

Destination: Romania

To local people, in recent years Romania has become a country one leaves, since capitalism and democracy have offered the luxury of mobility. No longer forced to remain here, as they were in communist times, many are packing their bags to seek their fortune elsewhere. But it is not one-way traffic. Fewer in number and less widely known about, a steady stream of foreigners are coming here, falling in love with the place and choosing to stay.

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Sam R, Steven van Groningen and Volker Moser are an American, a Dutchman and a German who have all chosen Romania as their new home. Their experience here may be an eye-opener both for local pessimists as well as those whose sole impression of Romania is derived from the negative and far-fetched headlines in the international media.

For those not living in Cluj, where Sam R, an adoptive Romanian, usually spends his days, he is more easily found online, at www.kingofromania.com. He may also be reached on Facebook, under the Sam cel Roman (Sam the Romanian) persona, a profile which proudly exhibits a picture of the 15th century Romanian (back then, Moldavian) ruler Stefan cel Mare.

Sam's blog displays a passion and excellent knowledge of Romania, its people and its culture. Most of his blog posts are analyses of enthralling aspects of life in this country or its language. He has also written a book about his Romanian experience so far, *The Complete Insider's Guide to Romania: 2011*, aiming to offer tips and tricks to temporary and permanent visitors to the country. His next plan is to make a TV show on the same subject, with the purpose of offering a more balanced perspective than either foreign or local Romanian films. Looking back on his arrival in the place he now refers to as "home", Sam confesses: "What drew me to Romania? I guess you could say it was a random event. I've been traveling all of my life and I've visited and lived in many countries in Europe, including (then) Communist nations." He visited Romania for the first time in 2000, but returned another three or four times before finally moving here in 2004. Coming from a family of travelers, with relatives spread all over the world, Sam's choice of Romania no longer seems so difficult to understand. He now speaks the language fluently and honestly believes this to be the place of settlement he had been looking for in his previous trips. Something beyond reason attracted him here. "The honest truth is that I just felt called to this place in some way. There's just something in the spirit of this land that does not exist anywhere else."

He chose Cluj because of its multicultural population, youth and vitality and because it has "the amenities of a modern city with the feeling of a small, family town." He also likes Timisoara, where he previously lived. His number one Romanian location would have to be Brasov, however, and after that, Sighisoara and Iasi, since the latter is in the fact the heart of the region that his inspiration, Stefan cel Mare, ruled.

His top three likes about Romania are the "top quality, natural, fresh, organic



The quirky Lipschani district is popular with foreign visitors

and delicious" food, the local alcoholic beverage "tuica" and the streets' occasional animation with the sound of children laughing. His top dislike is Romanians' "general negativity and cynicism", which he understands "originated historically with periods of great hardship, but Romanians are now, for the first time, in a participatory democracy", and he calls for a leap of faith and encourages everyone to "pitch in and do their part." Number two is the local mania for building "extraordinarily expensive highways" and last, but not least, foreigners who continue to promote the image of a "dangerous, lawless, chaotic" Romania.

While discussing Romania's ongoing efforts to rebrand itself touristically, Sam remarks, "Every year there's a new 'tourism campaign' that gets discussed endlessly in Romania. And every year the same thing happens - almost nobody outside Romania pays the slightest attention to it." And the reason for this? Sam says that it is because the country "largely relies on outdated forms of media to spend its limited tourism promotion budget on". Instead, it should focus more on general perception and reflection in the media "of the common man", video. "In polling foreigners coming here, the majority of what they've learned is from

movies, whether it's Hollywood (mostly vampire-related, although sometimes about prostitution) or from Romanian films which have won international awards. And which films are these? Why, only the most depressing movies ever, featuring criminals, illegal abortions and dying of neglect in the haphazard Romanian medical system." A solution would therefore lie in creating TV shows and movies in English, showing Romania in a more positive light and helping the country evolve beyond its usual clichés, a TV show that he will be giving a try this summer, in order to help promote the image of a "good Romania".

Speaking of "good Romania", Sam considers last year's country clean-up campaign Let's Do It, Romania to have been a complete success. "It is from my experiences in this campaign that I coined my slogan, 'O Romanie Frumoasa e Sarcina Tututor', which translates approximately to 'A Beautiful Romania is Everyone's Responsibility'. Those are words that I live by." They are words that he hopes more pessimistic Romanians will adopt as well.

Steven van Groningen was born in the Netherlands, but has spent the last 17 years in Romania, Russia and Hungary, as he confesses on his eponymous blog, www.stevengroningen.eu. He has spent a total of 14 years in Romania the reason for which is his marriage to Romanian Valeria Racila, Olympic Champion in the single sculls (rowing) in 1984 at the Los Angeles Olympic Games. This is where the couple met, as he is also a former Olympian and was part of the Dutch rowing team. Since 2002, van Groningen has been president and CEO of a local bank and has got involved in several local organizations and initiatives. Locally, he is known for supporting healthy living and has participated in the Bucharest City Marathon organized by his wife and which is set for its fourth edition this year. Having lived in the country for quite a while now, van Groningen makes some recommendations to visitors, which "depend a bit on their interest and time available." Walking around Bucharest and visiting the art museum are two of the things that can be done in Bucharest, while the fortified churches of Transylvania are a must-see for those traveling beyond the capital. Bukovina and the Delta are also top attractions. On this subject, van Groningen also discusses the situation of Romanian tourism, which he considers to be "negatively affected by pollution: everywhere you see garbage, even in the most remote areas. Also there is too much construction going on that destroys the experience for tourists. Ugly big hotels should not be constructed in pristine touristic areas. I was shocked to see what has been allowed to



be built in certain areas near the monasteries in Bukovina for instance.”

On the topic of cultural differences, van Groningen remarks on Romanians’ lack of desire to challenge stupid or unfair rules, which is different from the Netherlands, for example, where such rules are not heeded.

All in all, van Groningen believes, “Romania would be a better place to live if people had more respect for their fellow citizens, cultural heritage, nature and the environment. We only need to see how drivers treat pedestrians and cyclists to get the idea.”

A German who settled in Bucharest after his wife got a job offer here, Volker Moser confesses that he was mostly bothered by Romanians’ tendency to blow their horns in traffic on account of even the most minor of hold-ups. “But you have to adapt and find a way to get along with this and also with a different Romanian work and business culture as a German,” he continues, because otherwise, life here would be rather difficult.

His experience and challenges with Romanian life have inspired Moser, a Public Policy and Management graduate, to co-found City Compass with two partners, “aiming at supporting newcomers with information and services in order to help them adapt well to Romania and Bucharest and to get rid of stereotypes.”

Since nowadays Romania offers similar products to those available in his homeland, Moser says that he does not miss home too much, and his family and friends visit on a regular basis. And as the country does not enjoy a very

good image in Germany, “once people come, they are oftentimes amazed by the diversity and the beauty of Romania.” Moser however misses the good quality of German roads, since it is the poor state of the streets that has stopped him and his family from visiting more of the country’s beauty spots, such as Bukovina, Maramures, the Danube Delta and Transylvania. Not to miss in Bucharest, Moser recommends the Lipsicani area, the “diversity of the city, architectonically, but also the very different faces and people of the city. And a concert in the Athenaeum.” Moser and his wife are also raising their son here, who was born in 2009 in Bucharest. He does not seem concerned with his child’s education, for the moment at least, not until he has to go to school: “I think raising children here until they start going to school is not a problem, if you have enough money to pay for private education.” His Romanian experience has made him quite fond of the place. “Who knows how long we will stay in the end?”

What Moser loves about the country is “knowing a lot of international people here that execute exciting projects, discovering unknown places in the countryside and Romanians for being so caring about children and for their hospitality.” On the down side, he would change “the emergency ordinance system that produces crazy and contradictory laws (overnight tax changes...) and the lack of social responsibility of some foreigners and Romanians towards Romanian society as a whole.”

Photo: Laurentiu Obae

Romania’s cafe culture draws in expatriates who like taking it easy

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