

## **Driving in Romania**

### **Driving Romanians Crazy**

### **Romanians Driving Me Crazy**

### **Driven Crazy in Romania**

They interviewed Warren Buffet, the sage from Omaha about what it was like to be a billionaire. He replied something like “having money just increases your options.” On a barely tangent note, I’ve found having a car in Romania radically increases your options as well....

I landed in the land of sunflowers and castles after my “semester in sand”, just marveling at the green growing things, and getting caught out in the rain never felt so good. But there is more to Romania than two days in Bucharest, so I heeded the advice of those before me and rented a silver Opel, and headed out into the countryside.

Renting cars is never cheap, or at least not in MY experience, but sometimes you just get on the bus, and in this instance, you get in the car. There are many things to see in Romania, yet only a few were big enough to have a town built around them, so when you added up all the additional side trips, and the scheduling of busses and trains, the car became more realistic.

#### **First Stop – The Painted Monasteries of Bucavina**

OK, I became fascinated (ok, perhaps obsessed) with these churches after seeing a few pictures on the inter-tubes...small ancient churches with fresco’s painted on the exterior walls. There would be seven stops; web advice was “take it slow, take 2 days”. The drive from Bucharest to essentially the northern border with Moldova took me 6hrs; time well spent trying to figure out how to connect my phone’s “tunes” to the car’s stereo, how the rear-window-wiper worked and to experience Romanian open-road driving. It was an eventful day behind the wheel.

Having a car lets you shop in real grocery stores and buy more bulk, since you’re filling the back seat and not a backpack. In Romania there are a few major grocery chains, Kaufmanns, Carrefour and Media Shop. Oh, and in Romania there are pretzels..not great ones, and somehow they’ve figured out a way to have the pretzels repel the “salting” process. There’s salt in the bag, but almost none sticks to the pretzel...but since Scandinavia in ’16 these were the first pretzels I’ve seen. There was joy in the Opel.

So I over spend, but feel “equipped” for the open road ahead. The car could break down at any moment, but I wouldn’t starve for a few days..and north I drove. There are indeed major highways Romania, named, like in England and Europe A1, A2 and A3...sadly the route to the Painted Monasteries was on a lesser road, something called the A237. These three-number wonders link the small towns and hamlets that make up the bulk of Romanian existence. Then there were the roadside Gypsies (or Roma); selling anything they had, apples, apple juice, flowers, melons...you would come over a small rise and the shoulders would be filled with roma holding up fruit. This would become a VERY familiar site. I was using

the maps.me app as navigator, so I had to alternate between quick glances at the route, and quick glances at the shoulders to ensure I didn't clip a wayward roma.

Arriving at my first "away" camp/hostel in Iasi (pronounced "yash") the room was decent, and the tub quart icecream for dinner was divine. There was even free beer at the hostel, remnants of some over-eager Swedes who went on a buying run and just couldn't finish..beer and booze is everywhere in Romania, and perhaps eastern Europe. It is literally everywhere. Gas stations rival liquor stores on both availability and price. Large grocery stores have multiple aisles devoted to advanced fermentation. The "bohemian" in me was shopping at the lower end, and Romania didn't disappoint. 3-liter bottles of beer were about \$2.50. There was an absolute correlation between price and taste, but at that level, quantity is what drives the purchase. There were also these little "hand grenade" bottles that resembled plastic canning jars, for 50-cents....and actually they weren't half bad. But I digress.

Bright and early on a Saturday I headed off for the first Painted Monastery. Maps.me did a great job bringing me to the church on time and the camera did it's thing. It was only after leaving the monastery that my day would begin to unravel.

For it's many benefits, I am loyal to maps.me. In major cities, it can ferret out the most direct route on foot, car or bus between two points. You download the recent maps and head out. Unfortunately in Romania, the definition of "road" got a little fuzzy, and what transpired after the first church reminded me of that insurance commercial in the states where the line was "did they cover you completely for your accident?" "Well no, not exactly"... and it was that "no not exactly" part that would be replayed a few times along my voyage in Romania.

The next church was only about 15 miles away and I was very excited to do less driving and more photography. Take a left and head off...but the pavement soon turned to compacted gravel, which migrated to small-rock-gravel, which deteriorated to large-rock gravel. I passed a few horse-drawn carts full of roma as I dutifully followed maps.me into the hills..within minutes I realized that the rental car was no match for this "road" and doubled back. Returning to the pavement, I pulled over and tried to reroute, and uncovered a flaw in the maps.me universe...you can't reroute. Apparently the parameters are set to "drive a road, or not" and once the app maps you an efficient route, there's no debate: you WILL pass horse-carts full of gypsies, ford streams and chase cows to reach your destination. Here is where a real map, with circles and black and red lines would have come in handy...I had bet on technology and lost.

So I chose another monastery, hoping to come at the missing one from another direction. Thankfully the road remained paved and horse-cart free. And so the day was spent. You pay admission to each, and a hefty \$2.50 fee to use your camera (outside only) but the monasteries were great. In the end, I saw five of the seven and called it good. By the end of the day I was over 100 kilometers from that first missed monastery and my "need" to complete the set, and see them all, had vanished.

I had plans to take it slow, and spend two days out among the monasteries, but I had had my fill. A little more mapping showed that if I drove on, only another three hours, I could gain a day on my itinerary

and perhaps find a town more conducive to staying around...So I pushed on, and stayed at "Hotel Opel" once I got close to Cluj-Napoca.

For the voracious readers of my blog, I won't reiterate the adventure of the "Salty Turd" but it's the previous post, so get curious.

Cluj-Napoca, or just Cluj, is a big city on the western side of the country. Beside the afore-mentioned salt mine, there is a big university here and a massive soccer stadium that hosts concerts. I stayed a night in a decent hostel, but there was some electronic dance music festival (EDM, apparently) out in the farmland west of town, so all my fellow residents were dancing all night and sleeping all day. I walked around town a bit and then did the only other thing I could come up with; I hit the mall. Time to see how folks in bigger cities spent their free time and money.

The city-center mall was full of American and European brands, and a decent food court. While eating my way thru a plate of goulash at "Gladiator" I saw the movie theater and I was surprised that they didn't dub the American movies into Romanian, just added subtitles. And with this, a plan was hatched.

Leaving Cluj after only a day, I still had a "free day" card to spend, and more time...so I continued west to a place called "Timisoara" (timi-shawara). This was a great place, and I used my "free day" here. There was a "house zoo" here where they moved ancient houses from all over Romania into an open field close to town. The hostel, "Costal Hostel" was a massive single-family home, once the residence of a famous ballerina during the 1920's. There was a great outdoor "hang" space with plenty of fruit trees to provide shade. I met some locals who plied me with some local fermentation product that had a little red pepper in it...sure they dared me, but I probably would have eaten the pepper anyway..I would NOT recommend this to my younger or more sensitive readers.

There were plenty of "hand-grenades" and large jugs of beer shared. A local "meat palace" was visited and "Timi" had a glorious main square with ancient, and not so ancient buildings to roam.

From Timisoara, it was on to Colvin Castle, as I moved from the west, into Transylvania, home of all things hilly and castle-like. Colvin was my "first" and now, looking back, my best castle. When you think of castles, you think of moats, drawbridges, sentry posts, and all of this perched on a hilltop...Colvin had all of this...and some pretty cool windows that let in some pretty cool light.

Insert Colvin castle

After Colvin, it was on to Sibiu, a short drive away. Here I had a hostel room above a coffee/beer bar right in town, with all the cobblestone paths and crusty old decaying buildings...it was great. I walked around for a few hours, then settled in for a coffee while planning out my next stop. It was probably during my second sip of surprisingly decent coffee that I searched "Sibiu, things to do" that "it" appeared; The Transfagaran. A massively windy road taking you up and over the second highest mountain in Romania.

Insert Trans picture

They say a picture speaks a thousand words, but to me, I only heard a few “Dude, you GOTTA do this!” And the next day I did. There was an initial question about which way to drive it, but further searching now brought the cast of the BBC show “Top Gear” into the mix. Seems the cast had designated this road as one of the best, and if you were going to have a “Top Gear” experience, you experienced it from south to north. So, like I had been doing for days now, I plugged in the little hamlet where it all begins (kilometer post 252) and off I went at 6:30am. The plan was to get going before all the others got out of bed, hopefully getting a jump on the crowd. The road down there was amazingly traffic free and when I got to within twenty kilometers, I had to make my first turn...off the pavement, onto small gravel, then onto larger gravel....

I’ve typed it before and unless you just started reading at this point...you’ve read it before..maps.me had taken me into the boonies...more horse-drawn carts, BUT a big advantage was that there were also cars parked along the road, regular cars too, not high-clearance Range Rovers...I had hope. There were three sections of horror-filled gravel, on high peaks and without any signage stating this was the “right” way, just the electronic voice from the phone saying “in 400 meters, take a right” ...but in the end, there would be pavement, and I was dumped out of the wilderness, at kilometer 252, and after a sharp left, I was on the Transfagaran.

For the next 90 minutes I was in heaven, The road was amazing, taking you uphill, past lakes and pastures, and gypsies selling flowers and fruit and it was sunny and lovely. I stopped frequently when the terrain demanded a digital camera treatment, and I was really amazed that while there was traffic, it was light...must have been because I left early...

There is a final tunnel at the top, signifying that the “up” will shortly turn to down. A lake, Balea lake awaited, then I could take pictures like the “spaghetti road” above...but coming out of the tunnel, something went horribly wrong...there was no more blue sky...there was no sky at all...it was cloud. For those of you who were driving on my last great road rally in Iceland (“REI” Jim) it was just like that road on the east coast...all cloud, no vision..there was sadness in the Opel that day.

Yes, Balea lake was a thing, but covered in cloud it was a different thing. I did some hiking, took some pictures, but you could barely see the road ahead and pictures were a waste...and then the cloud around me turned to rain..There is a large tourist presence at the top, many vendors selling food and drink, and on a sunny day there must be a cracking business to be had, but even the vendors new, today was not that day.

So the Opel got pointed towards Sibui and down I went. The “spaghetti pavement” was a challenge in the rain and fog, but within thirty minutes I was among the flatlands again and heading to town. Sibui also has a “house zoo” and I spent a few hours back out in the sun taking pictures of windmills. I had thought to stay in Sibui another night, but again realized that another few hours behind the wheel would give me another day, so I pushed on to Sighisoara (sigi-shwora)..by nightfall, again hotel Opel

“Sigi” is yet another medieval town with cobblestone streets, crumbling old buildings and a present existence related 100% to tour bus traffic. I spent a few hours walking around, but without the need to

shop, I was on my way. Today would be “castle time”, with stops at Bran and Rasnov castles before my hostel in Brasov.

When you’re driving around Romania, you hear things. When you stay in hostels, you hear more things. When you’re drinking a lot of Romanian “hand grenades” you hear even more, but it’s a little muffled for some reason..anywho, I had heard that “Bran” castle wasn’t all that great.

Bran, with an indirect link to Dracula, was THE castle all the tourist want to see, and it’s even marketed as Dracula’s Castle, but Dracul was Hungarian, over the mountains to then north....but the Opel went the way of Bran Castle anyway.

There’s only one road in and out, which is so Romanian...but don’t get me started about Romanians and waiting in line...but I digress... the one road is under construction, so the path to the castle isn’t easy...it never is.

Parking is the first obstacle to overcome. Everyone drives cars about the same size, like a girls “petite”, and these get placed, by their drivers, at all sorts of funky angles, for miles before you actually get to the site. Why? To avoid parking fees. Romanians will walk a mile (or more) to avoid a \$1 parking fee. Luckily I had the \$1 so I got to park closer. But then it started raining again, which reminds me, it has rained daily for the two weeks I’ve been here. Thankfully never long, and Romania is nothing if not “quick drying” but still...Paris Accord? What’s that? But I digress further.

You might not know exactly where the castle is, but follow the tour busses and the crush of humanity, up a hill the path lined with folks hawking painted eggs to fruit, gypsies with the flowers and the odd beer hall. This is supposedly the castle of Vlad the Impaler, so there are torture museums here too, but you know the way....the way is up.

For a mere 35 LEI, about \$8.50 you can have your moment in the castle and for another \$9 you can now visit something called theTime Tunnel, more on that in a bit.

So we’re all a little wet from the rain, but we’re going in...All one-thousand of us...simultaneously. Perhaps those opining that Bran wasn’t all that great were right....and yes, they were.

With a thousand-member chain-gang going thru the castle at a snails pace, you quickly learn who’s having a good day, who’s got marital issues and who’s idea it was to come to Bran pretty quickly. Sure, they’re all speaking Romanian, but some expressions are universal. But the snail pace was killing me.

This castle has a myriad of little rooms and each has to be gone thru, slowly. Some rooms only have a sign that said “Queen Mary” walked here...then there were the rooms with a complete life story of Bram Stoker, who wrote Dracula..it is said that Bran castle was the setting for his story...OK, good to know.

So there are a lot of stairs, and not everyone walks up and down stairs well, as you find. Then there are the shutter bugs who realize that they “missed” a shot two rooms ago and are flailing again a rip-tide of humanity to “get back” from whence they came...and then it got hot.

And in the end, you don't leave Bran Castle, as much as get expelled from the belly of the retail beast. I may have written that before in a previous post, but it sounds like an apt description of the exodus from the castle.

But I'm a curious sort, and upon the exit, I saw another cluster/gaggle of tourists waiting for this "Time Tunnel" that I had somehow missed. So I queue up for about 10 minutes or so until I deduce that I needed to have bought a ticket for another \$9, and at present they were taking five people at a time, for 30 minutes, so your wait point would be estimated at roughly three hours...so I went on.

Further research reveals that the "Time Tunnel" though promoted as some sort of sinister site, was actually a short-cut taken by Queen Mary to get to the Royal Garden faster during her 1930 visit. Good thing I didn't have a ticket for that. There was no fee to take pictures in the castle, but few were taken. There's no mystery here, no foreboding presence...just commerce. And once the road to Bran gets repaired, the busses can get here quicker and "no money, mo money".

But when in Romania, you do castles...so once I extricated myself from Bran, it was on to Rasnov castle, or what's left of it. For \$6 (including parking) you get to roam among the rubble, grovel in gravel, and yet thoroughly enjoy your time among the ruins of a once greater castle up on the hill. A few nicer shots were taken and by 2pm I found myself in Brasov, capital city of Transylvania.

My two night stay was a hostel called "Evil Clown" which I was hoping was more than a stop for the juggalo's of the Insane Clown Posse (you'll have to google that, tough to explain)...it was just a hostel that sold clown shirts, but it was close to the town square and I had enough time/energy for a decent town tour and some nice pics of the Black Church.

Another Saturday and I was lacing up the hiking boots. I found one of those free tourist maps that mentioned something about a hike called "7 ladders", and a bit of time with my friend Mr. Google and I was off. Again, not exactly close to town, but the car makes everything possible. It was all uphill for the first hour until you arrived at this basecamp of sorts, offering zip-lining and the seven ladders hike. From the basecamp you would enter a small slot canyon with a raging water-flow beneath. For your \$2.50 you gained access to 7 ladders that took you up and over the water and onto a higher pass before your eventual descent.

The ladders were cool as the steep uphill hike to get there, but the descent was sketchy. With the daily rains, the terrain was a bit rough. While the 7 ladders helped get over the water, they could have installed 7 ropes to help with the descent over a muddy hill without a path. How I didn't wipe out on all that mud was a mystery as most around me did.

But returning to the car and it's air-conditioning was a treat, and allowed me to drive to get a meal. I located the mall, and found that "Antman and Wasp" was playing at the movie theater...in English with Romanian subtitles...my night was set.

Over the next few days I made it out to the Black Sea, to a town called Constanta, where there was a huge abandoned casino to shoot, and miles of coastline to walk. I saw a few more movies as well, and

consider myself “caught up” on the American Cinema, thru such classics as Antman and Wasp, Jurassic Park, Deadpool and Mission Impossible.

I am back in Bucharest now, awaiting my flight to Budapest.

Some Observations.

Romanians hitch hike a lot. I saw whole families exit a restaurant and stand on the curb trying to hail a ride for 4..out in the country there are no cabs, but lots of helpful Romanians.

Romanians like popcorn...lots of flavored selections, and they do have pretzels, albeit mediocre at best

It would be hard to envision Romania without the gypsy/Roma population. They are everywhere, much to the consternation of the few locals I got to talk to about it, but they're here to stay.

There is a large quantity of beer alcohol here. Perhaps it's just that I came from four countries that had none of this, but every possible venue to sell booze is loaded to the gills with inventory.

Romanian roads are generally good, but they save a lot of money by having few stop signs and stop lights. The Romanian driver is constantly in motion. You have to constantly watch out for hitch-hikers, gypsies, horse-carts and the stray farm animal herd, but that's all part of the fun here.

Food-wise, Romania is generally on the Neanderthal plan; lots of gristle and fat surrounding pork and beef products...it's been lovely. But the locals walk it off a lot here, so perhaps it's not that bad.

I would advice people to come here if they like castles. There are a lot of them. The lore of Vlad the Impaler, and Dracula is ever present, but in a general sense, Dracula was Hungarian; so one floor up, and to the left.

From here I continue to Hungary where there will be more meat and pretzels awaiting me, and my best friend Dave to show me around.