

# Orthodoxy, Myths and Rural Life

The “No 1” place that the travelers want to see in Romania, when they arrive for the first time, is the province of Bucovina in the north-east of the country. Bucovina is famous for its painted churches – painted, that is, on the outside rather than just on the inside which would be more usual for Orthodox churches. This feature is unique in the Byzantine world and these churches have kept their vivid colors on the outside walls despite the vicissitudes of 500 years of rough weather. Themes such as “The Jesse Tree”, “the Prayer of All the Saints”, “The Hymn of Mary” and “The Siege of Constantinople” are to be seen on a beautiful palette of reds, blues, greens and yellows.



The monasteries of Voronet, Sucevita and Moldovita which all feature these churches are within easy reach of each other by road and are interesting, not only for those who want to study history or art, but also for those who are fascinated simply by local culture and something “completely different”.

However, perhaps the traveler would like to see Transylvania first. Transylvania is, of course, famous through Bram Stoker’s novel “Dracula” but yes, it really exists! There is a lot more to this province besides ghoulish castles and a bloodthirsty count. Here we find a pure environment combining the majesty of medieval fortified churches with well kept villages displaying beautifully preserved traditional architecture along their colourful main streets.

Maramures, the very northern part of Transylvania, is rapidly becoming a favourite destination as it depicts a way of life which disappeared from the West long ago. Here can be found sleepy villages where womenfolk still wash their blankets in the tiny streams, where grain is milled by water power and where, on Sundays, people still wear colourful traditional costumes for their “Sunday best”.



Many of the churches are traditional wooden structures and, indeed, new churches are still built using the same materials and methods. Here too, on most of the farms, the humble horse and cart still reigns supreme.

Unfortunately things are moving quickly and the way it is used to be is changing - more quickly than most people want. This is perhaps inevitable as local people strive to achieve those things which the Western world takes for granted - housing with all mod cons, cars, mobile phones and so on. But this is also why the tourists that are arriving want to savour Romania before the old way of life disappears.

Of course, that's why Romania is not a destination for mass tourism. Luckily, you hardly see parks packed with coaches or queues for buying tickets. It is mainly a destination for private and personalized tours, where curious tourists are exploring the villages and the countryside and where they can speak with the locals and enjoy leisurely meals. Romania doesn't attract tourists for cheap beach holidays (even though Black Sea resorts certainly exist!), but for walking, trekking, cultural and wild life holidays.

Romanian tourism is slowly in a process of rebirth, still dealing with a poor infrastructure but with great hopes in eco-tourism and self-sustaining rural communities. Responsible and sustainable tourism here is not a trend but a way of life. Strip farming and peasants living with the seasons are part of normal life in this corner of Europe and these self sufficient people are more than happy to share their products with their guests in small family run B&Bs.



Advertised as “Life as it used to be”, “Rural Romania Revealed” or the “Forgotten Corner of Europe”, Romania is struggling to change the bad image that western television has bestowed upon it, often very unfairly. This is the biggest challenge Romania has to surmount.

Alan Heywood, the director of Ffestiniog Travel, UK, is speaking about Romania: “Personally, I think Romania is one of Europe’s best kept secrets. Very few people in the UK know anything about it which is why it is so difficult to sell. I think the whole problem is summed up by the fact that everybody who has been on our tours say that Romania is wonderful and they usually add “much better than we expected”.”

“This was my wife Pam’s reaction too and it was Pam’s enthusiasm that persuaded Sue M. to join our tour last year. The problem is that this “drip feeding” of enthusiasm works too slowly. Pam must have told about 50 people including her relatives how much she had enjoyed the holiday but only Sue M. actually did anything about it.”

“If so few in the UK know anything about Romania, that means that there is a huge untapped market if only the message could be got across.”

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