

Review of 'Discover Hidden Romania – Dracula Weekend Trip'
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I was fortunate enough to participate in the pilot tour of the 'Dracula Weekend Trip' which took place 15th – 16th May 2010. Having spent the last 10 months in Bucharest, I was conscious that I had not seen as much of the Romanian countryside as I would have liked and this trip seemed like a good way of doing that, without having the stress of organizing it myself, of course!

We left Herastrau Park at the allotted time in our cosy bus and were soon cruising towards Curtea de Arges. We were entertained underway by our knowledgeable guide, who told tales of local hauntings and supernatural events that are rumoured to have taken place in the surrounding area. We drove into Pitesti and were given an informative account of the history of the town, which has a surprisingly unsettling past for such an innocent looking town.

We arrived at Curtea de Arges on schedule and checked into our comfortable hotel. Located in a tranquil area, the hotel was cheerful and hospitable and was more than happy to cater for my vegetarian diet.

The first attraction on our 'hit list' was the Princely Court, and it didn't disappoint. The imposing ruins of the court and the adjacent 14th century church were the subject of numerous questions for our obliging guide.

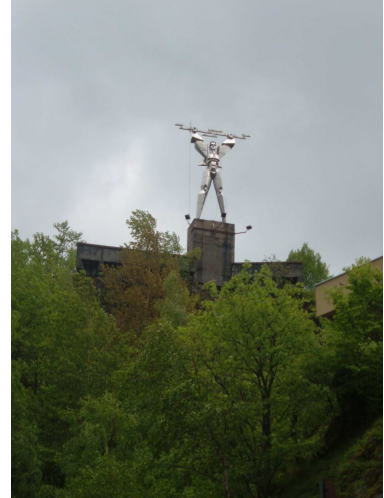


Having spent adequate time here, we moved on to the Monastery in Curtea de Arges. I was very impressed by the grand structure and interior decor, and even more impressed to discover that the granddaughter of Queen Victoria herself is buried in this hidden architectural gem. Whilst we were admiring the decor, a wedding party waltzed into the church and promptly proceeded to go about their business, much to the amusement of the legions of tourists!

Saturday evening was even more action-packed than the morning had been. Following a delicious, traditional meal in the village of Aref, we met up with local villagers who entertained us with traditional songs, stories and dances. Their boundless energy is to be admired! It provided an insight into local customs that is difficult to experience in Bucharest, and guests are even given the opportunity to join in if they wish. Having sipped several glasses of delicious 'tuica' during the session, I was even prepared to demonstrate my feeble dancing skills by the end of it!

The pace of the trip did not slow down on Sunday. Following a lovely breakfast at the hotel, we embarked on the next part of the tour. We followed the same winding country

road to Aref that we had taken the previous night, this time branching out towards the Transfagarasan and the imposing Vidraru Dam. I had been awestruck by the dam since sighting it in 'Top Gear' (Series 14) and it isn't any less breathtaking at close range. Presiding over the dam, Electical Man watches over like a giant robotic soldier – the perfect bridge between industry and art.



From here, we drove on to Poienari Fortress with depleted energy yet revitalized enthusiasm, ready to tackle the 1,456 steps to top. Our guide gave us a fascinating talk and the tales told in Aref seemed to echo in our ears as we climbed to the top. Having walked all the way to the top, it took some persuading before any of us were willing to attempt the 1,456 steps back down!

I would thoroughly recommend this tour to anyone who wants to find out more about Romanian customs and traditions, expat or native alike. Our guide could not have been any more helpful and informative, willing to answer any questions and provide us with more information than our inquisitive minds could recall. The tour seemed very good value for money, as the meals provided were more than adequate – on more than one occasion I felt more like I was present at a banquet than simply eating lunch! The tour provides ample opportunity for participants to do as much or as little as they wish. Guests were given choices about the itinerary and there was time for shopping and leisure if this was required. It is also a good opportunity to meet new people, socialize and experience a different part of the country. All in all, a very worthwhile weekend trip!

