

Vacation with Vampires

IN TRANSYLVANIA

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Rustle. Flutter. Scritch.

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From the dark night, the sounds seep into a midnight slumber's vision of a charming man who has a commanding air about him. Waking, you follow a pull to the drafty old room's lead-paned window.

Small wings suspend the creature whose tiny red eyes adhere to your sleepy gaze. You sense its primal purpose, feel its instinctive persistence drawing you closer.

Your arm extends to the window dividing you from predestination, reaching forward into another terrible dream of free-falling into blackness.

Morning brings bright reassurance, along with a stiff neck and headache. You must have slept wrong in the finely made guest bed, and had too much of the dark red wine your host served with dinner—

Wait. Wasn't that window closed before you turned back the covers the night before?

Yes, you definitely had too much wine last night.

Castle Bran,
the fictional home
of Dracula

Add turtlenecks, garlic and scarves to the top of the packing list, muster some courage, and summon your sense of adventure. The ultimate late October adventure awaits in a distant land where a 15th-century ruler terrified all who dared to challenge his ways. After time in Romania's Transylvania region, Halloween trick-or-treating and stateside spooky house tours will seem like a tame teddy-bear tea party compared to Count Dracula's haunts.

Would-be vampire hunters can explore Transylvania solo or seek courage in numbers on one of the increasingly popular Dracula tours. The commercial tours find their own ways to inflict a bigger bite of vampire pop culture for victims—er, visitors. Outfitters may throw vampire balls, host Halloween costume contests, show classic Dracula films on board the bus or hand out small

cross necklaces and survivor certificates to their brave travelers.

All along the Transylvanian way, the terrifying touring unfolds against a backdrop of some of the oldest forest and unaltered land in all of Europe. Transylvania shrouds itself with thick quilts of old pine, projects the Carpathian mountains' stark peaks and then soothes its visitors with natural mineral spas.

A VAMPIRE'S LINEAGE

The vampires caricatured for silent films, best-selling novels, cereal boxes and even "Sesame Street" all descended from Vlad III Draculea, a Romanian prince who reigned in the 15th century. The prince earned the nickname "Vlad the Impaler" for the



merciless ruler's gruesome method of doing away with enemies. His given surname, Anglicized as "Dracula," is derived from the word meaning either "dragon" or "demon" in his native tongue.

Irish writer Bram Stoker drew inspiration from Vlad the Impaler for his novel "Dracula," published in 1897. The book's antagonist, a vicious Romanian count with a thirst for young blood, rises from his coffin bed and masochistically preys upon British newlyweds Jonathan Harker and Mira Murray. Decades later, the iconic vampire gave actors, including Bela Lugosi, Brad Pitt, Tom Cruise and Gary Oldman film roles they could really sink their teeth into.

The charismatic but creepy Dracula popularized in books and film is actually a newcomer of sorts to his homeland. Vlad Dracula may be native to Romania, but his scarier protégés are recent immigrants. In the 15 years since communism fell in Romania, tourism entrepreneurs followed the lead of the first visiting vampire aficionados. Now the sharp-toothed Count is a bona fide tourist draw who posthumously contributes to the country's economy.



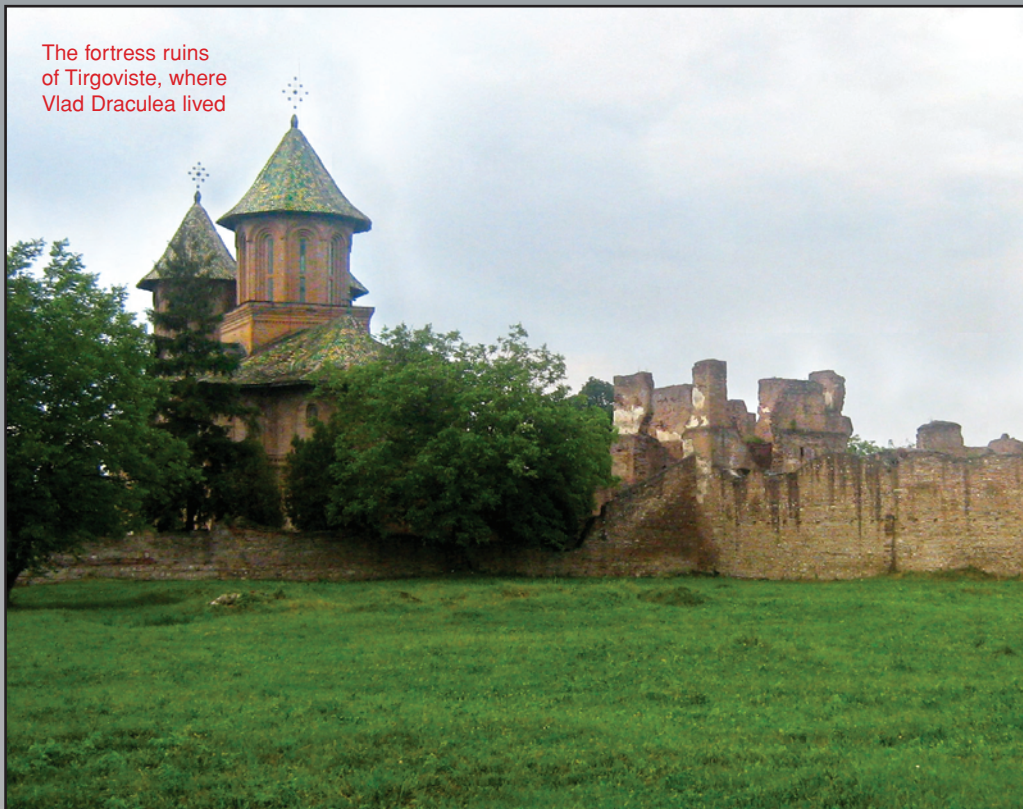
The clock-tower in Sighisoara

RETRACING DRACULA'S TRACKS

If they dare, travelers on the Dracula trail can follow the vampire prince from birth to burial. Vlad Dracula entered this world in the Transylvania town of Sighisoara, noted for one of the region's few walled fortresses. The house of Dracula's birth, marked with a modest plaque on the door, now multi-



Sighisoara, birthplace of Vlad Draculea



The fortress ruins of Tirgoviste, where Vlad Draculea lived

tasks as a restaurant serving Romanian cuisine and a small museum of medieval weapons used during Vlad's rule.

Although Castle Bran is strongly associated with Vlad Dracula, the foreboding edifice actually has the weakest historical ties to the Impaler. Perched at the apex of a narrow, climbing road near the city of

Brasov, the massive stone building clearly inspired the cinematographers and animators who worked on just about every "Dracula" film project. In reality Vlad the Impaler was rumored to have only briefly stayed at the castle. The Transylvanian tourist industry originally presented Castle Bran as Dracula's because of its appearance and accessible location closer to main highways in Romania. As a result, Castle Bran draws hundreds of visitors a day and is still the best place to buy Dracula merchandise.

What remains of Vlad Dracula's real abode can be found about 50 miles northwest of Bucharest near the town of Tirgoviste. The fortress ruins are almost inaccessible, requiring a climb of 1,500 steps up a mountain that overlooks a river basin. The castle served Dracula as a refuge from advancing enemies as well as a place to watch their demise. Among the palace ruins, visitors can make out the overlook tower from which Vlad viewed impalements that took place in the courtyard.

Vlad the Impaler's own finale happened by assassination, after



Spiraling and plummeting, you resist the creature's lead in this deathly dance. Your garlic garland permeates; he laughs at its pungency. Tiny silver crosses reflect back in his defiant black eyes.

Desperate, you grip the rough wooden stake, the crude weapon that will splinter the captive bond born of his primal hunger.

Plunge. Pierce. Twist.

Plunge. Pierce. Twist.

It returns him to his tortured origins, so you may make your way back to more innocent ones.

As you move forward, the dark castle diminishes from view, something you know will never occur in your subconscious. Forever changed, you speak the words as if reciting a vow: "Fangs' for the memories."

which his remains are said to have been entombed in the Snagov monastery just north of Bucharest. The 16th-century monastery, accessible only by boat, is situated on an island in the middle of a lake. Romanians still revere the ruler who defended their nation against the Turks, and continue to honor Dracula with a portrait and vases of fresh flowers near his resting place.

LEGENDARY HAUNTS

Other Transylvanian Dracula sites are steeped more in myth than history. Hotel Coroana de Aur in Bistrita was a key setting in Stoker's novel. It was "The Golden Crown" inn where main character Jonathan Harker stayed and ignored the warning not to travel "tonight, when the clock strikes midnight, all evil things in the world will have full sway." Harker dined there on robber steak, a dish still served in the restaurant along with "Dracula elixir."

Castle Dracula Hotel on the Borgo Pass now stands where Stoker fictionally located the Count's castle. The vampire-themed hotel seems standard enough with 62 rooms, restaurant, banquet facilities and



small nightclub. But below ground, Dracula's vault keeps the vampire's signature resting spot—a coffin—undisturbed. It's tempting to tiptoe down and peek into the casket despite vivid murals that seem to shout "turn back!"



CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE

Most Dracula tours originate and end in Romania's capital city, Bucharest, but can vary widely by amenities included and targeted demographic. Doing some homework before booking will ensure that your trek through Transylvania suits your style.

Fodor's included Transylvania Live's (www.visittransylvania.eu/index.html) Dracula tour on its list of top adventure travel picks. The tour features firsthand experiences, such as instruction in preparing wooden stakes and an excursion reenacting the ritual vampire killing on its 10-day Halloween with Vlad the Impaler excursion.

Transylvania Express (www.transylvaniaexpress.com), based in the United Kingdom, is "the little tour that could." Guests of the four- or seven-day Dracula tours travel Romania's extensive rail system on one of the outfitter's charter trains. The tour emphasizes historical accounts and sites related to Vlad Dracula.

American outfitter International Tours & Events believes it's Halloween year-round, running its Dracula Tour (www.dractour.com) in October and July. With escapades such as a rowboat trip to Vlad Dracula's tomb, Halloween ball with costume contest and a night's stay in a haunted hotel, the eight-day tour is not for the timid.

For general information about traveling in Romania, navigate to the site of the Romania National Tourist's Office (www.romaniatourism.com).



Hotel Coroana de Aur in Bistrita, an important setting in Bram Stoker's classic novel.