

# Moldova: Proud of Being Europe's Least Popular Country

Not all countries pride themselves in being least visited by tourists, but for Moldova, it is something they couldn't be more proud of. Declared as Europe's least visited country, the Republic of Moldova boasts of a whopping 9,000 international arrivals back in 2011. While other countries would probably think of this as a death sentence, Moldova is doing the opposite, possibly holding a countrywide celebration.



Voted as the #2 "Off the Beaten Path" destination in the world (after landslide winner Bhutan) by Lonely Planet readers in the 2013 Traveller's Choice poll, Moldova is a proof that the best places are perhaps those least visited by tourists. A little bit of help from USAID and CEED II was all it took for the country's tourism sector to wave the unpopularity flag high and proud, showing the world that being unpopular is, in fact, cool.

What is it with Moldova that makes it too cool to be popular among tourists? Is it the country's capital city of Chisinau (which apparently won't be winning any architectural beauty awards soon), or Milestii Mici and its wine cellars? Perhaps it is the fact that no aspect of the country has been fashioned in such a way to cater to tourism or even practical convenience. If you're eager to see the Orheiul Vechi Monastery Complex (arguably the country's most popular sight), then take the overused minibus and squeeze in with the villagers who just finished their shopping at Chisinau.

But if you think the citizens of Moldova neglect their visitors, you have it all wrong. Moldova might not be the most popular destination, but it boasts of the most welcoming locals on that side of Europe. Hop on the bus and the driver will take you exactly where you want to go, with a free running commentary on the latest news and sights. Plus, the locals along the way greet you as if you were one of them (albeit in Romanian).



Moldova is not the usual subject of postcards or setting of Hollywood movies. But if there's one thing to be proud of, it is the country's wine industry, which actually produces fantastic varietals. Moldova's wineries were the sole supplier of the former USSR, back in the day when thirst could only be quenched by fine-tasting wine. However, the industry plummeted after the break up.

It took around 20 years for Cricova, the so called "Grand Duke" of Moldovan wineries, to recover. Just as business was starting to boom, Russia banned Moldovan wine in 2006 and 2010, allegedly due to political reasons. This proved to be a blessing in disguise, however, with Moldova catering to new customers in Asia.

A stone's throw away from Chisinau, Cricova boasts of 120 kilometers of labyrinthine roadways, with 60 being used for wine storage. 100 meters underground, these wine cellars hold almost 1.2 million bottles of the rarest and finest wines.

Held during the first week of October, Moldova's Wine Festival is perhaps the biggest celebration in the country. However, you don't have to wait until October to get a taste of the country's delicacy; tours and tastings can now be done all year round.



Chisinau isn't looking too bad either. It has gone a long way from overpriced restaurants catering to thugs and overly made-up women. The country's capital now welcomes you with reasonably priced restaurants and a nightlife that almost parallels its more popular European counterparts.

Although the party scene sounds rather tempting, any trip to Moldova is incomplete without spending time in the country's villages. Butuceni, not far from Orheiul Vechi, boasts of an agro-tourism experience via Agro Pensiunea Butuceni. They offer rooms, and can also arrange meals, tours, and other cultural experiences.

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