

ANNIE MAKOFF- ROMANIAN LOVE STORY

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You don't just visit Romania, you explore it

By *Annie Makoff*

If you're reading this, I'd hazard an educated guess that you're probably considering visiting Romania at some point. Maybe you're intrigued by the myths and legends around Dracula or you've heard about the Black Sea resorts famous for their mud bath treatments.

But there's a lot more to Romania than this. I say this as a British disabled journalist and mother. (Yes, I realise my country is currently burning in Brexit hell right now). I say this as someone who has visited Romania time and time again, sometimes alone, sometimes with my partner and more recently, as a family with my little daughter. And I say this as someone who has fallen utterly, utterly in love with a country which has so much to give. So much in love, that our daughter's name – Elena – was chosen because we wanted to give her a popular Romanian girls



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It's too easy to list the reasons why you should visit Romania. But it could never be an exhaustive list. So here instead, follows my own experience.

A Romanian love story

I first visited in early 2006 as a trainee journalist with nothing but stereotypes of Dracula and orphanages and communist-style buildings to go on.

My first taste of Romania that January was in temperatures of -23. Brasov, snuggled like a baby at the bottom of the Carpathian Mountains, was the stuff of Christmas cards. The medieval city centre – caked in snow – was a wonderful mix of history and contemporary comfort, buzzing with cafes, restaurants and bars selling warming drinks, Romanian delicacies and the more familiar global cuisines ranging from Italian, Turkish to Irish. Cobbled streets and alleyways, pastel-coloured buildings with turreted roofs and high-arched stone gateways persuaded you you'd gone back in time. The main square too, Piata Sfatalui with its frozen fountain and sleepy municipal buildings felt like you'd entered the realm of Sleeping Beauty.

Even in the height of summer, when the square and nearby streets are transformed into al fresco dining hubs and pop-up craft and gift stalls line the streets, Brasov has a different sort of charm.

The Brasov experience is in no way unique to Romania, though. Across the Transylvanian region, it's easy to lose yourself in medieval cities which spill out across different levels, such is the mountainous terrain. I love Sibiu and its famous roof eyes, where steps lead up and across and down and beyond.

Transylvanian adventures

Transylvania in particular is rich in history, architecture and scenery. There are fortified churches to explore like Prejmer and Rasnov, each one with their own unique story. There are the famous castles like Bran and the picturesque Peles near Sinaia as well as cable cars from which to admire entire regions from above.

The car in Brasov for example takes you through Hollywood-style Brasov lettering. For the animal enthusiast who prefers to see animals in their natural habitat, there are eco-friendly wildlife trips to see bears, wolves and lynxes.



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City breaks

Forget the cliched city breaks of Western Europe for now. Bucharest, once known as Little Paris of the East is starting to live up to its name once again. I've witnessed a huge transformation from the chaotic and at times – unsettling – city I first visited twelve years ago. No longer suspicious of tourists nor suffering anymore from a stray dog population, Bucharest is now one of the safest European capital cities to visit and feels vibrant, exciting and modern. The old town has been lovingly restored to its former glory and there are dozens of fascinating museums and art galleries to absorb. I love the massive open-air [National Village Museum](#) and the [National Museum of Art of Romania](#). The tour buses which operate across the city are fun, too, as long as you don't mind sitting in the infamous Bucharest traffic jams which plague the city at certain times of the day.

Cluj, too, a beautiful university city in Northwestern Romania is a real gem. On a slightly smaller scale than Bucharest, It has a real student vibe going, with bohemian cafes and teahouses and arts and music-centred events to enjoy.

So much more to experience

Yet I've barely touched the surface of Romania. The discerning traveller may want to explore some of Romania's salt mines or the jaw-droppingly incredible [Bear's Cave](#) in Chiscau, Bihor with its breath-taking geological formations. Then there's the famous Danube Delta, which flows through ten countries. I have yet to have the pleasure, but I gather you can take a river cruise along here and stay in a floating hotel.

It's not just about visiting Romania though. It's about exploring Romania and immersing yourself in the culture and the music and the Romanian way of life. Some Romanian restaurants host traditional folk evenings like [Hanu' lui Manuc](#), an old coaching inn with a massive courtyard seating area with Romanian music and dancing.

Whatever your personal motivations for visiting, the Romanian experience is one you'll never forget. Rich in history and tradition, it's a country like no other.

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