

One highlight of Romania is the helpful people. Perhaps they get lots of practice helping tourists since there is no tourist information office at either the Bucharest Airport nor the main train station, Gara du Nord. So, I arrived Gara du Nord (by bus from the airport) in a downpour without a map. My guest house was supposedly close by and I thought the bus had actually been on its street. I called them for directions, but no answer. I asked a man standing at a nearby gas station and he pointed me in the correct general direction. Then I stopped in a bank and a young man



was nice enough to pull up Google maps on his phone. About 15 minutes later I found it and after several rings of the doorbell it was answered. At least the person (one of the cleaners, I think) was willing to take my suitcase up the two ornate but steep flights of stairs! My room is huge and beautiful and I make hot tea and dry out. I have been traveling since 3:30 am so I am ready for dinner and bed.

The library's ten-year-old guidebook had described this neighborhood as emerging – and it still is. There are some new office buildings and a few of the handsome old buildings (pre-WW I) have been restored, including my guest house. I found a couple of not-open restaurants so headed back towards the train station and found what turned out to be an excellent steak and burger place with peanut shells on the floor (I haven't seen that in a while).



In the morning I am headed to Old Town for a walking tour. In the metro my credit card wouldn't work, but 8 lei (~\$2) bought a daily pass, there was a very helpful ticket seller who also showed me how the entry turnstile works, and she had a Metro Map. Of course, the stop for the walking tour is the huge Piatti Unii, I have no

idea which exit to take or where to go once on the surface. I picked an exit, asked a pedestrian, got lucky and I am just across the river from the entrance to Old Town, anchored by Starbucks!

Fortunately, the Europa Bucharest hotel is nearby, serving its reasonably-priced huge buffet breakfast, available to the public. I partake.

Our walking tour guide has maps, yay!!! Romania is 80% Orthodox, and the language derives 60% from Latin, 30% Dracian (the original inhabitants of the region) and 10% Slav. The Old Town is continuing to be restored and the tour, in English, is excellent. We start at the Old Court Church.

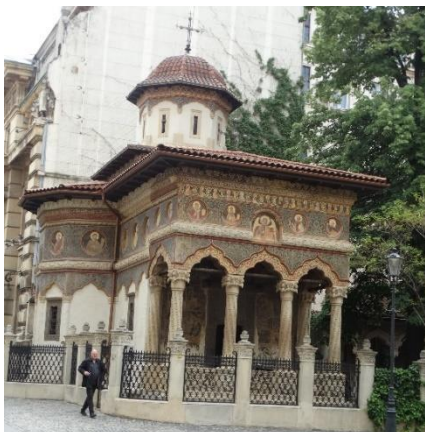


We traverse

an underground passage recounting the history of the competition between the Dracians and the conquering Romans and are entertained by a harmonica player. Due to the Roman period, statues of Romulus and Remus, the mythological “founders” of Rome being suckled by a wolf, appear periodically in town, as they do in Rome. Elsewhere we are entertained by another street musician.



A couple of highlights. The tiny Stavropoleos Church (1724) with Corinthian columns, Arabesque arches



and Byzantine interior is quite elegant despite (or because of) its polyglot architecture.

There is also a beautiful covered Passage, unusual to me in being L-shaped. I find a bookstore with a decent selection of paperbacks in English and buy three to get me through the rest of the



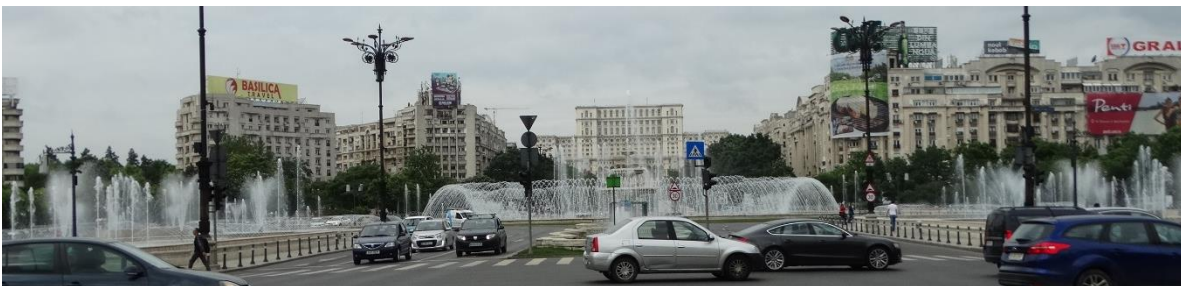
trip.

After the walking tour and lunch in a nice open space surrounded by galleries and art supply shops, I took the Metro to see the most important site – Ceausescu’s Palace of Parliament building, second largest in surface area in the world after the USA Pentagon. I had a nice view from a park but have no interest in doing the tour. On my final morning I had a different view, from the

Piatta Unii, with perhaps more fountains than I have ever seen in one setting, one for each county in Romania. There were also a lot of American firms represented here: Citibank, Amway,



Herbalife, Metlife.



I was wondering about the money which has a really different texture. Anecdote is that when an IMF representative was visiting the Central Bank, they noticed that everyone was paying cash, no credit/debit cards, and remarked that soon it would be plastic. So, the Central Bank created new money made from plastic, which came into circulation in 1999. It turns out Australia and New Zealand were already using polymer banknotes and I learned that today at

least two dozen countries do so. I don't remember that from visiting New Zealand, but that was back in 1998.

I am happy roaming neighborhoods, not trying to do museums or "sights". The early 20th C was Bucharest's "Golden Age" with neo-classical buildings and parks modeled after Paris. However, WW I bombings, two major earthquakes, and Ceausescu's post WW II redevelopment in the Soviet model, destroyed most of it.

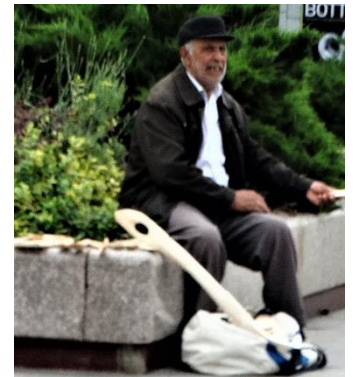


There are many flower kiosks, although I realized they are mostly selling artificial flowers.



There are also a fair number of elderly beggars and street sellers.

When I return to my room, I am greeted by a wedding party just exiting the lovely small church across the street.



As I walk and photograph in my 'hood, I see families barbecuing in courtyards, men in little groups drinking beer; it is a balmy spring Saturday evening.



And as I go to sleep, I hear the sounds of the “Proprete” men cleaning the sidewalk and street, emptying garbage, to a background of a neighbor’s Romanian music. I am happy I stayed in my “emerging” neighborhood.

My Romania plan is a clockwise circle tour by train primarily focusing on Transylvania and the painted monasteries of

northeastern Romania) over a at the airport, I bought the rest bought the first batch when I Romania’s national airline, en weeks earlier. (Train tickets are advance.) The same ticket also helpfully told me there two hours so I should take the communicated well considering we didn’t speak a common language.



Southern Bucovina (in two-week period. When I arrived of my train tickets, having passed through on Tarom, route to Cyprus from Paris three only available 30 days in seller lady remembered me and was no train to Gara du Nord for bus from one level down. She

After following a river below mountains, I arrive at my first stop, Sinaia, which I have named “turret town” as not only do the two main castles have lots of them, but they seem to adorn even otherwise simple





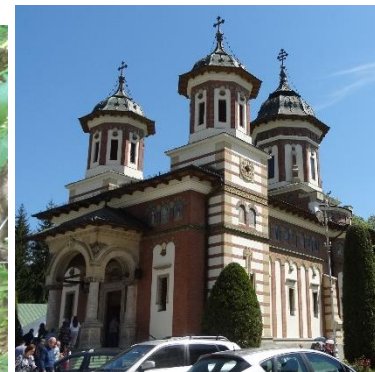
buildings. The ski areas on the hill above still have snow.

People were helpful with my suitcase on the train, in the underpass at the station, and with left luggage (I am traveling with only one 10kg carryon bag for a five-week trip). It is a beautiful sunny Sunday so the sites are mobbed. I skip tours and just enjoy the exterior of two castles, Pelesor and Peles



and walk through the park to the Monastery and

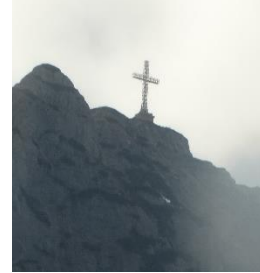
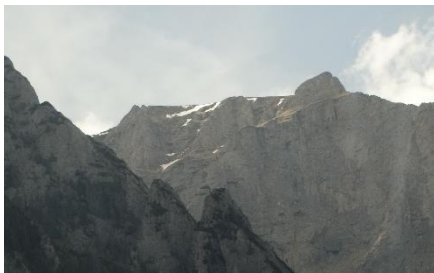
a cemetery.





I spend more time than I expected because I ended up going to the center of town for lunch – it was difficult to find food other than creperies and pastry shops. I finally found a restaurant, with a menu in Romanian. This is where I realize that all menus

have a comprehensive list of allergens and whether ingredients have been previously frozen. I end up just eating polenta and green beans. Sinaia is not a big town, but I got lost trying to return to the train station and again helpful people got me straightened out. Sinaia is the only town in Romania to have had two Royal train stations, used only by the castle occupants. In the early 20th C it was also a very high-class ski and spa destination with classic hotels and a casino as well as the ski areas and chalets. Fortunately, there are frequent onward trains to Brasov where I will spend the next two nights. The mountain views departing from Sinaia are dramatic.



At Brasov I call my guest house to ask what bus to take, they don't know and say just take a taxi. Given the distance and the local economy the fare at almost \$25 was outrageous but the driver was full of information. It is hot today 27C, normal highs are 22C like Paris. At least my hosts have a map and tourist pamphlet. I skip the evening walking tour in favor of a 15-minute little train overview and an excellent Cobb salad for dinner on the main plaza.



The next morning, I want to visit Raznov Citadel. Turns out I need to get to a different intercity bus terminal in Brasov by local bus, and I neglect to buy a round-trip ticket. The intercity terminal is very basic, but once again people are helpful and you buy your ticket on the bus

from the driver. I get off one station too soon in Raznov, but that is fine as I get to see more of the town, not including where the train station is, which is my alternative return if there is no bus.



The route was a mixture of farmland, forests, industrial, suburban and urban towns, with a mountainous backdrop.



This town is full of second-hand clothing shops, as is Brasov.



The young man running a coffee shop speaks English and sort of can explain where the train station is. I choose not to actually go up to the citadel (although later I realized there might have been a funicular that was running), it is enough to see it. There is a nice flower market and I see the evidence of the forest products industry when waiting for the return bus.



Fortunately, I get the intercity bus back to Brasov, but then I have difficulty finding the connecting bus stop to my part of town. Again, helpful people, and when I get the bus, I realize I have no ticket and these drivers don't sell tickets nor was there any ticket booth near where I got on. An older lady gave me her ticket, I tried to give her the price of 5 lei (~\$1) but she refused showing me some sort of pass. So, perhaps she has free transport as a senior?

I am realizing that my notes, and this travelogue are mostly about the mundane daily logistics of the trip!!! The photos will have to tell the story of the country.

One of the major sights in Brasov is the Black Church, from 1543, part of the Reformation. Apparently, sermons were so long that people decided they had to have seating (Orthodox Churches don't) so families/organizations built their own pews. The higher your (wealth, influence?) the closer your pews were to the pulpit. No photos are allowed inside, but there are oriental rugs hanging everywhere, supposedly the largest collection outside of Turkey. The explanations are all in German as this is Lutheran. Later on, when I was back near the church I saw and overheard a young girl (perhaps 12, 13 years old) coaching a young boy (perhaps 10, perhaps her brother) in how to beg in English, "I am hungry", "I am thirsty".



Brasov is in the center of the country with the Carpathian Mountains nearby. The highest ski resort in Romania, Poiana, at 1799m is nearby. A weird Brasov statistic is the average annual temperature of 6-7C. There is snow on the ground for 71 days and summer is 50 days long.

As I travel around the country, I realize that Romania is a polyglot mixture of the regional ethnicities (although not racially diverse). The rural areas have changed hardly at all which has preserved the Romanian language.

In Brasov an interesting “Rope” lane (~ 1m wide) is full of street art that makes you think it has



three dimensions. I dallied too long there and missed getting to visit the synagogue which closed at 4 pm when the students finished school. A city tour bus had just started operating the prior week (no advertisements or pamphlets yet, just signs posted at the stops) so I took it to easily get uphill to see the other bastions and walk along the wall.



Surprisingly, the train station had no cafés where you could sit and have a coffee and pastry which I had counted on before my departure to Sighasoara. There was a cafeteria, not open, an open bar, but only men inside. Even the toilets were not well signed and I wasn't finding any English or French speakers. There were plenty of places to buy a coffee or a pastry, but

nowhere to sit! It appeared a large number of students were headed in the Bucharest direction, opposite mine.

We again follow a muddy river, fields, and villages and fortified churches.



My Sighasoara guest house had said there is no bus from the train station and to take a taxi. But there is no taxi rank or taxi's in sight when I arrive. Fortunately, one couple had also gotten off and had a car and driver waiting for them. The driver didn't speak English but the couple did and offered to call a taxi for me which arrived quickly and was metered. Much appreciated.

There is a large Orthodox church in the center of the lower town and I can see the Old Town perched up on the hill. My guest house is about a 15-minute walk back to the center of Old Town and my hostess gives me easy directions and restaurant recommendations for lunch. There are no maps as City Hall gives them out free to the guest houses/hotels but not before the tourist season which doesn't start until June 1.

After a delicious lunch it is all uphill. You enter the UNESCO -protected walled city under the clock tower and I opted to follow the wall from tower to tower as long as my energy held.



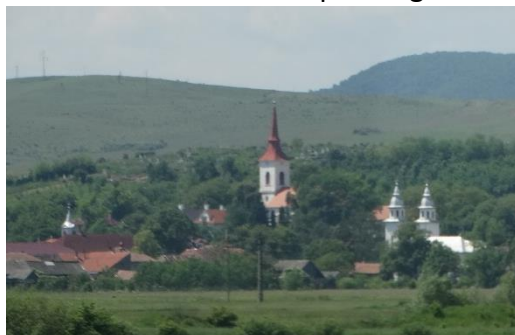


Much to my surprise I made it to the top to the “Church on the Hill” which had a loaner typed history page in English that I could photograph. This is another example of the church/fortress prevalent in this part of Romania dating from the 13th-14th C. I actually entered from below which is a German cemetery. There is also a school on top of the hill for which the covered staircase (that I descended) was built.



The Lutheran Evangelical Church, further downhill, has an excellent exhibition of the history of the Reformation in central and eastern Europe. Many churches have been Orthodox, Reformed and/or Roman or Greek Catholic at various times in their history.

My next stop is Sibiu and en route I am surprised at how advanced people’s vegetable gardens are given it is mid-May and they have such severe winters. In most villages I see spires of at least three different types of churches. There are also “halts” where a passenger can flag the train to get on, or off.



On arrival I am again assisted by a local woman who says I should take a taxi and not try to walk to my hotel. I have a map which suggests it is a straightforward walk of about 15 minutes but it is starting to rain so I take her advice. It was a good thing because I hadn’t counted on how steep

the approach is to the Upper Town where I was staying. Interestingly, I inadvertently hired my taxi not from the taxi rank, but across from the station where many of the drivers were having lunch. The driver who was to take me had to get directions from one of

his colleagues. Then it was only a short (flat) walk from the end of the road around the large plaza to my hotel.



This part of Transylvania (the area between Brasov, Sighasoara and Sibiu) was occupied by the Saxons from the 12th C. The German influence is very strong and church services at both the Lutheran Evangelical and Catholic churches are given in Romanian, Hungarian and German. My guide for the walking tour attended German language schools, is married to a Hungarian woman and they speak Romanian at home. He tells us that there are 18 nationalities in

Romania and everyone has a right to be educated in their own language. While at the local level the multi-ethnicity seems very compatible, at the national level the EU stopped funding road projects in the country due to the excessive level of corruption. There was even a sculpture to corruption in Bucharest coming out of the metro station at Piata Romana!

The Lutheran Evangelical church with its patterned tile roof (similar to Dijon, France) is currently under restoration. However, a very interesting exhibit of famous women in some unusual professions (parachutist, spies) is mounted on their fence.





One of the prettiest buildings is the City Hall, built only in 1902, while one of the oldest, an “eyelid” building, pre-dates the major plaza. Its lion frescoes were only discovered during restoration in 2005.



In 2007, together with Luxemburg, Sibiu was a European Capital of Culture and there has long been a relationship between the two. Apparently, the local language is quite close to

Luxembourgish language.



The guilds were a major part of society organization in the middle ages and as in Brasov and Sighasoara, guilds were responsible for maintaining the towers of the fortifications.

walking tour, I decided I didn’t need the scheduled to be in Sibiu.



Since I had walked quite a bit of the town on my arrival the evening before, and had this thorough whole extra day I had

I made sure my hotel in Cluj Napoca day early and headed to the train change my ticket for a small fee and to eat nearby. Nothing nearby so I ate in the station café with mostly train workers. Of course, the food was good, plentiful and cheap! I didn’t know the names of anything but pointed to a kind of kefta that one man was having and asked for that. My white wine was served in a beer glass. Total cost about \$4.00.

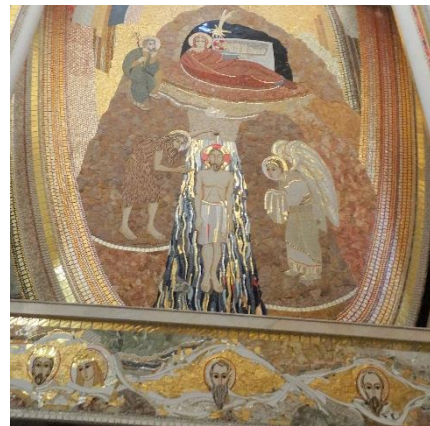
could accommodate me a station. I was able to then searched for a place

The downside of this train route is that I have a couple hour layover in Copsa Mica which is a large station mostly used for connections. There are no facilities. The one lady ticket taker let me use her personal bathroom when my need became urgent after a couple of hours!

My evening arrival in Cluj was slightly adventurous. This is the only time I felt I may have been deliberately cheated. I knew that my hotel was right in the middle of Cluj near the main square and it is a big city. But the taxi kept taking me further and further into the residential areas and

I kept protesting. But there was Hotel Meteor. So, I paid him and got out. And, of course the night clerk didn't speak English, but she could accommodate me but no, she had no Booking.com reservation for me. Finally, I asked if there was another Hotel Meteor and of course there was, right in the center where I had reserved. So, she called me a taxi and, no surprise, the one to arrive was the one from which I had just exited. So, I reluctantly paid him again to take me to my actual hotel right in the center.

Cluj is a major university city with over 100,000 students, second only to Bucharest in Romania. Its 300,000 population sprawls along 13 km of the Somes river. The major area of interest is the center, and it is known for the wide variety of religions represented. Unfortunately, the Roman Catholic Cathedral, Synagogue and Lutheran church were all closed for restoration. However, I was stunned by the mosaics in the Orthodox Parish Schimbalea la Fata, comparable to what I



had seen in the Basilica to St Theresa in Lisieux, France.



When I visited the Reformed church, photos of all the Reformed churches in Romania were displayed in their outside courtyard.

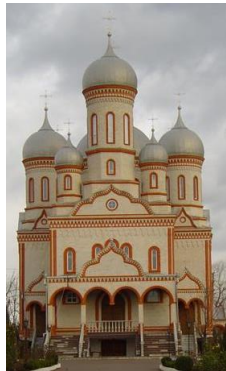
One reason for coming here is because it is considered the founding place of the Unitarian Church after the Edict of Torda in 1568 granted all persons the right to choose their own religion. A rock inside the Unitarian church is supposedly that from which Ferenc David preached and converted the

majority of the then-population. The current church dates from 1796 and I was able to attend the first part of Sunday church service before getting my train. The hymns were familiar but all words/service were in Hungarian.



Another of my objectives in Cluj was to visit rural villages in this Hungarian region of Romania. When the trip was planned for last year, I was going to stay in one of the rural homestays. However, as now my stay was on a Saturday night and there are no buses back to Cluj on Sunday, I had to content myself with a day tour. However, it was fantastic! There are over 40 Hungarian villages in this region of Transylvania and we visited several. My Hungarian guide is actually the manager of the Mercurius Tour company and did an excellent job, even though he was nervous as he doesn't usually guide in English.

En route we detoured to view some "tin roofed palaces" of wealthy Roma in Huedin, the capital of the Kalotaszeg region of Transylvania. Most of these houses are not lived in, the owners primarily live outside Romania (license plates I saw were London). The assumed origins of these Roma were in Western India and the tin roofs' designs are reminiscent of the medieval architecture there. These communities exist elsewhere in Romania and also in Soroco, Moldova where the houses take on themes such as the Bolshoi ballet, US capital, and Moorish palaces.



We also saw, however, the other extreme of Roma life, the nomads.



And the people

selling copper ware (including stills) at the artisan fair in Cluj are Lacht Roma.

The historic church was the focus of each village we visited. Always at the top of a hill, and originally either Orthodox or Roman Catholic, but now Reformed. They are famous for their painted ceilings, mostly created by Lorinc Umling and his son in the 18th C. The first church dates from the 13th C, and its bell from the 15th C. The ceiling was painted in 1765 and apparently no one any longer knows how to create the bell of wheat.



At least one church was attempting restoration of the frescoes that had been whitewashed over with the Reformation. In another I found that each Confirmation class created an



embroidered banner for the church. One had a very interesting portion of its cemetery dedicated to military and in yet another we were greeted by the artisan currently engaged in the restoration work!



These villages have some distinctive wooden features on their houses and many of the women are still dressed traditionally. Quite a contrast from Bucharest!



Sanraieu, where I was originally going to stay, has an extensive network of homestay houses (~45), the organizer is a wood worker, and in their home, there is a fine display of local artisan



products.

We also visited lovely Bridal Veil waterfall. However, when in realize the extent to which forest for Romania.



the rural areas you again products are a major export

I was fortunate that the weekend I was in Cluj there was a lot going on. Most importantly a super artisan fair from the broader region set up next to the Orthodox Cathedral. It was also graduation, Confirmation and preparation for the 17th Transylvania International Film Festival, TIFF, which attracts more than 100,000 visitors.



This year's honoree is Nicholas Cage who would receive the Transylvania Trophy for Special Contribution to World Cinema just days after my departure. The festival is one of the top 40 in

the world. Displays featured prior years' honorees, and the menu of films on offer is impressive.



Cluj also has a section of neo-Baroque buildings inspired by Baron Haussmann of Paris, especially “Mirror Street” with its twin buildings, which links the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Cathedrals. And, we have Romulus and Remus here again.

During my visit Romania has the Presidency of the Council of the European Union which rotates every six months. Next up, Finland.

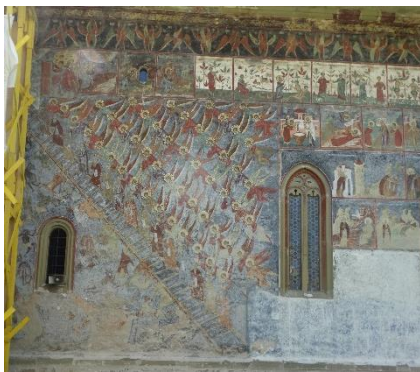


The next leg of the trip is a six-hour train ride northeast to the town of Suceava in Southern Bucovina, noted for its nearby 15th and 16th C painted monasteries. En route there is more



beautiful scenery and forest products. Like many parts of Europe, the Bucovina region has been part of many countries. Since WWII southern Bucovina is in the Moldavia region of Romania (not to be confused with the country of Moldova next door to the east). The rest of Bucovina is in Ukraine. These monasteries were built at a time when the region was threatened by Turkish invaders and the local armies and population would seek protection inside the walls.

I was fortunate to find a driving tour for the next morning. My companions are two other ladies, one a Spanish solo traveler, the other a Brazilian foreign service officer on vacation from Budapest. Our first stop is Sucavesti Monastery which today houses about 30 nuns. The building is under restoration, and the paintings date from the late 16th C, the newest of the monasteries I will see. No photos are permitted inside. Here are some details from the exterior.



All the monasteries, which face east, tell roughly the same stories (people were illiterate) including the 32 steps to achieve Holiness, a family tree of Jesus, Creation, Moses' life, old and new testament stories. There are the "innocents", children, in every one and also a depiction of Hell. The top row is always blue for Heaven. Each monastery tends to have a predominant color theme. Sucavesti is green.

Following the Habsburg occupation of Bucovina in 1785 most monasteries were closed and the occupants restored to secular life. They were similarly persecuted under Communism and it is only since 1990 that the inner life of these sanctuaries has matched the dynamism of their facades, created from natural dyes.



We pass occasional metal-roofed houses in the villages and at the top of a pass, 1100 m, take photos of the monument (1968 – Communist Era) to the workers who completed the road.

Horse and cart transport, as well as human, is prevalent and we catch site of a stork feeding its young.



The next monastery is Moldovita (yellow, 1537) with about 25 nuns. Here we have a battle scene.



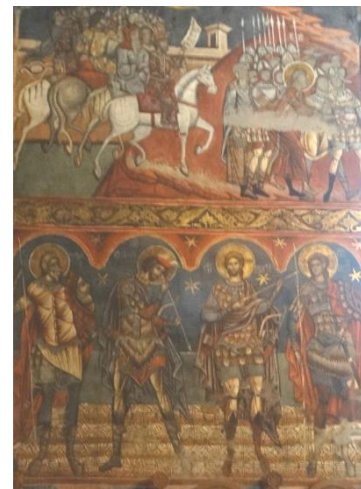
As we pass through the village of Frumosu we are fortunate to see the women collecting milk in their horse-drawn carts, and other horse-drawn transport of dirt, lumber and hay.



At Voronet (blue) there are 365 paintings inside and I found my birthday by counting back from Christmas. Here, in Hell, the animals have human body parts in their mouths! One area is usually reserved for local stories, and the Patron Saint of the monastery.



Humor (red, 1535) is the only one with the parable of the prodigal son, just to the right of the



siege of Constantinople. None of these monasteries' frescoes are "restored", only cleaned.

The next day one of the ladies and I hired the same driver/guide to head to Neamt Fortress, about an hour away. En route we visited two 18th C monasteries.

We travel through an apple-growing region (vineyards are further south) and often see Troita's, crosses, at the entrances to towns or at crossroads, reminding people to pray. The man-made lakes were government fish farms constructed in the Communist era and are now privately-owned producing carp, catfish and pike. The forests are 70% government-owned and "managed" i.e. replanted. In the villages we see colorful metal roofs replacing the former asbestos ones.



Agapia Monastery, built in 1641, frescoes from 1858-60, has about 200 nuns who run a flour mill and bread-making operation. Many of the nuns live in the village and have a small boutique where they sell their pastries and other local products. The fresco-painter created a self-portrait over the iconostasis and there are a lot of silver icons.



Varatec, built in 1785, frescoes from 1882, is currently undergoing restoration and we were able to take photos inside. The church was built in memory of a daughter who died.

After a long, slow hike uphill to Neamt fortress, built at the end of the 14th, beginning of the 15th C to protect against the Ottomans and Poles, we discovered that it was closed for three

days for cleaning. We were not the only tired visitors who wondered why a sign could not have been posted at the bottom of the hill!

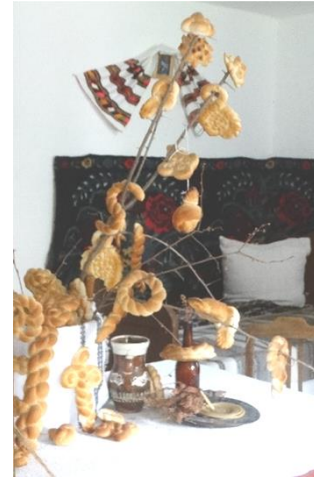


My final day in Suceava I spent walking the town, starting with its fortress. In 1476 it held off Mehmed II, conqueror of Constantinople. It was never taken, but in 1675 was blown up by the Turks. The fortress uses projected conversations of period people, to tell its story, the first time in Romania. It has an extensive collection with all information in English! And I photograph myself in period costume.



Adjacent is a large ethnographic village with houses, mills, a church and a weaving boutique, among others, relocated from throughout Bucovina. I always enjoy these glimpses into past lifestyles.





There is also a covered municipal market including an extensive flower department.



The church nearby the guest house is the Armenian Church St Simon, called the “red tower” whose red brick color used to bleed during the rains.



My boutique hotel/guest house does not have 24-hour reception, nor do taxi's take phone-ahead reservations. So, the front desk manager agrees to come get me at 4:30am to get my train. I guess that's one reason why they get a 9.1 rating on Booking.com, to say nothing about the beautiful room and excellent restaurant where I ate every night!

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The final train ride in this beautiful country is bland, no mountains, and I finish up the trip with a night in Bucharest before a non-stop Air France flight home. Romania is not a major tourist destination (except for Count Dracula fans) but I am delighted to have had my two weeks there.