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BUCHAREST

“IN YOUR SPORRAN”

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About this guide

This series of downloadable NATA Mini “In Your Sporran” Guides has been designed specifically to save the hassle of printing out reams of NATA web pages in order to make sure you don’t miss something whilst wandering the back streets of your chosen destination.

This guide has been compiled almost exclusively by me (Paul Allison), and is based entirely on personal experiences and opinions. Please do not prejudice anything on my say so – not only am I quite warped, but many places were only visited once, and therefore may have been having a particularly good or bad day.

This guide is not intended to replace more traditional sources of information, such as the excellent Lonely Planet guide books or the indispensable “In Your Pocket” guides available local in many Eastern European cities (as well as the downloadable versions from www.inyourpocket.com, which have inspired this very guide). Instead, the idea is to supplement these more detailed, better researched and more balanced guides with my own ramblings.

These guides originally came about as people were forever asking for pub tips and the like for places I’ve been to – I soon grew tired of typing out the same emails every few weeks and opted instead to keep the information on the web on the NATA Online site.

All opinions expressed in this guide are those of the author, and not necessarily those of the Netley Abbey Tartan Army.

- For more information about NATA (the Netley Abbey Tartan Army), including photos and diary accounts of many trips abroad with Scotland, as well as much more travel information and guides), please visit www.netleyabbeytartanarmy.com
- For more information on me, please visit www.paulallison.co.uk



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Romania Introduction

Romania is a bit of an eye-opener. The infrastructure is still pretty Eastern Bloc, and on the streets of Bucharest, you will be exposed to scenes of poverty at every turn - this is something you will have to come to terms with. Once you get over the culture shock, and accept that Bucharest will never be as pretty as Prague, you can start to appreciate the country for what it is - a very friendly, welcoming destination.

There is a very high crime rate in the country, and corruption (even amongst some officials) is reportedly rife, however we did not encounter either on our visit. The most prevalent crime is pick-pocketing, even to the extent of bag-slashing, and the Lonely Planet guide sincerely warned against back-packs or bum-bags. There have also been reports from friends who have travelled in the past of muggings and assaults, but again, we had no problems in this respect. The one annoyance we did suffer, on a very regular basis, was street-begging. It would appear that many women have kids specifically for this purpose, and they actively encourage them to harass westerners on the street - whether you give or not is up to you (I never would, personally) - but do not get angry/violent. The police we encountered (mainly at the game) were very friendly and hands-off.

The country is quite anarchic - get a map, but look on it as more of a suggestion that fact! We encountered streets that did not exist, and main roads that had been dug up and all street lights switched off. The other thing to look out for all over the country, particularly in Bucharest, and especially around (and to the south of) the People's Palace, are stray dogs. Released into the wild twenty years ago when Ceausescu ripped down the Old Town, these dogs have bred and formed into highly territorial packs - most are very friendly, but stay away (you don't want it's scent on you for a start!).

Romania is still very much a "cash" economy. ATM's are easily accessible (Visa is better than MasterCard), and exchange houses offering decent rates and no commission abound (many are 24 hour). Do take Euro's or US Dollars, however, not Pounds Sterling, as you will get much better rates (just don't change too much at the airport).



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The Romanian language is not slavic but latin in origin. That means it's closer to Italian or French than is it to Russian or Czech. This also means that if you learnt a little French (or Italian or Spanish) at school, you should get the gist of what's going on pretty quickly. Do learn a few words, as it goes down a treat. "Buna Seara. Doua beri, va rog. Multumesc" is "Good evening, two beers please. Thanks" - sorted*!

Alcohol-wise, the local beer is very palatable. Ursus seems to be the most popular brand, and very crisp it is to. Also expect to see Bergenbier (nicer from bottles, for some reason) and Silva (not so great) widely available. Tuica and Palinka, both types of plum brandy, are the rocket-fuel of choice, but we never dabbled, and Romanian wine is highly regarded, but very sweet (like Hungarian stuff) - we had some fresh wine from the barrel in a Romanian restaurant.

Bucharest Introduction

First things first: if you've come for a romantic weekend, you're not going to be too impressed. Bucharest is no Prague. It is a large, sprawling, soviet-style planned city with very dusty (i.e. muddy) streets. A lot of planning went into the wide long boulevards flanked by soviet-style apartment and office blocks (and loads of balconies - Romanians have a weakness for balconies, apparently). As for the "Paris of the East" tag that it was once so proud of, Bucharest now shares the traffic problems and dog mess with it's French cousin, but little of the romance, sights or atmosphere. However... if you accept Bucharest for what it is - a vibrant and ambitious capital of a reborn nation - then you'll have a much better time for it, I promise!

Bucharest is served by two airports - the old Baneasa, now reserved for charter flights; and the shiny, new (but a little small for the number of people using it) Otopeni airport - both are on the Ploiesti road, with Baneasa closest to the centre. Bent taxi drivers abound - a fair fare to the city is around 5\$-8\$, many will try to charge 50\$ or more. You may want to arrange a transfer through your hotel/travel agent (see links below - Just Romania can arrange transfers on their own). You can always chance the bus, a snip at 0.60\$ return, and see where it takes you (we opted for the transfer - three in a car for 15\$).



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Taxis are dodgy throughout the city - try to use reputable firms like Cristaxi or Perozxi wherever possible. The metro system's not too bad - the north-south M2 line is where the money was spent. M1, M3 and M4 are less frequent (every 10 minutes or so during the day). There's also buses and trams (which we needed to use to get back from Steaua's ground), but I've no idea how they work!

The city's very spread out, and there is no discernable centre, although the Piata Universitatii (where the Intercontinental Hotel is) is the de facto centre - and is handy for just about everywhere. Piata Romana to the north has a lot going on, but lacks importance, whilst the vast Piata Unirii to the south is just too big and empty. Unirii was intended to form the new city centre, but never really took off, although when "downtown Bucharest" is referred to - this is the place. Piata Revolutiei (where the Hilton hotel is), close to Universitatii, is another pretty central area. If you're looking for the Old Town, there's not too much left (Ceausescu bulldozed almost 20% of the centre to create space for the new "Civic Centre" - Unirii and the People's Palace), but you can find the remnants (literally) between Unirii and Blvd Regina Elisabeta.

There are plenty of accommodation options, spread across the whole city, but the cheapest are not the most central. Several budget options, and the TA-staple Ibis, are to be found near the Gara de Nord train station. The most central (and priciest) are the Intercontinental, the Majestic and the Hilton - the Marriott bucks the trend by being the other side of the Palace, but it's managed to generate it's own wee community (albeit one that is geared towards the expense account visitor). The Ambassador Hotel is a vast art-deco behemoth halfway between Romana and Universitatii, and faces the slightly posher Lido. The Horoscop is on the far side of Piata Unirii, and right next door to the Harp. With the affordable hotel rooms snaffled by package operators, and the pricey hotels very pricey indeed, we opted for the apartment option - we had three apartments between us, all in central (enough) locations, and paid from 50\$-80\$ a night (with three of us in the most expensive apartment, it worked out at £20 per person, per night).

Paul's recommendations:

- #1 Bar – Amsterdam Grand Café or La Curtea Veche
- #1 Sight – The Peoples' Palace
- #1 Thing to do – Go to Transylvania



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Bucharest: must see sights

Bucharest is hardly choc-a-bloc with must see sights, so you may wish to consider a day-trip. Otherwise (and we have included football stadia here)...

- **The People's Palace** - (aka The Palace of Parliament, The House of the People or Casa Poporului) is the second biggest building in the world (by surface area), and third by volume. If it matters (and it did to me), the Pentagon is the biggest, and Cape Canaveral is the second biggest by volume. So that makes the People's Palace the biggest outside of America. Come and marvel at the sheer waste of money it is - built by an egomaniac whilst people starved. Has to be seen to be believed.
- The rest of the **Civic Centre** - the "Civic Centre" is the generic name given to the redevelopment of Southern Bucharest, and includes the People's Palace, as well as Piata Unirii, Unirii Boulevard, and the government buildings to the south. Many of these were unfinished by the time of the 1989 Revolution, and still stand as shells.
- **Statue of Remus and Romulus** - it's just a wee statue, and it's marooned on a traffic island at the top of Piata Romana, but it is a potent symbol of Romanian nationality. A gift from Rome, it celebrates Romania's Roman ancestry.
- **The Arcul de Triumf** - Knocked up in the 1930s to celebrate reunification, this is one of the reasons Bucharest was known as the "Paris of the East". Not worth a trip in it's own right - you'll see it on your way in from the airport. See, sightseeing's easy the NATA way!
- **Stadionul Ghencea** (home of Steaua Bucharest) - This stadium is way, way out - just inside the city limits of Bucharest, but just outside civilisation! If going for a match, allow plenty of time, then add on 45 minutes just to be sure. If going just to see it - are you sure it's worth it? Tram 32 or 33 (I was drunk, and it was raining) brought us back to Unirii (an expensive cab took us there). It may



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look like walking distance on a map, but it's not a pleasant route! Apparently, road signs in Ghencea warn about drunks in the road! There were pubs around, but we didn't venture into any (it was dark, wet and late, and Saints had just lost). I don't know if there's a shop at the ground, but there is an official, and woefully under stocked one, on Strada Ion Brezoianu (near McDonalds on Elisabeta). Thankfully, the national team no longer play here, as they now play at...

- **Stadional National** - not to be confused with FC National Bucharest, who play in a smaller stadium just north of the Marriott Hotel (which we were going to visit, but stayed in the pub instead - blame Beckerbrau!). A big, uncovered bowl shaped ground to the east of the centre - get a metro to Piata Muncii and walk for 15 minutes away from the city down Bulevardul Basarbia, past the park. The Stadium is set back from the road, and has a circular road all around it (and little else, bar woods and other sports grounds), although there are a couple of basic bars by the main entrance road, and a couple of small restaurants along the way.
- **Dinamo Stadium** (home to Dinamo Bucharest) - home to the Red Dogs, and the small cafe bar of the same name. Dinamo is everything you should expect of a communist era stadium - a big uncovered bowl, with a couple of big statues and a team name mosaic thrown in. The Red Dogs is at the main gate (along with the well-stocked club shop), but if you head around the stadium to the left (as you look it) to the club office building, you'll find a small, shabby pizzeria that is insanely popular with the locals (even just for beer and coffee), and is very cheap. The main road running past the ground also has some drinking options. This ground is an easy walk from the Romana end of town, and even easier from Stefan Cel Mare metro. If you're in the area - make sure you pay a visit to Sport Spirit as well (see below).

Err, that's about it! The streets of the old town are interesting enough, but that's probably where you'll be doing your drinking. The Village Museum (up near the Arcul de Triumf) is also highly recommended, but I didn't go, so you'll have to make your own mind up. Well, after all that sight-seeing, you'll be needing a drink...



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Bucharest: Top pubs

Thankfully, there's no shortage of great pubs in the town. Do be warned, however, as things do change rapidly. Helen had done her usual trick of preparing a list off various internet sources, however one that was only a few years old proved to be woefully out of date. The moral of this story? Get up to date info (from In Your Pocket, for example), and remember that this guide was based on October 2003, and places may have closed/changed. The pubs listed roughly go from north to south, so you could (theoretically, anyway) pub-crawl them together. My favourites have been starred:

- **Red Dogs** (Northern City Centre) - A Dinamo fans bar at the main entrance on Stefan Cel Mare. Very small, but friendly and with some old team photos on the wall. Worth a visit if you're already at the ground.
- ***Sport Spirit** (Northern City Centre) - Imagine a greasy spoon cafe populated by spotty, hooded youths, with every inch of wall space taken up by sports memorabilia. Then throw in a loud stereo, four impossibly fit young women gyrating on the bar in spray-on jeans, and imagine trying to get a round in by reaching between their legs for a beer! Can't promise you'll have the same experience (it was Friday night), but this amazing bar in Str Voda Caragea is well worth a visit. As is the nearby...
- ***Barbar** (Northern City Centre) - just around the corner, off Calea Dorobanti, is this tiny, but very cosy, bar. Hard to find - head down the stairs and into it's warm embrace.
- **Bistro Atheneu** (Northern City Centre) - More of a restaurant than a bar, but they were happy to serve us beer. Opposite the Athenaeum and just along from the Hilton.
- **The English Pub** (in the Hilton, Northern City Centre) - we went here to try and get a quiet drink in familiar surroundings, and found ourselves in the midst of expense account bores too scared to wander the streets for a drink. Not recommended.



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- **Cesky Pub** (just east of Piata Universitatii) - a big disappointment. The only Czech thing about this place is the highly priced bottled Budvar. Trying to be too trendy - not worth the trek.
- ***Edgar's Pub** (just west of Piata Universitatii, in Str Edgar Quinet) - A decent enough wooden affair, with a very good menu. Almost an Irish pub.
- ***Red Lion** (just west of Piata Universitatii, in Str Academiei, south of Elisabeta) - Sounds like an English pub, tastes like an Italian pizzeria. Very friendly staff, and were happy enough just to serve beer (although the pizza is very good and very cheap).
- **Jos Palaria** (just west of Piata Universitatii, off Elisabeta - one street in from the Red Lion) - look out for the huge plastic sombrero (the name means "Keep it under your hat" or similar). Supposedly the smallest bar in town - there are a few seats upstairs. Only bottled beers - we were disappointed with this place.
- ***Whispers** (to the east of the Old Town, at the bottom of Str Ion Brezoianu) - A very well done pub/bistro on the edge of the Old Town.
- **Caru' cu Bere** (Str Stavropoleos, in the Old Town) - More of a restaurant than a pub - we brass-necked it and they relented and served us beer (but try and push the beer snacks - we would have but we'd just eaten in Whispers. The interior is absolutely gorgeous and is over 100 years old. The name means Wagon Of Beer.
- **Gara Lipscani** (Str Selari, in the Old Town) - Train themed, this friendly underground bar is popular for cheap beer and food. Suffers from garish strip lighting and early closing.
- ***La Curtea Veche** (in a narrow lane off Str Selari, Old Town) - A small, unassuming bar with Dinamo Zagreb and FC National Bucharest pictures on the walls. Very friendly and very down to earth, with a load more seats upstairs.
- ***Amsterdam Grand Cafe** (Old Town) - A very plush, large cafe bar in Str Covaci. Large menu and attentive service, but on the



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- expensive side. On the plus side, has Rummikub for late night gaming sessions.
- **Horoscop Pizzeria** (next to The Harp on the south side of Piata Unirii) - okay, not a pub, but a hotel pizzeria. Still we did drink (and eat) here.
 - ***Becker Bräu** (on it's own) - my favourite pub in the city, but that may have something to do with it's oasis-like presence in a desert of shell-like buildings and packs of roaming wild dogs. To be found due south of the People's Palace on Calea Rahovei (no 155), in an area you will not believe a pub could possibly exist. This huge cavernous German style brew-pub has it's own superb brew on draught, and a decent sized menu - worth finding (just mind out for the dogs!)
- Ones we wanted to go to (but couldn't find or didn't have time), in no particular order :
- **Erik The Red** - supposedly on Str Selari, with a viking boat for a bar. No sign of it!
 - **Laptaria Enache** (4th Floor of National Theatre) - Reputation as one of the best bars in town - we just didn't make time for it.
 - **The Harp/The Dubliner/The White Horse** - A trio of ex-pat haunts. The Harp is at the bottom of Unirii, the other two are in the northern part of town. With all the other pubs in town, we didn't see the need.
 - **Die Deutsche Kneipe** - a German owned traditional pub on Calea Victoriei.
 - **La Mama** - a chain of very highly regarded Romanian restaurants, with one on Str Episcopiei!
 - **Impaler** - Supposedly built over the tomb of Vlad Tepes - this large place is right opposite the Amsterdam Grand Cafe, but just wasn't open.
 - **Brit Inn** - Supposedly in the grounds of the British Embassy and only open Thursday evenings. We just didn't believe it was possible.
 - **The Green Devil** - Absolutely no sign of this old town pub, supposedly on the 8th Floor of an apartment block. There was, however, a big hole where an apartment block may have once stood.



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- **Insomnia** - a mythical Country & Western bar supposedly on Bibescu Voda (behind Unirii) - not a sniff!

Day Trips

It's quite a long way to go in a day (almost 3 hours each way), but I really would recommend taking the trip out to Transylvania. Prices vary enormously - from 50\$ to 100\$ per person, so do shop around.

Romvision, Watchland and Just Romania can all arrange in advance (although several people did manage to find a tourist office in Bucharest and book that way) - we found Just Romania's price far and away the best.

From what I can tell, the gist of most Transylvania tours is pretty similar - drive north to Siniai, where you visit the fairytale Peles Castle and learn a wee bit about Romanian royalty (more interesting than it sounds), then further northwards to Bran and Bran Castle. Bran Castle is "sold" as Dracula's Castle, but that's a bit of an exaggeration (Vlad "The Impaler" Tepes may have stayed there. Once.) - it is breathtaking (and that's just the hike up the path to it). There's loads of traditional souvenirs for sale at the bottom, including Vampire wine and Dracula vodka. Most tours also include a lunch, as did ours - a vast three-course affair washed down with local house wine. We were exceptionally lucky with our guide - his grandparents were from nearby Brasov, and he was keen to show us that as well - so we got an extra bit thrown in.

Brasov is far more prettier than Bucharest, and has old churches, cobbled streets and merchant houses ago-go. It's also much more compact, and therefore easier to see things - we were there for about an hour, and I feel I know the place already! Most bizarre of all the sights was the "Sheffield Pub", tucked down a back alley, with the Sheffield United blades crest for a pub sign. The city did remind a wee bit of Kaunas in Lithuania, so you can make your own minds up (if you've been to Kaunas, that is!).

Another trip people made, albeit for a couple of days rather than a there and back job, was out to Constanta on the black sea coast.



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