

# EASTERN EXCURSIONS

Annie Makoff finds out what Romania has to offer as an accessible holiday destination...



Bucharest night scene

**F**or the majority of disabled people in the UK, Romania isn't exactly the destination of choice for a holiday. Maybe it's the perception of it as a post-Communist country, and the fact that relatively few Brits are aware of what the real Romania is all about. I know I wasn't.

Before I discovered it in 2006, I had assumed it was one of Europe's poorer countries, full of orphanages, starving children and concrete blocks, but how wrong I was. All it took was a six-week trip as a volunteer to snow-trodden Brasov and my mind was changed forever....

## Romania regulars

Brasov, nestled at the foot of the misty and often snow-capped Carpathian Mountains of the legendary Transylvania, is a paradise of mediaeval cobbled streets and piazzas, trendy bars and restaurants, outstanding local scenery and friendly locals. Whilst Brasov might not sum up all



Corina Stefan and friend

that is Romania – which, like any country, has its problems – it was absolutely nothing like I expected.

My partner and I now return to Romania every year, determined to seek out and experience every nook and cranny of an otherwise unexplored country. Even Prince Charles, who has just bought his fourth Romanian property, is a fan of the country.

One of the main issues of visiting Romania as a disabled person however, is its lack of disabled access. It isn't like Britain, where cafes, museums and restaurants are obliged to provide disabled

facilities. When I visited for the first time, I quickly got used to hobbling long distances with several rest stops, relying on taxis to take me to otherwise isolated beauty spots and asking for help – it was all part of the experience.

But now, one woman is changing all that. Disabled Corina Stefan, spurred on by her love of her country and desire for other disabled people to experience the beauty it has to offer, recently set up Accessible Romania – the country's first and thus far only specialist tour operator, providing tailor-made packages for disabled Brits wanting to experience somewhere different from the usual tourist hotspots, such as France and Greece.

"I wanted to set up my own business as

a tourism operator, because I realised there are a lot of disabled people who are missing out on some unexplored, beautiful parts of the world," Corina says. "Being Romanian, I know just how beautiful much of my home country is, and I wanted to share that."

## Pulling out all the stops

Corina took my partner and me on a bespoke tour of Bucharest earlier this year. Being 22 weeks pregnant at the time I was

**"My partner and I now return to Romania every year"**

more disabled than usual, with aspects of my existing disability flaring up as a result of the pregnancy. Corina pulled out all the stops

to ensure that we experienced the best of what Bucharest and the surrounding area had to offer.

She took us to working monasteries (inexplicably populated by hundreds of cats), the Slanic Prahova salt mine (great for those with breathing difficulties) and to old Bucharest, recently restored as a cultural quarter of cobblestones, bustling marketplaces and fascinating museums.

Corina is passionate about what she does. There isn't a place in Romania that she doesn't know about. She makes a point of checking out every tourist attraction, hotel and restaurant in the most stunning of areas, armed with a checklist and a plethora of access-related questions to ensure that people with any disability can



enjoy the most amazing of experiences.

"I always inspect the places myself," Corina explains. "I want to be sure that the places I am taking my tour groups to are going to be accessible for a wide range of disabilities, as well as places that suit their individual interests. As time has gone on I've found my checklist has grown. It's no longer just about ramps and lifts – I'll ask about menus and dietary issues, about plugs in hotel rooms and whether they are at wheelchair height. Does the hotel reception have a lower side? Are there signs in Braille? Are there hearing loops? I even work with sign language interpreters who translate from Romanian, to English and to British Sign Language, all in one go."

## Corina's top five places to visit

### Bucharest

Romania's capital city is a mix of old and new, with plenty of museums, botanical gardens and famous attractions, such as the Palace of the Parliament.

### Sibiu

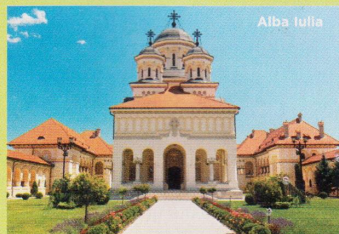
A mediaeval city characterised by cobbled streets and café- and restaurant-lined piazzas, Sibiu boasts a plethora of accessible museums, hiking opportunities and nearby mountain ranges to explore.

### Danube Delta

Rich in wildlife and ideal for boating enthusiasts, the Danube Delta is the second largest river delta in Europe and spans several countries, including Germany, Croatia and Romania.

### Alba Iulia

The site of Romania's unification in 1918, Alba Iulia is one of the country's oldest cities, with a huge mix of historic places of interest and natural attractions, like the tree-lined citadel in the old town and the nearby Apuseni natural park.



### Sovata Spa

The world-famous Sovata spa is unique in Europe for its several lakes and for having thermal waters that are renowned for their therapeutic and healing properties.



## Changing attitudes

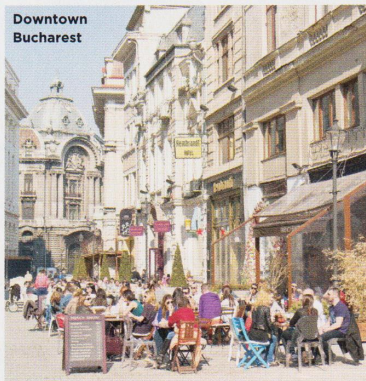
In the early days, Corina found that the reaction to this from some places was cynicism or suspicion as to why she was there. Sometimes she would come across people who were clearly uncomfortable with her disability. Since taking her motorbike everywhere, however, the fascination with that has started to override some people's attitudes. "They say, wow, you're a woman on a motorbike! And you have your own business. Are you crazy?"

Since Corina started out on her quest to offer accessible tours for disabled people, she's noticed a sea change in attitudes towards both disability and herself. "Chain hotels tend to be more accessible, of course," she says, "but I'm finding that more and more people are willing to bend over backwards to adapt their facilities. One monk was even prepared to put up a ramp so that wheelchair users could explore his monastery, which can't be adapted because of its age."

As for the tours themselves, Corina is proud of the choice that she offers. Though every tour is different, tailored as they are to individual needs and interests, her tours generally range from Transylvanian trips around beautiful Saxon towns and stunning countryside to city tours, from wellness tours involving visits to spa resorts and salt mines, to the package she is most proud of – the 'Live Like a Romanian' tour.

As she explains: "If people really want to experience traditional rural life in Romania, I recommend the Live Like a Romanian tour. It involves spending time with locals and shepherds in the really rural parts, taking part in traditional arts and crafts, visiting our vineyards, eating traditional Romanian food like stuffed vine leaves (*Sarmalute in foi de vita*) and meatball soup (*Supa de perisoare*), and maybe even observing bears in their natural habitat. Actually, half of the

Downtown  
Bucharest



European brown bear population lives in Romania, and there are plenty of safe spots to observe them."

People can even visit Romania for a so-called 'dentistry tour' – a tourism pull (excuse the pun) that has really taken off in the last few years. Because dental treatment is so much more affordable abroad than in the UK, increasing numbers of people are travelling overseas to have work done on their teeth by qualified dentistry professionals, while combining it with a holiday.

For Corina, who is used to dealing with all kinds of requests relating to motorcycle tours, vegetarian-only holidays and even visitors specifying that they 'only want to eat lamb', nothing phases her. She says, "What I really want is for people to see Romania as itself – an exotic country in Europe that is a mix of ancient and ultra-modern, with many well-preserved traditions and habits. Yes, there are still Communist-style parts to it, but Romania is so much more than that. The countryside and the mountainous scenery is breathtaking, and I want people to see its beauty."

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