museum that takes on two different angles to the city's past. More famous is Teleki Library, which includes 230,000 (and counting) rare books that stem from Samule Teleki's (Austrian chancellor to the city) donation to the city in 1802. Modest chickenwire encases simple displays. The adjoining Bolyai Museum is dedicated to Târgu Mureş sons Farkas and János, 19th century mathematicians and exellers in non-Euclidian geometry; if that's boring to you, father/son scalps and skull parts are displayed side by side.

At the northeastern end of Piața Trandafirilor are two very different churches. Dominating **Orthodox Cathedral** (1925–34) was designed to impress, with gold icons (as well as a politically charged mural of a 'Romanian peasant' Jesus being whipped by nobles in Hungarian costumes inside; look to the left and right after entering). Across the street is the airier, baroque-style **Roman Catholic church** (Biserica Sfântul Ionos), which dates from 1728.

On the square's western side, just past adjoining Piața Teatrul, is the simple **Ethnographic Museum** (☎ 250 169; Piața Trandafirilor 11; admission €0.30; ☎ 9am-4pm Tue-Fri, to 2pm Sat, to 1pm Sun), housed in the baroque Toldalagi Palace (1762). The collection of traditional fabrics, pots, looms and tools is dryly explained in English.

A block west is an ornate and well-preserved **synagogue** (Str Aurel Filmon 21) from 1900. Before WWII, 5500 Jews lived in Târgu Mureş; now only about 100 live here.

THE CITADEL & AROUND

A block northeast of Piața Trandafirilor, the huge citadel dates from 1492, but was rebuilt in 1602. The approach of huge stone walls and its seven towers is super, but it's less impressive inside. On its southern end, and accessed separately from the rest, is the Reform Church (1491), with the nicest grounds. Gates lead into the main area from either side, but it's easiest from the northeastern side. There are a couple of theatres as well as an army recruitment centre inside. The most appealing attraction, in the 1492 gate tower on the western wall, is a small **City Museum** (admission €0.30; ☎ 9am-4pm Tue-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat, 10am-1pm Sun), with pottery fragments and old decrees. There's a small **information office** (☎ 250 337; ☎ 8am-3 or 4pm Mon-Fri) near the northern gate; English-speaking staff can tell you if a concert or special exhibition is going on in the citadel.

Towards Piața Trandafirilor, on Piața Bernády György, is the yellow-painted, baroque **Teleki House** (built 1797-1803). Joseph Teleki served as governor of Transylvania between 1842 and 1848.

WEEKEND PARK

Târgu Mureş sure loves this **complex** (☎ 212 099, 214 080; cnr Str Luntraşilor & Aleea Carpați; admission per hr/day €0.25/1.50; ☎ 8am-midnight), 2.5km north of the centre. A bit scrappy, the complex is along a river-fed canal, with a couple of giant pools, a few kids' pools, beach volleyball area, and plenty of places for beer and meat. It's certainly where the action is on hot summer weekends. Take Str Revoluției north, then go left on Str Luntraşilor.

Sleeping

Târgu Mureş can surprise a late arrival with full hotels and guesthouses, particularly mid-week if conferences are on in town. If desperate, pick up a *Zile și Nopti* weekly, which

includes accommodation listings. Contact **Antrec** (☎ 269 343; mures@antrec.ro) for help finding *pensiunes* in the region.

BUDGET

Hotel Sport (☎ 231 913; Str Liviu Rebreanu 29a; r with shared/private bathroom €10/22) Crusty and a bit musty, this OK 44-room cheapie (five minutes north of the train station by foot) is for shoestringers only. No breakfast.

Weekend Park (☎ 212 099, 214 080; cnr Str Luntraşilor & Aleea Carpați; bungalows €12) You can rent bungalows here, or pitch a tent.

our pick **Pensiune Ana Maria** (☎ 264 401; Str Al Papui Ilarian 17; s/d/apt €26/29/37) With aqua-blue 'chalet' roofs over white bedframes, lacy green curtains on either side of raised platforms filled with tall plants, and framed prints of weird-looking women or unlikely mountains, the 8-room Pensiune Ana Maria is something like a home for Elvis Habsburg. The playful eight-room guesthouse mixes a bit of green Vegas garishness and Austrian tradition. 'Special breakfasts' are huge and superb; specially prepared dinners include homemade *țuică* liquor made at the owner's horse ranch outside town. The great staff can arrange laundry or help you pay parking tickets. Go past the citadel and turn right on Str Al Papui Ilarian.

MIDRANGE

Atlantic (☎ 268 381; www.atlanticotel.ro; Str Libertății 15; r €22 & €40; ☎) Gutsy tile choices clash a little with this 10-room *pensiune's* clean comfort and big space (in the €40 rooms), but there is a lovely garden gazebo and a very good restaurant.

Voiajor (☎ 250 250; www.voiajor.ro; Str Gheorghe Doja 143; s/d €29/34; ☎) It's connected to the bus station, 1.5km outside the centre, but this clean, aqua-and-gold 33-room hotel isn't a bad place for a night. Carpeted rooms come with cable TV, and staff are nice.

Casa Adria (☎ 250 544; www.casa-adria.ro; Str Verii 49; s/d €35/40; ☎) Up the hill 2km northeast of the centre, Casa Adria's 12 rooms provide a quieter base, with deck seats by a small pool and free wi-fi for the laptop crowd.

Hotel Continental (☎ 250 416; www.continental.ro; Piața Teatrului 6; s/d €56/74; ☎) This 111-room minichain hotel smacks of '80s socialism (eg the old wood panelling in clean rooms), but it's better spruced up than some of the old hotels in town.

TOP END

Hotel Concordia (☎ 260 602; Piața Trandafirilor 45; s/d €96/112; ☎) London chic meets Transylvania. This 34-room hotel, one of Romania's most surprising boutique hotels, offers stark, giant, stylish rooms with zebra-print chairs and framed fashion prints. Jet-setting Mureşianos hang in the ground-floor restaurant and bar (which projects key football games onto a blank wall). There's a fitness centre with Jacuzzi.

Eating

Kebab (☎ 268 510; Str Bolyai 10; dishes €0.75-1.50; ☎ 6.30am-10pm Mon-Sat) The name's simple, and the food's great and cheap, plus there's seating. Go in, pick out kebabs (€1.50, with freshly squeezed juice) or cafeteria-style salads or hot dishes (including a veggie option or two), then sit inside or under the orange canopy on the footpath.

Emma Vendégco (☎ 263 021; Str Horea 6; mains €1-3; ☎ 11am-11pm) This low-key Hungarian restaurant-bar brings in the locals for its €1.50 borschts and €2.75 four-course dinners. Best of all is the chicken with cucumber sauce and polenta.

Leo (☎ 214 999; Piața Trandafirilor 36-38; dishes €2-7; ☎ 24hr) Covered streetside seats fill first in this buzzing all-hours restaurant, popular for tasty grilled meats (a speciality is the lovely grilled pork with corn grits, fried eggs and garlic sauce), pizzas, big salads, beer or ice cream.

Hotel Concordia (☎ 260 602; Piața Trandafirilor 45) Those wanting to be seen stick with the street-side seats of the bar and restaurant here, where there are sandwiches (from €2) and business lunch specials (€4.25).

Varan Varan (Piața Trandafirilor; ☎ 7am-10pm Mon-Sat, 8am-6pm Sun) This is a central supermarket.

Drinking

Hotel Tinereului Café-Bar (☎ 217 441; Str Nicolae Grigorescu 17-19; ☎ 10am-10pm) Those collecting experiences should get a coffee or beer – and a free 1980s flashback – at this little, commie-era hotel café in the student quarter, 1km north of the citadel. (Rooms are stuffy and overpriced.)

Cuba Libre (Str Nicolae Grigorescu 17-19; ☎ 10pm-4am Thu-Sat) Next door to Hotel Tinereului, this basement club reels in the nearby students.

Teresa Scara (Piața Trandafirilor; ☎ 10am-10pm) Pretty much everyone who drinks beer (flirting uni students, middle-aged cowork-

ers) drops in at this open-air place for €0.80 beers.

Entertainment

The lovely **Culture Palace** (☎ 267 629; cnr Piața Trandafirilor & Str Enescu) houses a **children's library** (☎ 9am-8pm Mon-Fri) filled with fanciful decorations and displays. Here too is the **Agenție de Bilete** (☎ 212 522; ☎ 10am-1pm & 5-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat & Sun), which sells tickets for a wide variety of shows, including opera, high-school talent shows and the **State Philharmonic** (☎ 262 548, 261 420; tickets €1-3.50) concerts, which are held Thursday nights.

National Opera & Theatre (☎ 264 848; Piața Teatrului 1; www.orizont.net/teatru) Events at this very-1978 venue are in Hungarian and Romanian.

Cinema Arta (☎ 263 180; Piața Trandafirilor; tickets €1.25-2) Next to McDonald's, this cinema plays Hollywood films in the original language.

Red Light District (☎ 0740-038 555; Piața Trandafirilor 53; ☎ 10am-4pm Tue-Sun) Hosts rock and punk shows in its graceful two-room cellar.

Getting There & Away

Wizz Air (www.wizzair.com) started three weekly flights to/from Budapest in July 2006; flights cost around €17 one way. The airport is 14km west of town (on the road to Cluj-Napoca). **Tarom** (☎ 250 170; Piața Trandafirilor 6-8; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sat) sells tickets to Bucharest (flights three times weekly).

The **bus station** (☎ 221 451; Str Gheorghe Doja) sends daily bus and maxitaxi services, including hourly maxitaxis to Sighișoara (€2, 1½ hours), continuing on to Braşov (€5.25, four hours) and Bucharest (€10, seven hours). There are also five daily buses to Bistrița (€2.40, 2½ hours), three to Budapest (€57), five to Cluj-Napoca (€3.50 to €4, 2½ hours), two to Sibiu (€3.50, three hours), and frequent services to Sovata (€2, 1¼ hours).

The **Agenție de Voiaj CFR** (☎ 266 203; Piața Teatrului 1; ☎ 7.30am-7.30pm Mon-Fri) sells advance tickets. From Târgu Mureş there are two daily trains to Bucharest (€15.70, 8½ hours) and Sibiu (€4, 5½ hours), and one each to Budapest (€37, 7½ hours), Cluj-Napoca (€6.75, 2¼ hours), Iași (€12.30, 6½ hours) and Timișoara (€9.15, 6½ hours).

Getting Around

Central Târgu Mureş is small enough to cover by foot. Bus 18 (€0.45) goes from the stop at Piața Teatrul and Piața Trandafirilor to the

bus station; bus 5 goes to the train station. At research time no buses went to the airport; a taxi is about €6 or €7.

Eurolines (☎ 306 126; Str Călărășilor 38; ☎ 9am-8pm Mon-Fri, to 4pm Sat) rents Dacia Logans from €43 per day.

SOUTHWEST TRANSYLVANIA

The patch of Transylvania between the Retezat Mountains and Apuseni Mountains, west of the Cluj-Napoca-Sibiu highway, is one of the region's least chartered and ventured-to areas, where Dacian ruins, mountain-top citadels, and one of Eastern Europe's greatest 'Dracula-style' castles (in Hunedoara) await those willing to deal with scarce sources of information and an often dodgy hotel scene.

The history is undeniable. The pre-Roman Dacia kingdom lived in full force in the area until Romans conquered the capital Sarmizegetusa in AD 106. The union of Transylvania with Romania occurred in Alba Iulia. Twice. Once in 1599 and again after WWI.

Those willing to drive on back roads – such as the lovely hilly drive from Deva to Abrud – will get a break from often-industrial, highly trafficked roads, such as the sometimes unpleasant ride between Sibiu and Arad, or around Hunedoara's steel mills.

ALBA IULIA

☎ 258 / pop 66,400

Hugely important to Romanians – the nation announced the union of Transylvania with Romania here in 1599 and 1918 – and less so to foreigners, dusty Alba Iulia is a good stop-off if you're heading between Cluj-Napoca and Sibiu. Its Unification Museum, located in the citadel, is one of Romania's most interesting history museums. Otherwise, the town's rather modern, concrete-dominated sprawl and disappointing lodging options make it easy to pass.

Alba Iulia was known by the Dacians as Apulum, serving both as the capital of Upper Dacia and later, during Roman times, as the largest centre in the Dacian province of the Roman empire. From 1542 to 1690 Alba Iulia was the capital of the principality of Transylvania. Romania's national day (1 December) is a time of major celebrations in Alba Iulia.

Orientation

The sprawling citadel – filled with churches and administrative buildings – lies between the new town to the west, and lower town to the east, which resembles a building site. Most of the town's older buildings were bulldozed under Ceaușescu to make way for a civic centre that never happened.

Many locals stubbornly refer to streets by their old names. Some you may need to know about: Str Dr Ioan Ratiu used to be Str Avantului; Str Rubin Patița used to be Str Primăverii; Str Frederic Mistral used to be Str Parcului.

The adjacent bus and train stations are some 2km south of the citadel.

Information

INTERNET RESOURCES

Internet Domino (☎ 834 981; Str Dr Ioan Ratiu 2; per hr €0.60; ☎ 24hr)

LEFT LUGGAGE

Train station (per day €1.70; ☎ 24 hr)

MONEY

Banca Comercială Română (B-dul Regele Carol I, 35; ☎ 8.30am-6pm Mon-Fri, to 12.30pm Sat) Cashes travellers cheques and gives cash advances.

POST

Post office (B-dul Brătianu 1; ☎ 7am-8pm Mon-Fri)

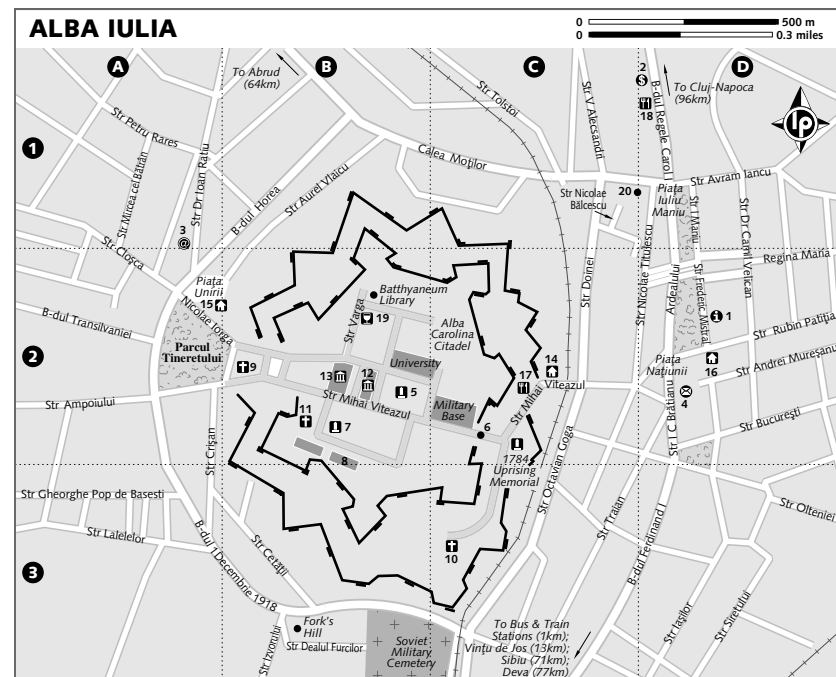
TRAVEL AGENCIES

Albena Tours (☎ 812 140; office@albenatours.ro; Str Frederic Mistral 2; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat) Central travel agent, more keen to get you out of Romania, but can help with regional tours.

Sights

The imposing **Alba Carolina Citadel**, richly carved with sculptures and reliefs in a baroque style, is the dominant sight of the city of Alba Iulia – and worth stopping to see for a couple of hours. It was originally constructed in the 13th century, although the fortress you see today was built between 1714 and 1738 to a design of Italian architect Giovanni Morandi Visconti. There are English and French information panels placed throughout the citadel, making it quite easy to delve into its history without a guide.

Str Mihai Viteazul runs up from the lower town to the **first gate** of the fortress, adorned with sculptures inspired by Greek mythology. From here, a stone road leads to the **third gate**



INFORMATION		Former Princely Court (Military Base).....	8 B3	Hotel Parc.....	16 D2
Albena Tours.....	1 D2	Orthodox Cathedral.....	9 B2	EATING	
Banca Comercială Română.....	2 D1	Orthodox Church.....	10 C3	Pub 13.....	17 C2
Internet Domino.....	3 A1	Roman Catholic Cathedral.....	11 B2	Ristorante Roberta.....	18 D1
Post Office.....	4 D2	Unification Hall.....	12 B2	DRINKING	
		Unification Museum.....	13 B2	Pas.....	19 B2
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES		SLEEPING		TRANSPORT	
Costozza Monument.....	5 B2	Flamingo.....	14 C2	Agenție de Voiaj CFR.....	20 C1
Entrance to Horea's Death Cell Site.....	6 C2	Hotel Cetate.....	15 A2		
Equestrian Statue of Mihai Viteazul.....	7 B2				

of the fortress, dominated by an equestrian statue of Carol VI of Austria. Above the gate is **Horea's death cell** (Celula lui Horea), where the leader of the great 1784 peasant uprising awaited his unpleasant end.

Just before you enter the third gate, a footpath leads 500m south to an out-of-sight **Orthodox church** (Biserica Memorială Sfânta Treime). The wooden church, brought to Alba Iulia in 1990 from Maramureș, stands on the site of a former Metropolitan cathedral built by Mihai Viteazul in 1597 and destroyed by the Habsburgs in 1713.

Inside the gates, about 200m west in a park, is the Soviet-style 22.5m **Costozza monument**,

which commemorates the soldiers and officers of the 50th infantry regiment of Alba Iulia who were killed while fighting in the Habsburg army against Italy in the battle of Costozza in 1866.

Just west is the **Unification Hall** (Sala Unirii; 1900), built as a military casino. In this hall the act of unification between Romania and Transylvania was signed during the Great Assembly of 1 December 1918.

Facing the hall from the south is a large **equestrian statue of Mihai Viteazul** (Michael the Brave), ruler of Romania from 1593 to 1601. On 1 November 1599 he visited Alba Iulia to celebrate the unification of Wallachia,

Moldavia and Transylvania – a union that crumbled after his assassination a year later. Behind the statue is the **Princely Court**, former residence of the princes of Transylvania, which was built in several stages from the 16th century onwards.

Immediately west is the 18th-century **Roman Catholic Cathedral**, built on the site of a Romanesque church destroyed during the Tartar invasion of 1241. Many famous Transylvanian princes are buried here.

Inside the former Babylon building (1851) just west of Unification Hall is the impressive **Unification Museum** (Muzeul Unirii; ☎ 813 300; adult/child €1.20/0.60; ☎ 10am–7pm Tue–Sun summer, to 5pm Tue–Sun winter). The commie years are all that gets missed in this look at Romanian history (it goes from pre-Roman history to 1944). Many Roman sculptures, votives and pillars found in the area are subtitled in English (one of the Jupiter statues lost his penis over the years). One hallway celebrates various heroes you may recognise from street names. Don't miss the section devoted to the peasant revolutionaries Cloșca, Crișan and Horea. The highlight is a replica of the wheel used to crush Cloșca and Horea to death in 1785 (Crișan sensibly killed himself in prison before he could be tortured to death). A plaque on the wall recounts the orders issued by the judge who determined their ghastly death:

...they are to be taken to the torture place and there killed by being tied to a wheel and squashed – first Cloșca, then Horea. After being killed their bodies are to be cut into four parts and the head and body impaled on the edge of different roads for everyone to see them. The internal organs – their hearts and intestines – will be buried in the place of torture...

Near the western entrance of the citadel, the highly impressive **Orthodox Cathedral** (originally known as the 'Church of the Coronation') was built on the old site of the citadel guardhouse in 1921–22 for the coronation of King Ferdinand I and Queen Marie in 1922. Their frescoed portraits remain intact on either side of the doors as you enter. Designed in the shape of a Greek circumscribed cross, the cathedral is surrounded by a wall of decorative colonnades that form a rectangular enclosure with peaceful gardens within. A

58m-tall bell tower marks the main entrance to the complex.

Sleeping

Flamingo (☎ 816 354; Str Mihai Viteazul 6; r with private toilet €29, s/d with shared toilet €8.60/17.40) This old villa has six rooms and a loud bar-restaurant, right next to the eastern entrance to the citadel. It's simple; upstairs rooms have shared bathroom, but are further from the ground-floor bar noise. No breakfast.

Hotel Parc (☎ 811 723; www.hotelparc.ro; Str Primăverii 4; s/d in 2 star wing €49/60, r in 4 star wing €77; ☎) Still rather flippantly run, the scrubbed-up '70s hotel in the centre is definitely Alba Iulia's smartest. 'Four star' rooms are bright, with lots of space, while 'two star' are fine. All rooms have balconies, plus there's an indoor pool and fitness centre.

Hotel Cetate (☎ 811 780; Piața Unirii 3; s/d €50/70) Thrown-down carpets and raised prices hardly make-over this 10-storey, 113-room, commie relic. It's up the hill, at the citadel's west entrance. Lots of groups.

Eating & Drinking

Ristorante Roberta (☎ 819 980; B-dul Regele Carol I; pizzas & pastas €1.50–5.50; ☎ 9am–midnight) On a busy commercial strip, Roberta churns out Alba's favourite meals, which break the usual Italian mould (eg tagliatelle with rabbit and cream sauce). There are two sitting areas – plant-filled brick-floors up front, a bit dowdy and formal out the back. Sometimes it takes time for fresh meals to be made. (Our pasta took 1½ hours!)

Pub 13 (3rd Gate, Citadel; mains €2.30–5.15; ☎ 10am–2am) Built into the citadel's eastern wall near the 'third gate', this cavernous restaurant-bar has world flags flying over a cool brick-walled space that's big on grilled meats and pizza.

Pas (Str Varga 4; ☎ 8am–midnight or so) Pas is a very artful little bar in the citadel (papier-mâché torsos come out of the walls) attracting an indie-rocker crowd. Good for coffee or beer.

There is a small market selling fresh fruit and vegetables, as well as dried and tinned products behind the Banc Priest building, next to the Agenție de Voiaj CFR office.

Getting There & Away

Direct bus and maxitaxi services from Alba Iulia's **bus station** (☎ 812 967) include six to Bucharest (€10), 14 daily to Cluj-Napoca (€4, two hours), five to Deva (€1.70, 1½ hours),

13 to Sibiu (€1.70, 1½ hours), three to Târgu Jiu (€4.30), three to Târgu Mureș (€3.90, 2¼ hours) and three to Timișoara (€3.60). Local buses 3 and 4 run from the stations to the citadel and centre.

The **Agenție de Voiaj CFR** (☎ 816 678; Calea Moților 1; ☎ 8am–4pm Mon–Fri) sells advance tickets. There are three daily trains to Bucharest (€9, 6½ to nine hours), Cluj-Napoca (€5, 2½ hours), Deva (€5, two hours), three to Timișoara (€10, five hours) and Sibiu (€5, 2½ hours). There are also a couple of daily trains to Prague (16 hours) and Vienna (12 hours).

DEVA

☎ 254 / pop 77,300

The area's key transport hub, Deva is a somewhat haggard mining town with a little spunk, much of it from the crumbling citadel looming above town. The historic citadel – nearly blown to bits in an 1849 explosion – is a popular haunt. Maybe it's the tug from the Hollywood-style Deva sign (which those copycats in Brașov seemed to like).

Romania's top gymnastics club, Cetate Liceul de Educație Fizică și Sport Deva, trains

young athletes for the elite Romanian Olympic team here.

Orientation & Information

The train and bus stations are five minutes' walk north of the centre at Piața Garii. It's easy enough to pop into town for a quick citadel look-around and a pizza, then get back on the road. The 'information' desk on the train station tracks keeps bags if you ask, with no set price.

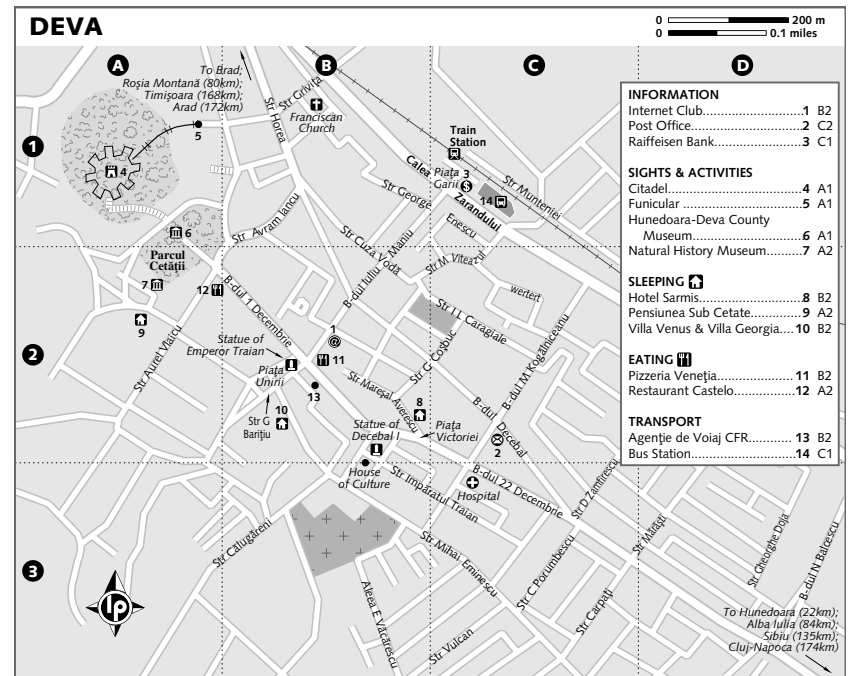
Internet Club (B-dul Iuliu Maniu; per hr €0.50; ☎ 24hr) Follow the sign behind the building.

Post Office (B-dul Decebal; ☎ 8am–8pm Mon–Fri, to 2pm Sat)

Raiffeisen Bank (B-dul Iuliu Maniu; ☎ 9am–6pm Mon–Fri) At train station.

Sights

Rising some 270m from town on a rocky hilltop, the 13th-century **Citadel** (admission free) crowns the mining town. A new **funicular** (☎ 220 288; return €1.45; ☎ 9am–9pm) saves visitors from the steep climb (which leads up behind Parcul Cetății at the west end of B-dul 1 Decembrie). At the top there are plenty of



stone walls to ponder, arched gateways to walk through, and windows to look out over 360-degree views of the surrounding hills.

Work started on the stone fortress in 1250. Legend says the wife of the mason was buried alive in the walls to ensure its safekeeping. In 1453 Iancu de Hunedoara expanded the fort, just in time to imprison Unitarian activist Dávid Ferenc (1510–79), who died here.

In 1784, during the peasant uprising led by Horea, Crişan and Cloşca, the fortress served as a refuge for terrified nobles fearful of being killed by militant peasants. In 1849 Hungarian nationalists attacked Austrian generals held up in the fort. The four-week siege ended with the mighty explosion of the castle's gunpowder deposits, which left the castle in ruins.

Down by the park are two museums. Closed for renovation at the time of research, the **Hunedoara-Deva County Museum** (Muzeul Judeţean Hunedoara-Deva) is housed in the 17th-century Magna Curia Palace. Hopefully they're expanding their already great exhibition on Deva and the surrounding area's citadels.

Nearby is the OK **Natural History Museum** (Muzeul Stiinţe ale Naturii; admission €0.35; ☎ 9am–5pm Tue–Sun).

Sleeping

Budget options are limited.

Pensiunea Sub Cetate (☎ 212 535; www.subcetate.ro; B-dul 1 Decembrie, 37b; s/d € 27/38; ☎) Family run, this excellent 10-room *pensiune* has a group

of rooms around a lovely patio and a garden that looks up to the Hollywood-style Deva sign. Best are the two front carpeted rooms with balconies. A couple come with a small kitchen. No English is spoken.

Hotel Sarmis (☎ 214 731; Str Mareşal Averescu 7; s/d €49.50/64.60) Vaguely shaped like a 1974 commie idea of an Aztec palace, this eight-floor, 113-room hotel is being renovated (at last). The best of the three stodgy hotels in the centre.

Villa Venus & Villa Georgia (☎ 212 243; www.villavenus.ro; Str Mihai Eminescu 16; r €55–75; ☎) Two neighbouring historic villas join to make Deva's nicest sleep. The six rooms mingle styles – chunky Art Deco beds or armoires in sprawling rooms with '70s-style carpets (new). One 'single' has a separate changing room and sitting area, each as big as Hotel Sarmis' double. A huge outside garden is filled with slides and play areas for kids. Next door's 'Villa Georgia' rooms are more modern – the apartment (€75) has a kitchen.

Eating

Restaurant Castelo (cnr B-dul 1 Decembrie & Str Avram Iancu; mains €2.25–4; ☎ 9am–midnight) Occupying a nice spot on the foot of the hill, locals cram in here for the €2.60 lunch specials, seating themselves on shaded bench seats out on the footpath.

Pizzeria Veneţia (B-dul Luliu Maniu; pizzas €2.60–3.25; ☎ 9am–11pm) The Veneţia is a vaguely modern pizza spot in the centre, with orange walls and brick walls, plus outdoor seats.

DISAPPEARING MOUNTAIN

About 80km from Alba Iulia or Deva, the **Roşia Montană** (or 'Red Mountain') has long drawn the less charitable instinct of foreigners, from Romans to Canadian suits. Known for its gold and silver, mines here date from Dacian times 2000 years ago. In recent years Canadian mining company Gabriel Resources launched a plan to create the continent's largest opencast mine, a 16-year-project that would begin extracting 2000 tons of gold and silver by 2009. Many locals, riddled with unemployment, have sold plots of land to the company and plan to create a new village 15km away.

Tension peaked in June 2006, when Vanessa Redgrave was awarded a lifetime achievement award at the Transylvania Film Festival and lashed out at the company, which cosponsored the festival. Hungary backed her up, by asking for mining not to continue, citing a 2000 mining disaster in Baia Mare that spilled cyanide into waters feeding Hungarian rivers. Many critics worry that the ecosystem will be crushed, a mountain lost and that culturally important sites – such as a 400m-long stretch of **old Roman galleries** (which were indeed locked up during our visit) – lost forever.

In the village, 10km north of Abrud, there's a rather neglected **open-air mining museum** (admission free) with old stamps used to crush ore in the 18th century, plus some Roman tablets.

It's just before the police station, off the main road; ask locals to point the way

Have a look before it's gone.

Getting There & Away

BUS

The **bus station** spills across the parking lot in front of the train station. Frequent buses and minibuses go to Oraştie (€1.15, 30 minutes) and Hunedoara (€0.75, 25 minutes). Other services include five to Cluj-Napoca, eight to Petroşani, four to Sibiu, two to Târgu Mureş and four to Timişoara.

Minibus 6 also does a circuit of Deva, running when full and costing €0.30 per journey.

TRAIN

Deva has many train links. Daily service includes a few direct trains to Bucharest (€10.70, 6½ to 7½ hours), three to Cluj-Napoca (€7.75, 3¼ hours), three with changes to Sibiu (€6.75, 3½ to 4½ hours) and a couple to Timişoara (€7.75, 3¼ hours), plus three daily trains to Budapest (6½ hours). Buy advance tickets at **Agentie de Voiaj CFR** (☎ 218 887; Block A, B-dul 1 Decembrie; ☎ 8am–8pm Mon–Fri).

HUNEDOARA

☎ 254 / pop 79,200

One of Romania's most communist-looking cities, with skeletons of steel mills surrounding a surprisingly welcoming Soviet-style city of housing blocks, is also home to one of Eastern Europe's loveliest medieval castles. Other than that, Hunedoara is all about bowling apparently – it hosted the 2002 Bowling World Cup.

The adjacent bus and train stations are a few hundred metres from Hotel Rusca; take Str Avram Iancu for 200m a couple of long blocks east, then head right (south) on L-shaped B-dul Dacia to where it bends back towards the west.

The castle shop sells a Hunedoara map for €0.60.

Sights

With a tweak in promotion, the 14th-century **Gothic Corvin Castle** (Castelul Corvinesilor; ☎ 711 423; adult/student €1.20/0.60; ☎ 9am–3pm Mon, to 6pm Tue–Sun May–Aug, to 3pm Mon, to 5pm Tue–Sun Sep–Apr) could trump Bran for Transylvania's premier (fake) 'Dracula castle' status. A drawbridge leads to three towering stone turrets over a rushing river. Inside you'll find iron gates, nooks into Gothic rooms, suspended walkways, and weapon displays of the glory days in the 14th and 15th centuries – it all seriously tugs an

imaginative chord in all but the most jaded castle-hating visitors.

The fantastical monument stands as a symbol of Hungarian rule (both János Hunyadi and his son Matthias Corvinus, two famous Hungarian kings, made notable improvements), which made it pretty unpopular with Ceauşescu.

The fairy-tale castle walls, believed to be built on old Roman fortifications, were hewn out of 30m of solid rock by Turkish prisoners. The fortress was extensively restored by Iancu de Hunedoara (János Hunyadi in Hungarian) from 1452 onwards. Eventually Jules Verne included the castle in his *Around the World in 80 Days* itinerary in 1873 (no steel factories then).

From the bus or train station, the castle is about 1.5km southwest. Take B-dul Republicii south, then turn right on B-dul Libertăţii towards the steel works; it's across the river from Piaţa Libertăţii via Str Bursan.

Don't miss the striking **communist murals** inside the train station.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Rusca (☎ 717 575; www.hotelrusca.ro; B-dul Dacia 10; s/d €40/55) Three decades on, the Rusca's spruce-up has scrubbed away the scars, making it more fresh than many commie-era make-overs. Rooms are nice and it's in the heart of B-dul Dacia action.

Scorpion (☎ 714 511; B-dul Dacia 4–5; mains €2.30–4; ☎ 10am–1am Tue–Sat, noon–1am Sun & Mon) About 200m north of Hotel Rusca, amidst housing blocks and tree-lined footpaths, the Scorpion is Hunedoara's best restaurant – with deliciously un-Romanian 'oriental chicken' with vegetables and rice, plus good pizzas.

Getting There & Away

The **bus station** (B-dul Republicii 3) sends maxitaxis every 15 minutes to Deva (€0.70, 30 to 40 minutes). There's a night bus to Bucharest (€17) and Timişoara.

The adjoining **train station** (☎ 719 238; B-dul Republicii 3) sees little action. About eight daily trains connect Hunedoara with Simeria (€0.50), where you can reach Braşov, Sibiu or Arad.

THE DACIAN & ROMAN CITADELS

Strewn across this area of Transylvania – from Oraştie to the foot of the Retezat Mountains – is an archaeologist's delight: Dacian and Roman ruins from fortresses recognised as Unesco

World Heritage sites, including the pre-Roman Dacian capital (Sarmizegetusa) and Roman-conquered Dacian capital (Ulpiu Traiana).

The area is very undeveloped for travelers, with few accommodation options and very few tourist services, including guides or information centres.

South of Orăștie

About a dozen kilometres south of the historic town Orăștie (on the Sibiu–Deva highway) are two nearby Dacian sites that are tough to reach without 4WD or hiking boots and time to kill. It's not easy to make much of either without a guide.

Easiest to reach is **Costești fortress**, built to defend the larger town Sarmizegetusa from its spot on the banks of the Orașului River. After the village Costești (10km south of Orăștie), when the paved road ends, veer right across the bridge; yellow-cross signs point to the fortress. It's a 40-minute walk, or you can drive on the rough dirt road.

Back where the paved road ends, a monster dirt road veers left into the wood, rambling 20km along the river to **Sarmizegetusa**, the Dacian capital from the 3rd century BC until the Romans conquered it in AD 106. The Dacian leader Burebista (r 70–44 BC) holed up here atop the 1200m hill from Romans after helping enemies of Caesar; both leaders were assassinated the same year (44 BC). Sarmizegetusa remained unconquered by the Romans until AD 106, when Roman forces led by Trajan forced the Dacians to retreat north. The Dacian city was divided into three parts – two civilian areas and the middle sacred zone, which contains the places of worship. Visitors are allowed to walk around the ruins. Our attempts to reach Sarmizegetusa through the muddy road by Dacia failed; the route is best tackled during the summer season, when it's clear of snow.

Orăștie itself is a pleasant little town, with a quiet central street a block south of the highway, with an **Orthodox Church**, an **Ethnographic & Art Museum** and heroic busts and murals of Dacian leaders Decebal and Burebista.

In Orăștie, **Mini Hotel Jorsa** (☎ 254 240 013; Str Bălcescu 30; s €14–21.50, d €26; 📺), halfway between the centre and the Deva–Sibiu highway, is a slightly run-down 13-room hotel that gets a little flair with potted plants, bright colours, a sauna and internet access. There are a couple of other options in town too.

Densuș & Around

About 13km west of the town Hațeg (43km southwest of Orăștie), and in full view of the Retezat Mountains, the **Densuș church** (admission free) is on Romania's top-10 list of fabulous historic treasures. A priest here will unlock the chapel.

The small stone church, built between the 11th and 12th centuries, stands on the ancient site of an edifice dating from the 4th century, which archaeologists believe to have been the mausoleum of Roman general Longinus (look for his name on the first pillar to the left inside). The church was constructed from stones taken from the Roman city of Ulpiu Traiana-Sarmizegetusa.

Archaeologists conclude that the church, believed to have been built as a court chapel, was built by a Romanian noble family, only falling under Hungarian rule from the 14th century onwards. There are fragments of a 15th-century fresco inside the church, and Roman-era pieces outside.

To reach Densuș, head west of Hațeg, turning north at Totești. All roads are paved.

One of the better places to stay in the area is the **Art Motel** (☎ 254 772 344; B-dul Vladimirescu 15; s €23 d €29 & €37; 📺) in Hațeg. This stylish make-over of a ugly building next to the central square is an excellent bet, with eight small rooms decorated with 1920s B&W prints of town.

Contact the local **Antrec representative** (☎ 254 770 796; hunedoara@antrec.ro) for *penziunes* in the area.

Ulpiu Traiana (Sarmizegetusa)

Following the Romans' defeat of Decebal's forces in AD 106, they built up a spectacular array of towns, and set their capital of conquered Dacia in Ulpiu Traiana, some 15km southwest of Densuș on the main Caransebeș road. To confuse things, the name of the former Dacian capital was added to the Roman city's name. It was now known as Ulpiu Traiana-Sarmizegetusa or plain old Sarmizegetusa.

Only 2% of the city, which was home to 30,000 in its heyday, has been excavated. Just off the highway, you can see bits of walls and some pillars in the city that may have covered an area of 60 hectares.

During the early 14th century, the stones of the Sarmizegetusa ruins were used by local villagers to build churches and it was not until the 19th century that the dismantled ruins fell under the protection of the Deva

Archaeological Society and later the National Museum of Transylvania. Remains of the Roman Forum, complete with 10m-tall marble columns, have already been uncovered; they're just south of the highway, past the main site.

Many tools, ceramics, ivory combs and other Roman treasures yielded from Sarmizegetusa are exhibited in the **museum** (☎ 254 776 418; adult/student €0.60/0.35; 🕒 9am–8pm summer, to 5pm winter), across the highway 150m west of the site.

Dani Delinescu chips in as an unofficial **tourist information service** (☎ 0747-038 145) for the town of 700. She can help find a room or a guide.

In summer archaeologists from Cluj-Napoca's **National History Museum of Transylvania** (p189) arrange digs around the area; contact them to see about volunteering opportunities.

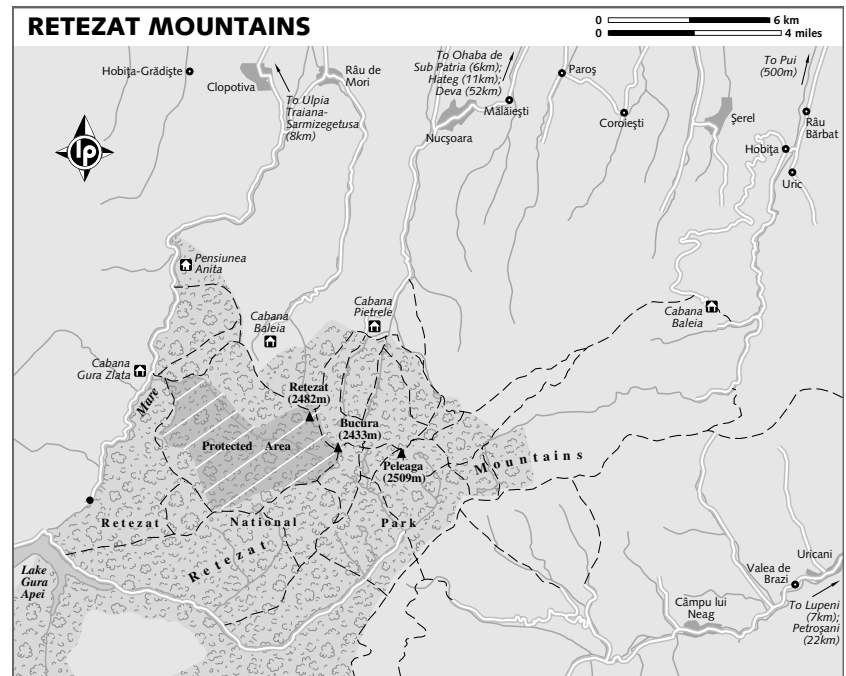
Pensiunea Sarmis (☎ 254 776 572; www.pensiunea.sarmis.webpro.ro; Ulpiu Traiana 82; r €20–23) is a modern *penziune* on a side road, southwest of the ruins. For something cheaper, the far more basic **Ulpiu Traiana** (☎ 254 776 453; r per person €13) is nearby.

One lone bus goes between here and Deva in the early morning.

RETEZAT MOUNTAINS

Part of the Southern Carpathians, these glacially bent mountains gain their name ('Retezat' is Romanian for 'cut off') from the flat-topped pyramid shape of these peaks. Most of the stunning territory is covered by the **Retezat National Park** (www.retezat.ro), Romania's oldest (established in 1935). Covering 38,138 hectares (including some 80 glacial lakes), the area is considered a Unesco Biosphere Reserve. Carnivores large and small (especially the cute marmot) roam the region, as do black deer and chamois. The region is among Europe's last remaining largely untouched stretch of wilderness and provides unforgettable hiking experiences among its valleys, peaks, rivers and gorges.

East of the Retezat Mountains lies the Jiu Valley, Romania's largest mining region, centred on the towns of Petroșani, Petrița and Câmpii lui Neag in the northern end of the valley. Petroșani makes a potential base.



From Petroșani you can head 57km south down the Jiu Valley to Târgu Jiu (p107). The southbound road running parallel to this road to the east is said to be the highest road in Romania, peaking at 2142m. It is only possible to cross the mountains along this road by 4WD vehicles.

From Târgu Jiu there are a few daily trains to Petroșani (1¼ to 1¾ hours). From Hunedoara and Deva, change at Simeria.

You can camp at designated tent sites for about €3 per person; cabanas cost about €6 to €10 per person.

Activities

Hiking is excellent here. The two main bases are Cabana Gura Zlata and Cabana Pietrele.

From Cabana Gura Zlata (the most popular cabin in the area), which is reached by paved road south of Cârnești, there are oodles of well-marked hikes. Another 12km south of the cabin is **Lacu Gura Apei**, a glacial lake you can stick your feet in (it's cold). It's possible to hike here from Ulpia Traiana (Sarmizegetusa), northwest of the mountains, by taking the red-cross trail 20km (about seven hours).

Cabana Gura Zlata (☎ 0744-648 599; www.turismtur.ro; d €10) is a two-storey villa, with campsites 200m north (in a patch of woods across the river). Staff know some English, and cook up breakfast for €2 (plus other meals). A few kilometres on there is a home on the stream that can be rented out called **Pensiunea Anita** (☎ 0744-524 871).

Another good base is south of Nucșoara. Hikers can catch a local train from Simeria (36km), Petroșani (44km) or Târgu Jiu (94km) to Ohaba de Sub Patria, then follow the trail south, through Nucșoara, to **Cabana Pietrele** (six to seven hours, blue stripes). This can also be reached by car.

A trail between the two cabins takes eight to 10 hours. A popular hike is up **Mt Retezat** (2482m), which is roughly halfway between the two cabanas (a very full day trip). Another popular hike is the five-hour hike up **Mt Peleaga** (2509m) from Cabana Pietrele.

Other access points to the mountains are to the northeast and east of the mountains. From Ohaba de Sub Patria (9km), take a local train to Pui train station, from where you can hike 3km south along a paved road to Hobița. From Hobița a trail leads to **Cabana Baleia** (4½ hours, blue triangles).

A starting point from the east is Petroșani. Daily buses run to Câmpu lui Neag, 28km west of Petroșani. There is a cabana in Câmpu lui Neag. From here a 3½- to four-hour trail leads to Cabana Buta in the southeastern Retezat.

NORTHERN TRANSYLVANIA

Stretching north towards Maramureș, Transylvania's treats don't stop. Cluj-Napoca is a hopping student town many visitors rank as tops in Transylvania, and is a popular gateway to the caves and hikes of the Apuseni Mountains just southwest. Further north, the Bârgău Valley served as the perfect setting for Bram Stoker's *Dracula*.

During WWII, northern Transylvania fell under pro-Nazi Hungarian rule. Under the Diktat of Vienna of 30 August 1940, the Axis powers, Germany and Italy, forced Romania to cede 43,493 sq km and a population of 2.6 million to Hungary. During the four years of occupation, thousands of Romanians were imprisoned and tortured while entire villages were massacred. Northern Transylvania was not recovered until 25 October 1944 when, following the liberation of Satu Mare, the territory fell back into Romanian hands.

CLUJ-NAPOCA

☎ 264 / pop 318,030

Just one letter away from 'club,' Cluj isn't quite as pretty or mountainous as the Saxon towns to the south, but it earns much of its nationwide fame for the dozens of cavernous, unsnooty subterranean discos that blare and bounce with many of the city's thousands of university students. Outside the clubs, though, it's one of Romania's most welcoming and energised cities – a 'real' city where there's everything going on (football, opera, espresso, heated politics, trams), regardless of who visits or not. Its attractions don't hit you over the head like *Dracula*'s 'birthplaces' do, but if you look closer Cluj's are some of Transylvania's most arresting.

It's also a great base for renting a car – it's cheaper here than in Brașov – and has several good travel agencies, so it serves as a common shooting-off point for the Apuseni Mountains and the further-flung Maramureș.

History

Cut in two by the Someșul Mic River, Cluj-Napoca has long made it a crossroads, which explains its present role as an educational and industrial centre. Known as Klausenburg to the Germans and Kolozsvár to the Hungarians (ethnic Hungarians make up 20% of the population), Cluj has added the old Roman name of Napoca to its official title, in order to emphasise its Daco-Roman origin.

The history of Cluj-Napoca goes back to Dacian times. In AD 124, during the reign of Emperor Hadrian, Napoca attained municipal status and Emperor Marcus Aurelius elevated it to a colony between AD 161 and 180. German merchants arrived in the 12th century and, after the Tartar invasion of 1241, the medieval earthen walls of 'Castrenses de Clus' were rebuilt in stone. From 1791 to 1848 and after the union with Hungary in 1867, Cluj-Napoca served as the capital of Transylvania.

Orientation

Central Cluj can be seen by foot. The train station is 1km north of the town centre, where many of the sites and hotels are within walking distance of one another.

Bookstores around the centre carry a few Cluj maps. Good for the city is MicroMapper's 1:18,000 *Cluj-Napoca* (€1.60) or Cartographia's 1:12,000 *Cluj-Napoca* (€2.90), while SunCart's ad-filled 1:15,000 *Cluj-Napoca/Cluj County* (€2.90) and Amoco's *Cluj-Napoca/Cluj County* add to the area, including Turda and Huedin Microregion.

Information

Șapte Seri (www.sapteseri.ro), *Zile și Nopti* (www.zilesinopti.ro) and *24-Fun* are widely available, biweekly entertainment listings (in Romanian).

Check www.clujonline.com for some general information.

BOOKSHOPS

Gaudeamus (Map p188; ☎ 439 281; Str Luliu Mariu 3; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Fri, 11am-2pm Sat) Has some maps, lots of art books and mainly Hungarian titles.

Librăria Humanitas (Map p188; Str Napoca 7; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Fri, to 6pm Sat)

Universității (Map p188; Str Universității & Piața Unirii; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, 9am-4pm Sat) Maps and some Lonely Planet guidebooks.

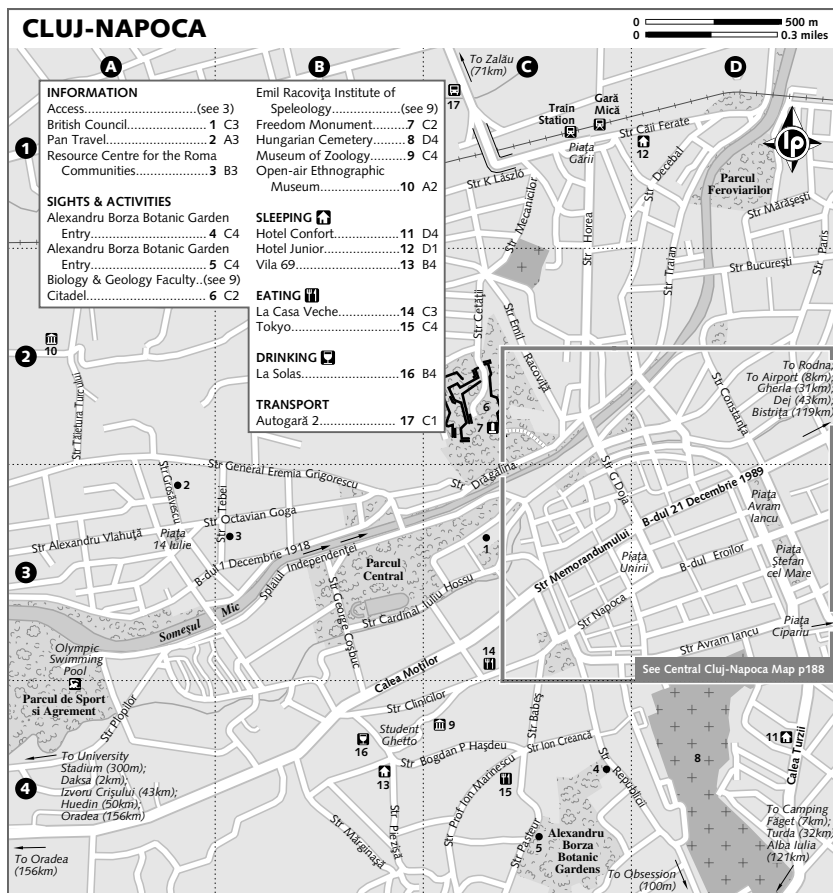
ROMANIAN/HUNGARIAN TENSION

A lot of locals shrug it off – 'it's just politicians, there's no trouble between people' – but there's no denying there's been some tension between ethnic Hungarians and Romanians in Transylvania before and after communism fell. (And we're likely to get a few letters for just bringing it up.)

In 1992 Cluj elected ultranationalist Gheorghe Funar as mayor, and he made no secret of his feelings towards Hungarians. While reports that he stripped the 'Hungarian' before Matthias Corvinus' names in Piața Unirii aren't true (it apparently happened in 1944!), Funar did stage a mock funeral ceremony when Romania signed a friendship treaty with Hungary in 1996. In 2002 he refused to recognise a new law legalising the use of native languages in weddings of minorities – a law prompted by a Cluj wedding in which a registrar walked out when ethnic Hungarians confirmed their vows in Hungarian (then Romanian).

Cluj voted Funar out of office in 2004, but there are various 'works' that arose during his time in office visible around town. Here are some examples:

- Blue, red and gold (ie the colours of the Romanian flag) rubbish bins, fire hydrants and poles facing Matthias Corvinus' statues.
- Piața Libertății has been renamed Piața Unirii (Union Square) to stress the Transylvanian union with Romania after WWI.
- Nearby at Corvinus' birthplace, a Hungarian-language plaque marks the site, while a rival one in Romanian and English calls the king 'Romanian' and dismisses the Hungarian claim as 'according to historical tradition'.
- Three blocks from Piața Unirii, an expensive statue of Avram Iancu (a Romanian who fought Hungary) is dramatically lit, while the nearby Corvinus statue remains mostly in the dark.



CULTURAL CENTRES & LIBRARIES

American Studies Library (Map p188; Str Ion Brătianu 22; ☎ 1-7pm Mon, 8.30am-3pm Tue-Fri) University library open for the public.

British Council (Map p186; ☎ 594 408; www.britishcouncil.ro; Str Arany Janos 11; ☎ centre 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, library 1-7pm Mon, Wed & Thu, 10am-4pm Tue & Fri) First-floor library has good stock of books, magazines and CDs, plus internet access. A year's membership is €18/12 per adult/student, a day pass is €1.80.

French Cultural Centre (Centre Culturel Français; Map p188; ☎ 597 595; www.cfcf.ro; Str Ion Brătianu 22; ☎ library 2-7pm Mon, 10am-7pm Tue-Fri, to 1pm Sat Sep-Jul) Well-stocked library; hosts art, music and film events.

German Cultural Centre (Deutsches Kulturzentrum; Map p188; ☎ 594 492; www.kulturzentrum.ubbcluj

.ro; 1st fl, Str Universităţii 7-9; ☎ library 10am-2pm Mon, Wed & Fri, 2-6pm Tue & Thu) Library with German periodicals; hosts cultural events and films.

Resource Centre for the Roma Communities (Map p186; ☎ 420 474; Str Tebei 21; ☎ office 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, library ☎ 3-8pm Mon & Wed, 10am-8pm Tue & Thu) Outgrowth of the Soros Open Foundation, with information and resources on minorities in Romania, especially the Roma.

United States Embassy Information Office (Map p188; ☎ 594 315; 1st fl, Str Universităţii 7-9; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri) Notary services and tax forms, plus a poster of Iraq's Most Wanted.

INTERNET ACCESS

Blade Net (Map p188; Str Iuliu Maniu 17; per hr €0.60; ☎ 7am-midnight)

Marghila Café (Map p188; Str Iuliu Maniu 1; per hr €0.40; ☎ 10am-midnight Mon-Sat, noon-midnight Sun) Adjoining Egyptian-style café with fast food.

Net Zone (Map p188; Piaţa Muzeului 5; per hr €0.30-0.45; ☎ 24hr 'approximately')

LANGUAGE COURSES

Access (☎ 420 476; www.access.ro; 3rd fl, Str Tebei 21; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon & Thu, 2-8pm Tue & Wed, 2-6pm Fri) Offers Romanian-language courses.

LAUNDRY

Perado Laundry (Map p188; Str Calera Turzeii 13; per load €4.20; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Sat) The ever-valuable, ever-rare wash-dry-and-fold service.

LEFT LUGGAGE

Plan ahead: the train station had no official left luggage service at research time.

MEDICAL SERVICES

For a well-stocked and central pharmacy, try **Clematis** (Map p188; Piaţa Unirii 11; ☎ 8am-10pm).

MONEY

Steer well clear of the leather-clad money-changing toughies on the streets. The city is full of ATMs and legitimate exchange offices. The **Banca Comercială Română** (Map p188; Str Gheorghe Bariţiu 10-12; ☎ 8.30am-6pm Mon-Fri, to 12.30pm Sat) gives cash advances and changes travellers cheques.

POST & TELEPHONE

Central post office (Map p188; Str Regele Ferdinand 33; ☎ 7am-8pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1pm Sat) The main **telephone centre** (☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat) is in the building attached to the back, facing Caragiale Park.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

The municipality has long delayed its promises to open a tourist information centre; Cluj surely could benefit from one. Retro Hotel (p191) organises enjoyable, good-value trips. Also see p190 for other associations that can help plan trips.

Pan Travel (Map p186; ☎ 420 516; www.pantravel.ro; Str Grozavescu 13; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri), a top-notch outfit led by the engaging Andrei, can book accommodation, provide English- or French-speaking guides (€15 to €30 per day) and car rentals (from €30 per day), and arrange trips to the Apuseni or around Maramureş. It's best to contact them ahead, via website or telephone. The trips themselves are authoritative and unstaged – a more 'knock on door'

approach than a pre-planned artificial event. Bus 30 goes from near Piaţa Unirii.

Transylvania Ecological Club (Clubul Ecologic Transilvania; ☎ 431 626; www.greenagenda.org, www.cdcluj.ro), one of Romania's most active grass-roots environmental groups, operating since the mid '90s, focuses on promoting ecotourism in the Huedin region and Apuseni mountains as an alternative to the booming timber industry. It can provide trail maps and find guides. It often works in collaboration with Green Mountain Holidays (p190). At research time, it was looking for a new location.

Sights

PIAŢA UNIRII

The vast 14th-century **St Michael's Church** (Map p188) dominates Piaţa Unirii. The neo-Gothic tower (1859) topping the Gothic hall church creates a great landmark and the church (built in four stages) is considered to be one of the finest examples of Gothic architecture in Romania. The three naves and vestry were the last to be completed at the end of the 16th century. The choir vaults, built in the 14th century, were rebuilt in the 18th century, following a fire. Daily services are in Hungarian and Romanian, and evening organ concerts are often held.

Flanking the church to the south is the bulky 1902 equestrian **statue of Matthias Corvinus** (Map p188) – the famous Hungarian king and son of Iancu de Hunedoara (János Hunyadi). It served as a focal point of nationalist mayor Funar's efforts to undermine Cluj's links with Hungary. See p185.

On the eastern side of the square is the **National Art Museum** (Map p188; ☎ 496 952; Piaţa Unirii 30; adult/child €1.30/0.65; ☎ noon-7pm Wed-Sun Jun-Oct, 11am-6pm Wed-Sun Nov-May), housed inside the baroque Banffy Palace (1791). The couple of dozen rooms are filled with paintings and artefacts, including a 16th-century church altar and many 20th-century paintings. The inner courtyard (free entry) sometimes stages outdoor shows, as do the ground floor halls.

Here's why we travel – for superb, fully rewarding, ever-surprising quirks such as this, the small three-room **Pharmaceutical Museum** (Map p188; ☎ 597 567; Str Regele Ferdinand 1; adult/child €0.60/0.30; ☎ 10am-4pm Mon-Sat). It's housed in Cluj's first – and Romania's fourth – apothecary (1573), as a bronze-plate map painstakingly attests. Tours are led by a hilarious pharmacist in a white lab coat, who points like a game-show model towards (seemingly

Head back down the hill then bear north along Str Horea to the **Synagogue of Deportees** (Map p188; Str Horea 23). This grand Moorish-style building is just one of three remaining synagogues in Cluj-Napoca. This was built in 1987 in memory of the 16,700 Jews who were deported to Auschwitz from Cluj-Napoca in 1944.

SOUTH OF PIAȚA UNIRII

The **Babeş-Bolyai University** (Map p188; ☎ 405 300; www.ubbcluj.ro; Str Mihai Kogălniceanu 1b), home to some 43,000 students, is the largest university in Romania (after Bucharest). Founded in 1872, Hungarian was the predominant language here until 1918. Internationally, it's famed for being the home of the world's only university institute of speleology (the study of caves). It's a lovely building, with its gold-brick centre courtyard, which you can peek into rather freely.

A couple of blocks east, on Str Mihail Kogălniceanu, is a **Hungarian Reformed Church** (Map p188) built by the king of Hungary, Matthias Corvinus, in 1486. The statue of St George slaying the dragon in front of the church is a replica of the 14th-century original, carved by the Hungarian Kolozsvári brothers; the original is now displayed in Prague. Organ concerts are sometimes held in the church.

Further east is the sprawling Piața Ștefan cel Mare, lined with wall fragments of the original citadel. At the wall's south end is the smaller Piața Baba Novac on which there's a **statue of Baba Novac** (1975; Map p188) in front of the **Tailors' Bastion** (Map p188; Bastion Croitorilor). There's no entry, but you can peek inside. The bastion, dating from the 1550s, is the only one that remains from the medieval fortified city. The square on which it stands is named after one of Mihai Viteazul's generals, who was executed by Hungarian nobles here in the 17th century.

STUDENT GHETTO

The student ghetto, southwest of the centre, is inside the triangle formed by Calea Moșilor, Str Mărginașă and Str Pasteur and is full of open-air bars, internet cafés, fast-food shops – and students. It has a completely different look (a lot of young people in lab coats) than elsewhere around the city, and is surrounded by the east and south, with some fine historic homes.

From the centre, walk west along Str Clinicilor, to where it branches left through a brick gate into the wooded **Biology and Geology Faculty**, where you'll find (100m up on the left, past the cocky statue of Emil Racovița) the surprisingly rewarding **Museum of Zoology** (Map p186; ☎ 595 739; Str Clinicilor 5-7; adult/student €0.45/0.23; ☎ 9am-3pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat & Sun), an L-shaped lab that looks like it hasn't changed since biologist Racovița donned his final lab coat here. Bird noise penetrates the huge windows, bringing some life to the silence (and death) of hundreds and hundreds of jarred and stuffed specimens, while invertebrates and fish sit vertically in filled tubes. We particularly like the display of a vulture feasting on dead rabbit. Oh, and someone needs to put an eye-patch on one of the boars.

West through the campus housing, head past fast-food joints up Str Bogdan P Hașdeu to Str Pasteur to reach the fragrant 1930 **Alexandru Borza Botanic Gardens** (Map p186; ☎ 592 152; Str Republicii 42; adult/student €1.20/0.60; ☎ 9am-6pm), which covers 15 hectares, with shaded green lawns, a super Japanese garden and rose garden with some 600 different varieties, and an observation tower.

Just east of here, most easily reached from Str Avram Iancu down the hill, is an immense, highly memorable **Hungarian cemetery** (Map p186; Házsongárdi temető in Hungarian), where dozens of revered Hungarian notables are buried.

Activities

Cluj-Napoca is a popular centre for mountain biking and caving enthusiasts, with the Apuseni Mountains to the southwest offering a wealth of caves and trails. The northern access points are covered on p198, the southern on p226.

Clubul de Gidoturism Napoca (☎ 450 013; office@ccn.ro) is a group of outdoors-lovers who don't organise trips, but can help with all your two-wheeler questions. At research time, they were looking for a new office.

Green Mountain Holidays (☎ 418 691, 0744-637 227; www.greenmountainholidays.ro) is a terrific ecotourist organisation, recommended for an environmentally-friendly, activity-filled week or two. Check its website for caving, hiking and biking tours – such as the 13-day hike around the Apuseni Mountains, with guides, transport, meals and accommodation for €550, or an 11-day cycling trip for €600.

Daksa (☎ 0740-053 550; www.daksa.ro) is an experienced group offering horseriding excursions outside Cluj for €80 or €90 per person per day, including transport, accommodation, food and guides. Trips last three to seven days. Carriage rides are also available.

Festivals & Events

Cluj's biggest event is the **Transylvania International Film Festival** (www.tiff.ro), held in June. In 2006, the festival drew 40,000 visitors to see some 105 films from 25 countries. There is also a **Septemberfest**, a **Folk Crafts Fair** in May, a **music festival** in September/October, and the nationwide **Festivum Wine Festival** all May.

Sleeping

Cluj-Napoca's accommodation is generally more expensive than the rest of Romania, and you're likely to pay more for less, unless you're staying at a hostel. Pan Travel (p187) can help. The Cluj **Antecrepresentative** (☎ 406 363; cluj@antec.ro) can help find a *pensiuine* in the region.

BUDGET

Camping Făget (☎ 596 234; tent space/2-person hut €2.20/15) This hilltop collection of OK cabins and tent spots in the trees is 7km south of the centre. Take bus 35 from Piața Mihai Viteazul south down Calea Turzii to the end of the line. From here it is a marked 2km hike.

Retro Hostel (Map p188; ☎ 450 452; www.retro.ro; Str Potaișsa 13; dm/r per person €11/14; ☎) On a quiet lane amidst 16th-century citadel wall fragments, the happy, superbly run Retro is one of Romania's best hostels. Two colourful dorm rooms upstairs have gold walls, moonlight windows and sunshiny bedspreads. Things are a little tight (only a couple of bathrooms, and one private room is accessible through the other room). When things are full, it opens its second location nearby – there are 48 beds in all. At research time, the Retro was planning to open four more private rooms. Staff offers good-value day trips and sells area maps. Half an hour of internet access is free, while breakfast is €2.50.

Piccola Italia (Map p188; ☎ 536 110; www.piccolaitalia.ro; Str Racovița 20; s/d €22/25) On a rising strip of private villas, this two-building, nine-room complex isn't in the centre, but in many ways it's Cluj's best-deal guesthouse. Rooms are

basic but comfortable; breakfast is served on the vine-covered deck.

Hotel Junior (Map p186; ☎ 432 028; www.pensiune-junior.ro; Str Cări Ferate 12; s/d €23/28) In a hot-pink building, with simple rooms, on a dusty, unappealing street just down from the trains, this place has no breakfast.

MIDRANGE

Vila 69 (Map p186; ☎ 591 592; vila69@email.ro; Str Hașdeu 69; s/d €29/38; ☎) Seventeen rather plain, modern rooms make up this happy little place – with restaurant and club. It's right off the main strip of the student ghetto.

Hotel Meteor (Map p188; ☎ 591 060; receptie@hotelmeteor.ro; B-dul Eroilor 29; s €35, d €40 & €44) This is a lightly faded modern hotel – some rooms are quite small, but the staff is nice and there's laundry service, plus the breakfast buffet at the next-door restaurant is a bonus. Some windows overlook the alley tables, and noise lingers on summer nights.

Hotel Comfort (Map p186; ☎ 598 410; www.hotelcomfort.ro; Calea Turzii 48; s/d €39/52; ☎) This quite colourful place with shiny tile floors and rather basic modern furnishings is done up in pastel. Six of the 35 rooms have wall-of-glass windows and air-con. Back rooms catch bird calls, not engine burps, from the busy street. The website easily takes honours for Most Overly Dramatic Website in the Fairly Cheap Guesthouse category. It's a 10-minute walk from the centre.

Fullton (Map p188; ☎ 597 898; www.fullton.ro; Str Sextil Pușcariu 10; s €40-60, d €45-65; ☎) The closest to boutique style in Cluj, this back-street central inn has earth-toned walls, wrought-iron bedframes and a nice covered patio bar – in all, the most comfortable accommodation on offer. More expensive rooms have writing desks and extra space. Some rooms have air-con. Plug-in internet's free.

Villa Siesta (Map p188; ☎ 595 582; www.villa-siesta.ro; Str Gheorghe Șincai 6; s/d €47/57; ☎) Though here since the 1930s, it's hard to see the history of this 12-room villa beyond its 1980s décor. For the price, it's a bit frayed (old blue-chequered carpets, nicks on the floral wallpaper).

TOP END

Hotel Victoria (Map p188; ☎ 597 963; www.hotel-victoria.ro; B-dul 21 Decembrie 1989, 54-56; s/d €55/66) This 1986 hotel aims for modern fussiness, with fluffy, sparkling-gold fabrics. All's new; rooms have

mini step-out balconies to watch the boulevard buzz by.

Hotel Agape (Map p188; ☎ 406 523; www.hotel.agape.ro; Str Iuliu Maniu 6; s/d €59/70; ☎ ☑) Run by Hungarian locals, this 40-room hotel is quite a complex – six restaurants and a great self-service cafeteria with a skylight. Opt for a double, which sprawls with blonde wood floors and beige throw rugs, plus two leather chairs.

Eating

RESTAURANTS

Agape (Map p188; Str Iuliu Maniu 6; dishes €0.80-1.50; ☎ 11am-9pm Mon-Fri) This cafeteria-style restaurant, the best of the hotel's six, is more stylish than you'd expect and serves quick, tasty, Hungarian-style meals on the cheap.

Tokyo (Map p186; ☎ 598 662; Str Marinescu 5; sushi & rolls from €2.80; ☎ 11am-midnight) If you've been in Romania for a while, you'll want to come to this non-Romanian, non-Italian eatery. It's hard to miss, with its red Shinto gate façade west of the Botanical Gardens. Japanese pop on the stereo is a refreshing touch, as is the pretty good sushi, warm hand towels and imported green tea. Lunch specials start at €4.30.

La Casa Veche (Map p186; ☎ 450 583; Str Clinicilor 14; mains €4-8; ☎ 11am-11pm Mon-Sat, to 10pm Sun) This lovely three-room place serves Romanian fare and it feels like stepping back a stack of centuries. It has silver platters and rustic wooden floors inside, and outside seats on a brick courtyard face the nice backyard. It's best for steaks, but – this is Romania – there are a few pasta choices.

our pick Roata (Map p188; ☎ 592 022; Str Alexandru Ciura 6a; mains €4.25-8.50; ☎ noon-midnight Tue-Sat, 1pm-midnight Sun & Mon) Housed in a back-alley building, with tasty traditional Romanian dishes served in clay plates, this joint is best for sitting on the small terrace and vying for space amidst potted plants and moss-covered stones. Traditional music puts a little bounce into the air. People know it's good, and it's almost always busy.

Lugano (Map p188; ☎ 594 593; Str Clemenceau 2; mains €5.40-9; ☎ 11am-midnight) This ritzy little Italian restaurant is the best at the pasta game, with no pizza to clutter the menu or a long wine list. Trout is grilled with lemon and costs €8.50.

QUICK EATS

For fast-food outlets, follow students. There are heaps of good pizza, hamburger and kebab

options on Str Piezișă in the student ghetto and more centrally on Piața Lucian Blaga and along Str Napoca.

Caprice (Map p188; Str Memorandumului 10; pastries €0.60-0.90; ☎ 8am-9pm Mon-Fri, 9am-8pm Sat, 9am-7pm Sun) Baking since 1926, this three-room patisserie evokes ages past. Ice cream comes out in summer, but look for the 'frog' (choco biscuit covered in Kermit-green icing) year-round.

Speed/Alcatraz (Map p188; Str Napoca 4-6; pizzas €3.15, sandwiches €1.25-1.75; ☎ 24hr) Busy fast-food option with good seating options, including an outdoor deck and an enigmatic Alcatraz basement with seating in Al Capone-style cages.

SELF-CATERING

For fresh produce, stroll through the quite colourful **central market** (Map p188), behind the Complex Commercial Mihai Viteazul shopping centre on Piața Mihai Viteazul, which also houses **Mega Supermarket** (☎ 7am-9pm Mon-Fri, 8am-8pm Sat, 8am-7pm Sun). The **Sora supermarket & shopping mall** (Map p188; Str 21 Decembrie 1989, 5; ☎ 24hr) has cafés, a basement restaurant, €1.20 *shaorma* (kebab) and €0.80 fresh carrot juice.

Drinking CAFÉS

Crema (Map p188; ☎ 0723-161 002; Piața Unirii 25; ☎ 9-1am) This place has masterpieces of Western Europe on the wall, and matching prices on the menu – espresso is €1.50, but then again, Crema is one of Cluj's hippest café-bars.

Flowers (Map p188; Piața Unirii 23; ☎ 8am-10pm Mon-Fri, 10am-10pm Sat & Sun) Stone-floored and twee, Crema's more chat-friendly neighbour offers loose teas and wi-fi access for its mostly 20-something, studious crowd. Tea is €0.75.

BARS & NIGHTCLUBS

Here you go. It's possible to just head to Piața Unirii and peek into surrounding streets and look for signs leading down to dozens of clubs that go a long way to perpetuating the 'vampire-only at night' stereotype Romania gets. Action runs along with darkness, and revellers come out around 11pm and stay till dawn in dozens of cavernous underground cellars and tomb-like bars, often with blood-red lights. Weekend nights sizzle, but things can be busy most of the week. Fun-seekers of all backgrounds, ages and sexualities jostle with minimal complexes. Don't limit yourself to the centre; in Cluj it pays to explore.

Diesel Bar (Map p188; ☎ 493 043; Piața Unirii 17) It's obvious – right on the main square – but if you walk past the hipsters looking to be seen in the all-glass entry and go downstairs into a towering room, with red-spotlit tables and giant rooms, plus €4.30 gin-and-tonics, you can mix with the coolest of Cluj. It's chill-out on weekdays, DJs and live music on weekends', explained the nose-pierced bartenders.

Latino Club (Map p188; ☎ 0722-750 611; Str Memorandumului 23; ☎ 6pm-4am) Blood-red lights and blood-red walls line this cavernous lounge with some salsa music and fancy cocktails.

Club Roland Garros (Map p188; ☎ 431 952; Str Horea 2; ☎ 9am-late) Part pizza restaurant, part teenage weekend disco, Roland delivers for its riverside balcony seats, great for afternoon beer to watch fishermen.

Music Pub (Map p188; ☎ 432 517; Str Horea 5; ☎ 9am-3am Mon-Fri, 11am-3am Sat, 5pm-3am Sun) A little Wild West up-front, this sprawling pub is a great casual place for buddy blokes to sit and drink, indie-poppers to flirt, and students to study on quiet nights. Lots of live shows on the small stage.

Obsession (off Map p188; ☎ 401 777; www.obsession.dub.ro; Str Republicii 109; entry about €10; ☎ 10pm-late) One regular told us with boundless pride that the slick three-room Obsession, about 1km south of the centre, is 'definitely the hottest club in Transylvania'. It gets its cred with its blaring beats, wall-to-wall bodies, theme nights (including Magyar Night) and big-name DJ visitors.

The student ghetto, southwest of the centre (on/off Str Piezișă, reached by Str Clinicilor about 300m from Piața Lucian Blaga), teems with lively open-air bars, including **La Solas** (Map p186; Str Piezișă; ☎ 10am-2 or 3am).

Entertainment

Șapte Seri (www.sapteveri.ro) and *24-Fun* are free biweekly booklets listing all the latest happenings (in Romanian). They're available in cafés, hotels and entertainment venues.

CINEMAS

Cinema Arta (Map p188; ☎ 596 616; Str Universității 3) This cinema plays Hollywood films in English.

THEATRE & CLASSICAL MUSIC

Hungarian State Theatre & Opera (Map p188; ☎ 593 468; Str Emil Isac 26-28) This company, close to the river, stages Hungarian-language plays and operas. Tickets are sold in advance at the box office inside the theatre.

CHEEKY IS DEAD, LONG LIVE CHEEKY

A UK poll in 2004 called their hit song 'Touch My Bum' the worst pop song of all time, and many Cluj locals roll their eyes and even apologise for them, but the Cheeky Girls remain the town's most famous export.

Twin sisters Monica and Gabriela Irimia were born in Cluj in 1982, and studied gymnastics, karate and ballet (at the Hungarian Opera House – go visit these hallowed grounds, mortal).

In 2002 they left with their mum for London, and somehow through a combination of reality-show failures and evil-star alignments they eked out a career based on 'dance hits' that plumbed the depths of shamelessness (eg a cover of Boney M's classic as 'Hooray Hooray! It's a Cheeky Holiday'). They never performed at Cluj's clubs – they've apparently never really performed 'their' songs 'live' – but certainly Cluj's clubs provided some background fodder for the CG's dance 'hits'.

Anyone wanna bet they cover 2 Live Crew's 'Me So Horny' as 'We So Cheeky' next?

The **National Theatre Lucian Blaga** (Map p188; ☎ 590 272; Piața Ștefan cel Mare 2-4) was designed by the famous Viennese architects Fellner and Hellmer and performances here are well attended. The **Opera** (☎ 595 363) is in the same building. Tickets can be bought in advance from the **Agenție de Teatră** (Map p188; ☎ 595 363; Piața Ștefan cel Mare 14; ☎ 11am-5pm Tue-Fri & before events). Tickets for classical concerts hosted by the **State Philharmonic** (Filarmonica de Stat; Map p188; ☎ 430 060) are also sold here.

Shopping

Romanian Folk Art (☎ 596 114; www.romanianfolkart.ro; Str Eroilor 1; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Fri, to 2pm Sat) Cluj's best shop for traditional items from around Romania, this alley shop offers painted eggs, embroidered dresses and tablecloths, colourful masks and hats, and other pieces. Prices are a little lower than other shops and the quality's high.

The Ethnographic Museum (p188) also has a gift shop.

Atta (Map p188; ☎ 590 743; Str Calea Motiła 32; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Fri, to 2pm Sat) Outdoors shop with maps, rock-climbing gear, tents and sleeping bags, hiking boots.

Betix (Map p188; ☎ 598 933; Str Universităţii 8; ☹ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 2pm Sat) Lots of neat hats are worn around these parts, some of them made here at this cute, 35-year-old shop. Lamb's wool shepherd hats are €60 to €70, felt jobbies are about €6.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Tarom has at least two daily direct flights to Bucharest (five-day advance ticket one-way/return €103/153). It also has several weekly flights to Milan, Bologna, Verona, Frankfurt, Munich and Vienna. Tickets can be bought at the airport or from the **Tarom city office** (Map p186; ☎ 432 669; Piaţa Mihai Viteazul 11; ☹ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat).

BUS

Cluj's bus situation changes frequently. Have your guesthouse or hotel call ahead to check times/locations. At research time, daily bus services from **Autogară 2** (Autogară Beta; Map p186; ☎ 455 249) included the following: two daily buses to Braşov (€8), four to Bucharest (€12), five to Budapest (€18), one to Chişinău (€20), one to Iaşi (€12 to €15) and three to Sibiu (€5.70, three hours); they are useful as there's often tricky connections if going by train. There's also a handful of buses to Bistriţa (€2.90, 2½ hours). The station is 350m northwest of the train station (take the overpass). Note: there is no Autogară 1.

From a parking lot on Piaţa Mihai Viteazul, two companies run seven daily buses to Turda (€1.20) till about 8.30pm.

From Piaţa Unirii minibuses go via Oradea to Budapest's Ferihegy 2 Airport (€10, six or seven hours).

STAY OUT OF THE WOODS!

Thank goodness the Transylvania Society of Dracula holds an annual symposium! In 2006, in Sighişoara, the fang-leaning congress met to explain all sorts of unexplained things, chiefly the 'Romania Bermuda Triangle', aka Hoia-Baciu Wood (HBW), outside Cluj.

And. It. Was. Explained. In. Frightening. Detail.

The pioneer in HBW research was Alexandru Sift, who in the 1960s and '70s took photographs of disc-shaped UFOs – and found many things revealed in photos not visible to the naked eye, including geometric flying objects and 'live' humanoid heads with faces resembling dead persons known to the beholder. The 'special active spot 3', which distorts photographic images, was identified...the same year Sift died (1993)!

It is not recommended to go into the woods, as, per the report, visitors there have complained of 'burns', 'thirst' and 'headaches'. Or maybe you can just take some water and aspirin.

Check www.benecke.com for updates.

TRAIN

The **Agentie de Voiaj CFR** (Map p188; ☎ 432 001; Piaţa Mihai Viteazul 20; ☹ 7am-7pm Mon-Fri) sells domestic and international train tickets in advance. Sample fares for *accelerat* trains include:

Destination	Price (€)	Duration	No of daily trains
Bistriţa	2.20	3½hr	3
Braşov	8.70	4hr	6
Bucharest	10.60	7½hr	6
Budapest	34.50	5hr	2
Huedin	2.25	45-75 min	13
Iaşi	10.60	9hr	4
Oradea	5.70	2¼-4hr	12
Sibiu	9.15	4hr	1
Sighişoara	7.30	3½hr	6
Suceava	8.70	7hr	4
Târgu Mureş	6.75 (rapid)	2¼hr	2
Timişoara	8.60	7hr	6
Zalău	5.70	4½hr	6 (not direct)

The smaller Găra Mică, 100m east of the central train station is for short-distance trains only.

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Cluj-Napoca airport (☎ 416 702) is 8km to the east of the town centre in the Someşeni district. Bus 8 runs from Piaţa Mihai Viteazul to the airport.

CAR

Cluj has some of the best car-rental rates in the country. **Pan Travel** (Map p186; ☎ 420 516; www.pantravel.ro; Str Grozavescu 13; ☹ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) rents Dacias

for €30 per day. **Rodna** (☎ 416 773; www.rodna-trans.ro; Str Traian Vuia 62), towards the airport, rents newish Dacia Logans from €30 per day, and foreign cars for a bit more. **Pro Travel** (Map p188; ☎ 598 858; Str Napoca 2; ☹ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sat) rents Daewoo cars from €25 (for four days or longer).

TAXI

Diesel Taxi (☎ 953, 946) is a well-regarded, meter-using local company. A ride from the train station to the centre is about €1.75.

TRAM, TROLLEYBUS & BUS

Trolleybus 9 runs from the train station into town. Bus 27 takes you within a 10-minute walk of the open-air ethnographic museum northwest of the centre in Horea forest. Single-ride tickets for either cost €0.35.

TURDA

☎ 264 / pop 60,400

A great and easy day trip from Cluj, the unfortunately named town of Turda (*tur-da*), 27km southeast, seems at first glance the last place to find deep, awe-inspiring drops made naturally by rivers (the massive Turda Gorge) or less naturally by human hands (the salt mine). Set in wide-open, rather flat farmlands, Turda was an important salt-mining town from the 13th century until 1932, when the main mine shut down. A quarter of the town's residents are Hungarian.

Michael the Brave hated Turda. He got himself decapitated here in 1601.

Orientation & Information

Turda's fun little central street, Str Republicii, is home to several banks, the post office, an internet café and a taxi stand at its north end (at Piaţa Republicii, near where the roads go around the 15th-century Catholic Church).

Stop by the **Tourist Information Centre** (☎ 314 611; Piaţa 1 Decembrie 1918; ☹ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat), about 250m south of the church, where you can get a Turda map and advice on hikes.

The **Fundaţia Potaissa** (☎ 316 385; Piaţa 1 Decembrie 1918, 6a), a rock-climbing club, has info on rock climbing spots in Turda Gorge, or the smaller Turenia Gorge north of town.

Sights

SALT MINE

Salt mines, shmalt shmimes, some say. But Turda's **salt mine** (☎ 311 690; Str Salinelor 54; adult/child €2.30/1.15; ☹ 9am-3.30pm summer, to 1.30pm Mon-Fri,

to 3.30pm Sat & Sun winter) is different. A cool 10°C-12°C throughout, the handful of trapezoid and bell-shaped mines are reached by an eerie 500m tunnel with concentric circles created by the occasional light. The main mine to visit is the 13-storey Rudolf (40m deep – big but not the biggest), which you can encircle from above on creaking wood platforms teetering perilously over the edge (a little too Indiana Jones for a certain Lonely Planet researcher). Two sets of stairs lead to the dark bottom, passing dates on the way that mark when miners reached the depth; from the bottom you can look way down into the adjoining Terezia mine (dated from 1690, which goes down 70m to an 8m-deep lake).

The mine operated from 1271 till 1932, after which cheese was stored here briefly. Try to note the odour at the closed-off end of the tunnel; it's said it's not salt, but the lingering smell of decomposing horses who died decades ago from one salt-cart haul too many.

The mine is about 1km north from the centre, back towards Cluj; a sign points 200m off road. If driving from Cluj, veer left at the first fork in the village (a sign points to 'centru').

TURDA GORGE

Turda Gorge (Cheile Turzii) is a short but stunning break in the mountains 7 or 8km west (as the stork flies). You can hike the bottom of the gorge's length in an hour.

One way there is to walk. From the centre, walk west on a trail (marked with red crosses) about 90 minutes across rolling farmlands to the gorge. There's now a cement trail along one side of the gorge – which can get choked with day-trippers on summer weekends. You can follow the trail up and over the quite straight-up steep northern end (about one hour up).

Driving there isn't as easy as it looks on a map. Only locals (supposedly) are allowed to use the road to the south of the gorge from the road 2km west of Mihai Viteazul on the main Turda–Abrud road. Another way is via Sănduleşti, 5km northwest of Turda; take the road across from the highway out of town towards Cluj, and follow the (signed) dirt road about 10km to the gorge.

At research time the **Cabana Cheile Turzii** (450m), at the southern foot of the gorge, was closed. Ask at the tourist information centre if eating options have opened up; otherwise take what you need.

OTHER SIGHTS

In summer, locals go and float in the deep Durgău salt lakes a few kilometres northeast of town. You can taxi or take bus 14 to the end of the line and follow the dirt road to the right.

Just off the trail towards the Turda Gorge are hill-top **Roman castle ruins** (Cetatea Romană) of the 5th Macedonian League, who stationed themselves here around AD 168; it's not easy to find, so ask at the tourist information centre.

A couple of kilometres east of the centre is the small, popular spa resort of **Băile Turda**, with an outdoor pool, allegedly built on the site of an old Roman salt mine. Bus 15 goes from Turda's centre here.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Potaissa (☎ 312 691; Str Republicii 6; s/d with shared bathroom €11.50/23, with private bathroom €27/36) The Potaissa is clean and central but a bit clunky, with loud carpets and a rendering of its 1947 opening in the lobby.

Hunter Prince Castle (aka 'Dracula Hotel'; ☎ 316 850; www.huntercastle.ro; Str Suluțiu 4-6; r €51 & €65; 🍷) A dramatic 'Transylvania castle' hotel, on an unlikely dusty central spot in a town with no Dracula links, this place can't quite decide to go for vampires or hunters, so splits the difference. It has creatively campy rooms, with rock walls separating spiked cast-iron beds, sitting areas and antlers on the wall. The restaurant (mains €4.30 to €11.50), with outdoor seating, has murals of head-cuttings and lots of furry pelts. It's good, but watch out for extra items on the bill.

Getting There & Away

Maxitaxis leave frequently from the centre to Cluj-Napoca's Piața Mihai Viteazul (€1.15, 40 minutes) until 8.30pm or so. A taxi back is about €15. Dacos buses leave from the 'Transit Stop' just north of the Catholic church, heading for Alba Iulia, Sibiu and Bucharest. Buses to the Arieș Valley – for stop-offs at Apuseni Mountain hubs to the south – are less frequent.

RIMITEA

☎ 264

West of Turda, Hwy 75 leads along the southern access points of the Apuseni Mountains (see p226). About 26km southwest is a pocket of paradise. This ethnic Hungarian village of

distinctive white-washed homes faces Pietra Secuului (1128m), a lone bluff that can be climbed (blue crosses). **Vajda Șara** (☎ 517 610; r per person incl meals €13) is a lushly traditional home you can stay in. Nearby, by a brook, is an old water mill.

Four kilometres south, from the village of **Colțești**, are ruins of a medieval castle on the hill to the west, which you can climb up to.

HUEDIN MICROREGION (KALOTASZEG)

☎ 264

Just off the Cluj–Oradea highway – like a more accessible Maramureș, – this bucolic paradise near the Apuseni Mountains includes 40 (chiefly) Hungarian villages bundled under the names 'Huedin Microregion' or Kalotaszeg. With a car, there's much to explore – as men in Austrian-style hats and women in headscarves on horse carts return your waves as you bounce and weave towards superb mountain hikes and waterfalls.

The Kalotaszeg is much beloved by Hungarian folklorists as a stronghold of pastoral Transylvanian Magyar culture. In Budapest's Ethnography Museum, there is a huge, seven-room exhibit devoted entirely to Kalotaszeg. Centuries-old traditions persist here – staying at a home can open up makeshift tours of horseshoe makers' workshops, shepherd huts and wooden churches – plus (from May to October), you can see how sheep-milk cheese is made.

You can plan trips with Davincze Tours in Sâncraiu or Green Mountain Tours (see p190).

Restaurants are not to be found in much of the area; plan on eating at Huedin or your guesthouse.

Along the Highway

Seven kilometres east of Huedin, **Izvorul Crișului** is known as Körösfő to Hungarians, or just as 'souvenir village' to everyone else, as the roadside is lined with stalls selling traditional handicrafts.

The area's namesake, **Huedin** (Bánffyhyunyad in Hungarian), 52km west of Cluj-Napoca, is an unengaging highway town that nevertheless can fill your cellphone with credits, tummy with food, wallet with lei. You're better off heading to Sâncraiu or Mănăstireni for accommodation, but the highway **Hotel Montana** (☎ 353 090; d €20.80), at the northern end of town, has fine rooms and a pretty good restaurant.

Twelve kilometres west of Huedin is the small village of **Poeni**, 2.8km from Bologa. The ruins of a 13th-century **medieval fortress** tower above it. Equally interesting is the old **watermill** (*moară de apă*), still in use today. The entrance to the mill is 3km from the main road on the left in the centre of the village.

Ciucea village, 22km west of Huedin, is principally a place of pilgrimage for Romanians and Hungarians alike, having been home to Romanian poet and politician Octavian Goga (1881–1939) and to Hungary's most controversial 20th-century poet, Endre Ady (1877–1919). There's a small museum and 16th-century **wooden church**, moved here from near Cluj to preserve it.

In villages around Ciucea, on the first Sunday in May, are irresistible **Measurement of the Milk Festivals** (Masuritul Laptelui), when shepherds bring in their flocks and milk them for a comparative contest – along with a lot of eating, dancing and merriment. Buses go to villages such as Magura Priei, 10km north of Ciucea, from Huedin for the festival.

Near Huedin

These places are quickly accessed in a two-hour leg-break on long drives, or serve as stepping stones to the Apuseni. Six kilometres south of Huedin, **Sâncraiu** is set at the base of sweeping hills, with a few dozen homes turned into guesthouses. Many are signed, though not all. Stop by **Davincze Tours** (☎ 257 580; www.davincze.ro; No 291), a crafty travel agency (across from the Reformed Church), which handles accommodation and tours. Rooms are €8 per person, €18 including all meals. They speak English.

A good spot for DIY exploration, **Mănăstireni** (Magyargerőmonostor in Hungarian) is 16km southeast of Huedin via Căluta or 21km via Izvorul Crișului. It's a quaint village noted for its 13th-century **church**, built by the Gyeröffy family, with a Gothic apse added in the 15th century. Inside an adjoining room you can see the old steeple with bullet holes from Turk guns. You may have to ask the priest for the keys – he's usually at the large, modern wood home 50m southeast.

During the 1848 revolution, 200 Hungarians died at the battle of Mănăstireni. They were buried in a mass grave, which today rests beneath lake waters at **Lake Beliș** – at low water levels, you can see the church top coming up for air.

A superb guesthouse in Mănăstireni is **Bogdan Erzebet** (☎ 375 221; No 279; r per person incl meals €15), run by a lovely English-speaking family who can arrange tours. Take the road to Râșia and follow the handmade signs to 'tourist info' for 150m.

On the roads between Huedin and Mănăstireni, **Căluta** has a little **restaurant** at the south end of town.

Towards the Mountains

If you don't want to rough it in the Apuseni but want to hike, the best (and last) base with guesthouses is **Rachițele**, a largely Romanian mountain village with farms on hillsides and a rushing creek passing through. Seven kilometres east, reached by a patchy dirt road, is Rachițele Falls. Most area hikes to Padiș start about 20km down the road (see below for hiking information).

There's a small **tourist information centre** (☎ 10am–1pm Thu, noon–3pm Fri–Sun) by the bridges in the centre, and eight (and growing) *pen-siunes* to stay in, including **Pensiunea Bogdan** (☎ 0729-016 278; No 167; r per person from €10), about 100m towards the falls. English is harder to come by out here.

A nice approach to the Apuseni is the 50km ride southwest from the main-highway town Gilău (16km west of Cluj) to Lake Beliș. It's possible to find accommodation in towns such as Rusești, Mărișel and Lake Beliș.

Getting There & Around

See Cluj (p194) for bus or train links to Huedin. Note that international trains don't stop here.

Huedin has taxis that can drop you off into villages; another option is hitchhiking. Bus trips around the area may be possible, but are unpredictable and few and far between.

APUSENI MOUNTAINS (NORTH)

Southwest of Cluj-Napoca, the popular Apuseni are dotted with caves and forested trails, with a world of subterranean rivers and a 3500-year-old underground glacier. It's a lovely area that draws fervent fans.

There are two distinct parts, and ways to get there. Most travellers head straight for the central Padiș Plateau – reached from the north or south – to camp or bunk at a cabana and make a week's worth of day trips from there. See p226 for information on the southern access points to the Apuseni Mountains and highlights such as the Bear Cave and Scărișoara Ice Cave.

Information

We hear information centres are in the works, but considering the area straddles county lines, disorganisation may continue. Check www.padis.ro for details on the plateau. One regional map is Dimap's *Munții Apuseni* (€5), which has limited trail details.

It's worth considering going with a guide. Based in Oradea, **Apuseni Experience** (www.apuseniexperience.ro) leads full week-long hiking, cultural, caving and underground rafting trips from €55 per day. Other good guides work with Green Mountain Tours or Pan Travel in Cluj (p187).

Padiș Plateau

From Cabana Padiș the most popular circuit leads southwest along the polluted Ponorului River to the fantastic Cetățile Ponorului (Cetatea Ponorului; 2½ hours one way, blue circles). The cave takes its name from a fortress because of its towering entrance. You'll need good boots and a torch to make much of the damp chamber underground. The river sinks its ways through the chamber's numerous holes – some as deep as 150m.

Another trail, marked first by red stripes then by red circles, leads from the cabana north for three or four hours to a meadow at **Poiana Vărășoia**. From here, red circles bear east two hours to the **Rădesei Citadel** (Cetățile Rădesei), another underground chamber with impressive rock formations (and tent sites). The route then circles **Someșul Cald**, a river in a deep gorge, before heading back south to the cabana. If you continue to follow the red stripes north through the Stâna de Vale ski resort you'll arrive at **Cărligatele Peak** (1694m).

Sleeping

There are a couple of camping places in Padiș plateau. **Cabana Padiș**, where many trails start from, is rather run down; one Apuseni regular said 'a tent is better'. Newer, and in far better shape, is **Cabana Cetățile Ponorului** (☎ 0722-760 190; www.padis.ro; per person €9), near its namesake attraction. This 40-bed place has bathrooms and a restaurant; reserve online.

Getting to the Plateau

The best access road to Padiș is south of Huedin from Rachițele (p197). It's 21km from Rachițele to Ponor and a further 10km to Padiș. Another option is slower going – from Pietroasa in the west (it's 16km to Boga then 6km to Padiș).

These can be difficult roads to ride, but many people make it in regular cars.

These roads can be hiked, as can trails from **Gârda de Sus** (five to six hours, blue stripes) or the lesser-used trail from **Stâna de Vale** in the northwest (six to seven hours, red stripes).

ZALĂU

☎ 260 / pop 62,700

Heavy on '70s housing blocks and light on cheap accommodation, Zalău, 86km northwest of Cluj-Napoca, is understandably missed by most travellers' itineraries. It's worth popping by on a loop between Apuseni and Maramureș, however, as the Roman-Dacian town nearby is the first town chronicled in Transylvania.

The town fills a broad valley coming down from the foothills of the Meșes Mountains. The steep decline into town from Cluj-Napoca along hairpin turns is about the most exciting part of the place.

Orientation & Information

The **bus station** (Str Mihai Viteazul 54) is 1km north of the centre. Bus 1 runs from the centre to the train station, which is 6km north of the centre in the village of Crișeni. Bus 23 goes from the centre to the south end of town. The centre stretches between Piața Iuliu Maniu and, a block east, Piața 1 Decembrie 1918, where you can find banks and ATMs.

Sights

Zalău's main site is about 10km east of town, the hilltop ruins of **Porolissum**, which was a Roman town that stood on the ultimate northern boundary of Roman Dacia. Dating from AD 106, the settlement was rapidly fortified, following which it developed as a leading administrative, economic and civilian centre. By AD 193, it had been granted the status of a municipality. It's an excellent way to break up a drive between Maramureș and Cluj or Huedin.

The 'Municipium Septimum Porolissensis', which some historians believe could even have briefly served as the capital of Dacia, was built within the walls of a giant castle. The 20,000 inhabitants who lived behind the walls were defended by some 7000 soldiers.

These days, nice views (some claim you can see Cluj on clear days) add to the thrill of walking around the 300m by 200m site, past crumbled and recreated walls, former roads and an amphitheatre that probably hosted

gladiator games for 5500 blood-thirsty spectators. Most sites are signed in English and Romanian. Sorin, a friendly chap who has worked at the site since 1977 and lives at the white house (No 229) just before the road reaches the ruins, will lead you around the site (donation appreciated).

From Moigrad, keep going up the road south up the hill, ignoring a couple of left turns – eventually it ends at the site gate. It's about a half-hour walk uphill from the village.

In Zalău centre, the **County Museum of History & Art** (☎ 612 223; Str Unirii; adult/student €0.35/0.20; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun), just east of Piața Iuliu Maniu, also covers Porolissum.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Meses (☎ 661 050; www.hotelmeses.ro; Str Unirii 11; s/d €53.50/65) Set back from central Piața 1 Decembrie 1918, this is a nice yellow hotel with 34 comfy but standard rooms.

Villa Vlad (☎ 619 183; Str Gheorghe Doja 159; s €51-57, d €60-66; ☎ ☎) Just past the south entrance to town, this is something of a 'boutique hotel' (with its own gas station out front!). Rooms have stylish leather seats and platform beds – room four has good balcony views. When the manager's away, you can get online in her office.

There's pizza in the centre. A nice spot near Villa Vlad is the **Hanul Drumeților** (Str Gheorghe Doja; mains €2.90-7.10; ☎ 24hr), with windows overlooking the valley, standard Romanian dishes and ice cream.

Getting There & Away

See p194 for train and microbus links between Cluj and Zalău. Train connections are a little inconvenient, with changes required at Jibou. Microbuses from Cluj stop at various points in town, finishing at the bus station; from there five or six daily buses go to Moigrad (€1.15),

near the Porolissum ruins. There are buses also to Huedin, Baia Mare and Oradea.

Call 633633 to arrange a taxi; a ride to Porolissum is about €12 to €15.

CLUJ-NAPOCA TO BISTRIȚA

☎ 264

Don't think this road, past many industrial towns, with trucks racing past you, is going to be a lovely leisurely experience. Still, there are a few places worth stopping off at if you're headed north towards Bistrița, Maramureș or Southern Bucovina.

Bontida

Thirty kilometres northeast of Cluj, this village is home to a Banffy Castle that will be under renovation for several years. You're free to wander by and inside the medieval 16th-century walls. During summer, a café is open Friday to Sunday. To find it, veer right past the river when you reach the central monument. The village is 3km east of the highway.

Gherla

About 45km northeast of Cluj, the highway passes through this small market town that, in the 17th century, was known as Armenopolis when it was predominantly Armenian. It has a pretty Renaissance-style castle and a baroque **Armenian Catholic Cathedral** (1784–1798) on the central square Piața Libertății. It is also the only town in Romania whose original city planning utilised a grid system. A small **history museum** (Str Mihai Viteazul 6) is a block north, on the street parallel to the highway.

The town is best known, however, for its prison. Still functioning, **Gherla prison** (Str Andrei Mureșan 2), about four blocks north of the square (on the west side of the highway), gained notoriety in the 1950s for its so-called 're-education program'. Using severe psychological pressure

GLASS ICONS

Painted-glass icons can be found all over Transylvania, but the small village of **Nicula**, 7km east of Gherla, is famous for them. Icons were painted here for centuries, but it took a miracle to get the honours.

Visitors to this hilltop 16th-century monastery can see examples of the age-old folk art that dates from the 11th century. Icons of saints were painted and put in peasants' houses to keep evil spirits at bay. Nicula earned its fame only in the 18th century after, per legend, an icon of the Virgin Mary miraculously shed tears for 26 days in 1699. Afterwards, Nicula-made icons became highly sought items.

Some 300,000 believers make a pilgrimage here every 15 August, St Mary's Day.

and physical torture, hundreds of dissident students were tormented until they ratted on friends and allies and were then made to torture them in turn. Conditions inside remained harsh even after re-education programs ceased in 1951. In 1970, during floods, 600 prisoners drowned in their cells after the prison director ordered the inmates to be locked in before fleeing the building himself. Just north is a **memorial** (a grey crucifix) to those who died.

SLEEPING & EATING

Cola Pensiunea (☎ 243 178; Str Mihai Eminescu 9; r €17) This small guesthouse is on the main street, with a popular restaurant. No breakfast is served.

Pensiunea Iona (☎ 213 451; www.pensiuneaion.ro; Str Clujului 4; r €17 & €23) This modern 18-room complex on the main road, a couple of kilometres south of the centre, has no breakfast.

Sic

On the dirt backroads between Bonțida and Nicula, Sic (Szék in Hungarian) is an interesting, predominately ethnic-Hungarian village home to the recently opened, EU-funded **Sic Redbed Nature Reserve** (☎ 410 720; www.arpmduj.ro, in Romanian; admission free). Here you can wander on woodland plank walkways across a marshy reef – the last thing you expect to see in Transylvania – where bird life can drown out the sounds of your footsteps. Large fish sometimes startle visitors, including Lonely Planet researchers, with sudden splashes just beneath the walkway. It's a 30-minute walk across.

The road winds along low-lying hills. At the north end is a nice, seven-room **pensiune** (☎ 228 392, 094 594 788; r about €12).

BISTRITĂ

☎ 263 / pop 81,470

Bistrița would hardly catch a passing gaze from travellers if not for the work of an Irishman who never made it here. Bram Stoker overnighted his Jonathan Harker in a hotel here on the eve of St George's day before riding on east to Dracula's castle. Some local businesses understandably try to cash in on the accidental fame, but with the museum half-closed and tourist information centre shut down, Bistrița (about 108km northeast of Cluj) is more of a village trapped in the form of a town. It feels a little sad at times – as if it knows its time in the sun has passed – but the people are nice and the medieval centre is worthy of a little stroll

after lunch, before heading towards greater glories at Tihuța pass, Lake Colibița or the cheesy Dracula Castle (p211).

First chronicled in 1264, Bistrița (Bistritz in German) was one of the seven towns founded by the Saxons, whose presence still lives on in the old town's quaint 15th- and 16th-century merchants' houses (only about 370 Saxons still call Bistrița home). Witch trials were common events in Bistrița during medieval times.

In August, the city hosts the International Folk, Dance and Traditions Festival *Nunata Zamferei*. The central streets seem a lot busier than you'd expect for a town of 80,000; good luck trying to figure out the complex web of 'right-of-way' at various intersections.

MAPS & PUBLICATIONS

The ad-filled *Bistrița-Năsăud County* map (€2.10) includes a city map. A local 200-page colour guide *Bistrița Năsăud Travel Guide* has some useful information on county sights in English.

Information

BOOKSHOPS

Librăria Radu Petrescu (Str Petru Rareș 1; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat) Sells books.

INTERNET

Club Internet (Str Ursului 14; per hr €0.45; ☎ 10am-midnight Sun-Thu, to 6am Fri & Sat)

MONEY

Banca Comercială Română (Piața Petru Rareș; ☎ 8.30am-6pm Mon-Fri, to 12.30pm Sat) Cashes travellers cheques and has an ATM.

Raiffeisen Bank (Piața Unirii 1; ☎ 9am-6.30pm Mon-Fri)

TRAVEL AGENCIES

A former tourist information centre has closed; a city hall rep told us another may open at some point in the future.

Coroana Tourist Company (☎ 212 056; www.dracula.transylvania.ro; Piața Petru Rareș 7a; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat) is very happy to sell you flights to Italy or to book Black Sea trips in Romania, but is far less useful providing information around the region.

Transylvanian Society of Dracula (☎ 231 803; 1st fl, Piața Petru Rareș 7; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri), part of Coroana, is a chapter of the nonprofit

(Continued from page 200)

organisation for a world group of vampire fanatics. It stages some events, usually tagged along with package trips. One employee: 'To be honest, I don't understand how this society works'.

Sights

The towering **evangelical church** (Biserica Evanghelică) dominates Piața Centrală, though is rarely open for visitors to see. Built by the Saxons in the 14th century, and today in a state of perpetual renovation, the 76.5m Gothic-style church still serves Bistrița's small Saxon community.

Facing the church on the north side of Piața Centrală is the fine **Șugălete** row of terraced buildings, which in medieval times was bustling with trading activities. Built between 1480 and 1550, the 13 houses were bound together with stone arches and in the 16th century, a portico was added. There is a bar, restaurant and a couple of shops worth peeking into, including the **Galeriile de Arta** (☎ 0745-454 032; Piața Centrală 24; ☎ 11am-

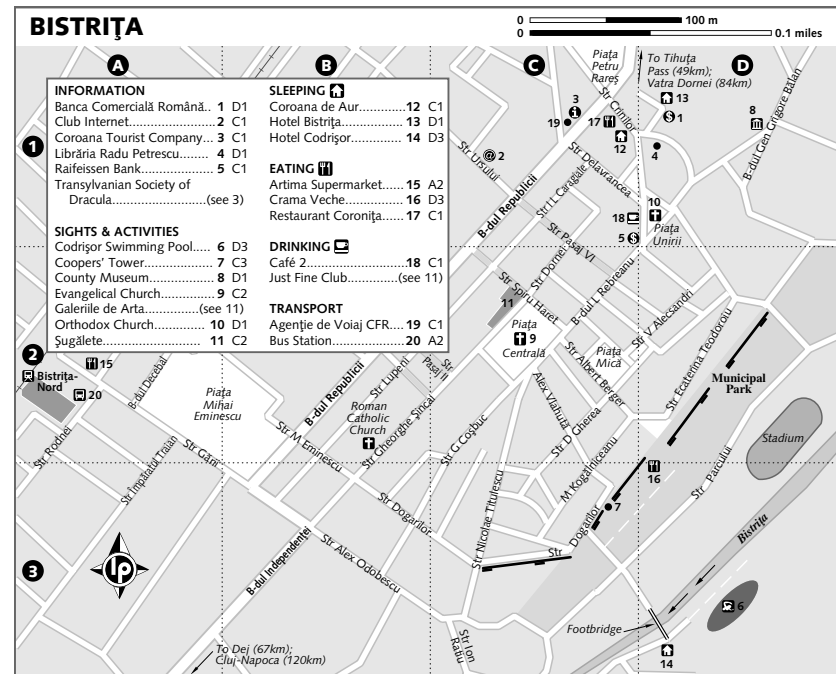
2pm Mon, 4-7pm Tue-Sat), with regularly changing exhibitions.

An **Orthodox church** (1270–80) is the centre-piece of Piața Unirii. The open courtyard of the half-closed **County Museum** (Muzeul Județean; ☎ 230 046; B-dul General Grigore Bălan 19; adult/student €0.60/0.30; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) has a wooden church and plenty of crosses to see. The museum proper's collection of minerals and stuffed animals is hardly worth a look; hopefully they'll reopen the history section some day.

What remains of the city's 13th-century walls lies south of the town along the north-west side of the **municipal park**. Bistrița suffered numerous attacks by the Turks and Tartars during the 16th and 17th centuries and the citadel and most of the bastions intersecting the city wall were destroyed. In 1530, Wallachian prince Petru Rareș (r 1541–46) besieged Bistrița, forcing its Saxon inhabitants to finally surrender. The **Coopers' Tower** remains at the east of the park.

Activities

To cool off or lounge about, there's the **Codrișor swimming pool**, an outdoor pool on the south side of the river.



(Continued on page 209)

Sleeping

Hotel Bistrița (☎ 231 056; www.hotel-bistrita.ro; s €23, d €33; 🍷) Tucked behind a bank and government building across from the Coroana de Aur, this modest yet stylish 44-room hotel is the town's best deal. Older rooms have wood floors, rugs and are fresh enough, despite the years; the new ones are swank (for Bistrița), with gold walls, standing lamps and little balconies.

Hotel Codrișor (☎ 233 814; coroaana@bistrita.ro; Str Codrișor 28; s/d €26/31.50) Right across a footbridge, and next to a large open-air swimming pool, this bright yellow hotel has 19 rather boxy, but colourful rooms, and is adding 10 more bigger ones. The terrace restaurant draws many locals in summer.

Coroana de Aur (☎ 232 667; www.hotel-coroana-de-aur.ro; Piața Petru Rareș 4; s/d €31.50/46) Prince might dig the purple façade, but Bram Stoker's character Jonathan Harker may have turned back if he had had to stop at this disappointing (and inevitable) cash-in attempt based on the fictional hotel Harker stopped at before heading to Dracula's castle. Oh, the 130 rooms are fine and comfy enough, but suffer from a very '70s decor (as in 1970s not 1870s).

Eating

Crama Veche (☎ 218 047; Str Albert Berger 10; mains €2.30-5.70; 🍷 noon-midnight) A better-than-average Romanian traditional restaurant, this evocatively traditional place – with oodles of wood carvings and unfinished wood tables and a live act – is a nice setting for Romanian, German and Hungarian fare off the grill. Hunter's goulash with venison is €5.70; start with the cauliflower, pepper and pickle salad served in an earthenware bowl (€1). Best is in summer, when the outdoor terrace fills with happy locals. It's set in the basement, at the back of the Casa de Cultura.

Restaurant Coronita (Piața Petru Rareș 4; mains from €2.90; 🍷 10am-11pm) The atmosphere's stuffy and tacky, but if you're craving breaded brains and Golden Mediaș wine try this place, adjoining the Coroana de Aur hotel.

Artima Supermarket (Str Garii; 🍷 8am-10pm Mon-Sat, 9am-7pm Sun) This big supermarket is across from the bus station.

Drinking

Just Fine Club (Piața Centrală 21; 🍷 10am-1am) This is the town's premier chill-out club, in a cave-like cellar with dim lighting, couches and lounge music.

Café 2 (Piața Unirii 2; 🍷 9am-10.30pm Mon-Sat, noon-10.30pm Sun) This cool-kid coffee and drink lounge has electronic beats and glass-panel floors exposing coffee beans.

Getting There & Away

BUS

The scrappy **bus station** (☎ 233 655) sends five daily buses to Brașov (€8, seven to eight hours), four to Cluj (€2.90, 2½ to three hours) and Oradea (€8.60), two to Satu Mare (€7.20), three to Sibiu (€8, six hours), one to Suceava (€6) and seven to Târgu Mureș (€3.45, 2½ hours). There are as many minibuses to Brașov, Oradea and Sibiu, and more to Cluj; call ☎ 213 938 for more information.

TRAIN

The **train station** (☎ 223 572) sends one overnight daily train to Bucharest (€10, 10 hours), four daily trains to Cluj (€2.20, three to four hours) and one to Vatra Dornei (€2.90, five hours). It's easier to reach Lunca Ilvei from Cluj. To reach Suceava (€10, eight hours) you must change trains in Beclan Someș. You can also buy tickets at the **Agentie de Voiaj CFR** (☎ 213 938; Piața Petru Rareș; 🍷 9am-4pm Mon-Fri).

BĂRGĂU VALLEY

☎ 263

Retracing Jonathan Harker's trip up to the lovely Tihuța Pass is irresistible for the fang-inclined, but anyone can appreciate some of the area's beauty, particularly west of the pass itself (and the 'Hotel Dracula'), Lake Colibița and little lost Lunca Ilvei. Eventually the pass leads to Vatra Dornei in Moldavia.

To fully access the region, you'll need your own wheels, or to be on a tour.

Lake Colibița

The first 20 or so kilometres from Bistrița pass dusty, rather industrial towns before climbing and turning past fir trees and hill-clinging farms. A well worthwhile (bumpy) detour is 15km southeast from the village of Prundu Bărgăului to Lake Colibița (www.locolibita.ro), a dam-made blue lake with lovely summer homes, boats to borrow, islands to swim to, and a few places to stay.

On the water, near the lake's west end, the dreamy **Lumina Lacului** (Light of the Lake; ☎ 265 570; www.luminalacului.ro; r with shared/private bathroom per person €10/14.50) is a lovely spot with simple rooms, a restaurant and boats. Best are the

rooms with shared bathroom, with balconies looking over the water. Meals are extra. Just up the hill is **Pensiunea Ariniș** (☎ 0740-407 954; d €17), with a handful of rooms, some with private bathroom, and terrace restaurant overlooking the west end of the lake.

'Dracula's Castle'

After Mureșeni (29km east of Bistrița) the road starts to climb steeply on its approach to the Tihuța Pass, which peaks at 1200m. A trail (red circles) leads from here to Piatra Fântânele at the top of the pass.

The main reason most people break their journey at Piatra Fântânele is not so much for the fine hiking that it offers but rather for the tacky, 53-room **Hotel Castel Dracula** (☎ 266 841; www.hotelcasteldracula.bn.ro; s/d €52/65, apt €86-100). The castle/hotel, better known as Dracula's Castle, towers 1116m high on the spot where Stoker sited his fictitious Dracula's castle. Stoker got the setting right: the views of Tihuța Pass are great. The architect who designed the jagged-edged building in the early 1980s clearly studied Dracula movies. Rooms sport a lot of cranberry-blood colour with dragon motifs – but are not overly camp. The 'highlight' of a visit is a peek into '**Dracula's room**' (admission €0.30), down dark creaky steps, where visitors are given a short, candlelit tour around his 'coffin'. A 'surprise' occurs near the end of the tour designed to give visitors a little jolt (it's not much of one, but a Canadian visitor had a heart attack on the spot in the mid-1990s).

There's tennis and a small ski lift next door. There are several **hikes** that pass by the area, though maps are hard to come by.

A couple of daily buses between Bistrița and Vatra Dornei pass by here.

Lunca Ilvei

Reached by 4WD vehicles from Piatra Fântânele on a forestry road, or via a 30km very rough ride from the Năsăd-Sângeroz-Bău highway to the west (in all 71km from Bistrița), the laid-back valley village of Lunca Ilvei is worth the effort for those seeking leisurely hikes past shepherd huts and haystacks up forested mountains, winter skiing and horse rides.

Run by a Brit here since 1999, the **Riding Centre** (☎ 378 470; www.riding-holidays.ro; Str Bolovanul 340) offers five-day riding trips to Dracula's castle and the mountains, staying in village guesthouses and moving luggage for you. A trip, including all meals and accommodation, costs €780; riding is €15 per hour. There are rooms for €25 per person (including all meals).

On the other end of town, **Casa Alexandra** (☎ 378 117, 0722-218 295; www.ecolunca.go.ro; Str Principală 44; r per person incl meals from €10) is a bucolic farm by the river with six rooms run by a sweet English-speaking family who provide meals.

Personal trains between Cluj and Suceava stop here. It's less convenient getting here from Bistrița by train.

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