

Bran Castle, often dubbed Dracula's Castle

FEAR AND LOATHING IN TRANSYLVANIA

Castles, Carpathians and cock-shaped dinners: weird things are afoot as *Bizarre* makes a seven-day pilgrimage to Transylvania, home of Bram Stoker's fictional Dracula and birthplace of the real Vlad The Impaler...

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PICTURES TRANSYLVANIA LIVE, BRITAIN KITTEN

According to the storybooks, Transylvania is a mysterious, fog-encroached world of vampires, wolves and terrified peasants. Embarking to a land steeped in such mystery promises the traveller a trip to remember – but while you'll have read about the region's fairy tale castles and time-forgotten villages, you rarely hear about its genital-shaped

dinners and kidney stone carvings. I expected Transylvania to be memorable, but I wasn't anticipating how strange that 'memorable' might be... but I do mean that in a good way.

Many people regard Transylvania as a fictional place, existing only in Gothic tales. In reality, it's a region of Southeast Europe that, along with Wallachia and Moldavia, forms modern day Romania. Much of its fame can be attributed to Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula* (1897), whose eponymous Count was a bloodsucking hermit

residing high in the Carpathian Mountains. But it's also where the children were spirited to in incarnations of the creepy folk yarn *Pied Piper Of Hamelin*, and birthplace of that most iconic of vegetarians, Count Duckula.

Not all of Transylvania's folk (anti)heroes are fictional, though. It's most famous son is Vlad III, a ruthless 15th century prince who also went by the patronymic name Dracula, and whose prowess in torture partially inspired Stoker's novel. Born in Transylvania in 1431,

PICTURES: CHRISTOPHER LEE DRACULA STILLS COURTESY OF EYES OF BLOOD: THE HAMMER FILMS DRACULA CYCLE STARRING CHRISTOPHER LEE, OUT NOW, PUBLISHED BY GLITTER BOOKS



"THE TRUE WHEREABOUTS OF DRACULA'S BONES REMAINS A MYSTERY"

monastery of Snagov, which is situated on a quaint islet across a lake.

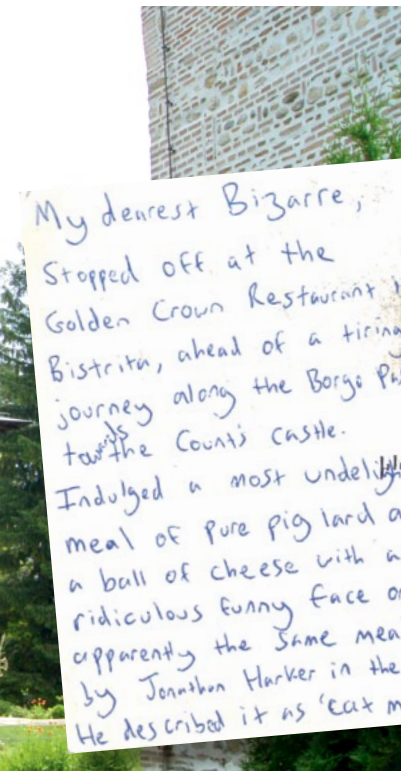
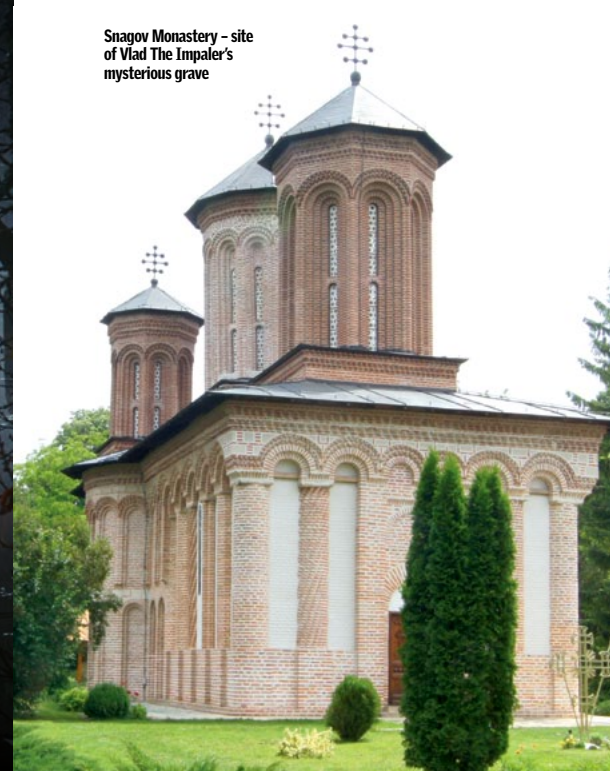
Inside the beautiful church is a grave marked with the name Dracula, and it's here that monks were said to have buried the remains of Vlad Tepes. This has been contested, though, and an excavation in 1933 revealed that the only body buried in the church still had its head attached. And as Vlad Tepes' noggin was apparently lopped off following his death in battle in 1476, the true whereabouts of Dracula's bones remain unknown.

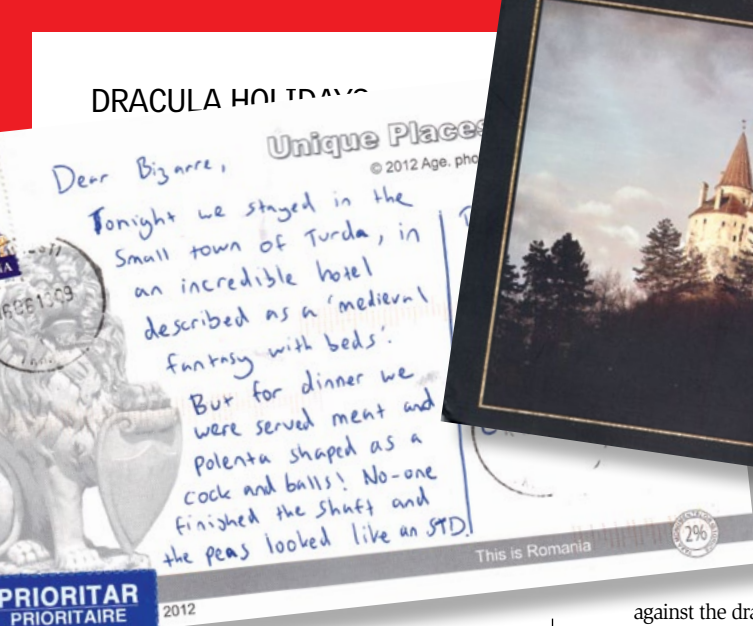
There's less mystery a few miles away at the ruins of Vlad Tepes' palace at Targoviste. Though reduced to a pile of crumbling bricks, with a lone tower skewering the clouds, the ruined palace still evokes the ghost of Dracula. It's from here in the mid-1400s that the deadly prince ordered 20,000 invading Turkish soldiers – who claimed that

Wallachia belonged to the Ottoman Empire – to be impaled in a nearby field. This mass-impalement wasn't just a way to punish enemy troops in the nastiest way possible, but also a ploy to scare off subsequent invaders. And when further Ottoman soldiers marched on Targoviste, it's said that they were so appalled by the sight of their comrades wriggling on bloodied poles that they instantly fled in fear and disgust. I don't blame them.

Both Snagov and Targoviste are in Wallachia, but it's not long before we begin our ear-popping ascent into Transylvania itself, towards the imposing Carpathians – a 932-mile long, conifer-clad mountain range that stretches across the region. We pass the grassy area where the Ottoman soldiers were executed, then drive through a gypsy village where two women are clawing at each other in a local dispute. When jokingly asked if we can stop to watch the scrap, our tour guide Claudiu shakes his head and slams his foot on the accelerator.

Snagov Monastery – site of Vlad The Impaler's mysterious grave





Aside from gypsy fights (actually, that was the only one I saw), there are other things that strike you when driving through Transylvania.

Most tragic are the packs of lonely, starving wild dogs, whose sad-eyed presence is a tragic consequence of years of domesticated canines not being neutered. Then there are the endless rows of coloured houses and shacks – all painted in putrid oranges, garish mauves and sickly yellows – in



various states of decay, which create a sea of architectural vomit

against the dramatic, mountainous scenery. However, perpetuating Transylvania's vampiric romanticism are the carved crosses that pepper the roadsides and villages. According to Claudiu, these Orthodox Christian crosses provide places of worship for neighbourhoods that are too poor to maintain churches. However, further investigation reveals that many are also erected at 'magical' boundaries and on crossroads as a deliberate defence against supernatural threats. Clearly, Romania is still a land steeped in superstitious belief.

"CARVED CROSSES PEPPER ROADSIDES AND VILLAGES"

Thousands of men and women, young and old, are said to have perished in this abysmal manner.

There are no such tales of terror linked to Bran Castle, though, which is a short drive from Brasov. A spectacular, fairy tale colossus of opulence and grandeur, Bran is often dubbed Dracula's Castle, but this is misleading – Vlad Tepes probably never stayed there, and the castle is located miles away from the Carpathian fortress in Stoker's novel. Queen Marie of Romania renovated Bran Castle in the 1900s, and gave it a distinctively modern interior. In fact, the scariest thing I encountered there is an uncooked chicken meal served in a local restaurant.

Our next stop is the fortified citadel of Sighisoara, the medieval town in which Vlad Tepes was born. Bordered by well-preserved walls, its cobbled walkways, rickety clock tower and burned-out dungeon all add to the town's magical charms. Vlad Tepes' birthplace was once an old merchant house, but it has now been converted into a tourist restaurant, recognisable by its cartoon 'Dracula' sign creaking in the breeze outside.

MAKING A GOOD POINT

Our first stop in Transylvania is in the vibrant city of Brasov, which was once a bustling trading centre for thousands of Saxon immigrants, complete with the large 'Black Church' that was smoked in a fire during the 17th century.

The town's bright, boxy Saxon architecture suggests

we may have taken a wrong turn and ended up in an Austrian ski resort by mistake. But behind its colourful, chattering façade there is a macabre underbelly: Vlad Tepes is said to have once impaled thousands of the town's inhabitants as revenge for the part they played in the murder of his father.

Although Vlad Tepes did not invent impalement as a form of torture and punishment, he took it to extremes. While many despots have used the sharpened end of a stake to puncture vital organs, Dracula is said to have preferred the blunt, rounded end, and before a victim's ordeal began he would order guards to lubricate his victims with oil. These unfortunate souls would then be pinned down, their legs spread apart, and the thick, greasy pole forced through their anus until it re-emerged through their mouth. The stakes were then raised slowly towards the sky, and the skewered victim would be slowly dragged towards the ground by their own body weight – an agonising death that could last several days.



After savouring Sighisoara's medieval time warp, our tour switches focus to the vampire in Stoker's classic novel. And it's at this point that the trip starts to get weird...

To begin with, we're driven to the Golden Crown in Bistritz, a tourist hotel built to replicate the fictional place where Jonathan Harker – the lawyer in Stoker's novel – snacks before journeying to the Count's castle.

We're anticipating a rustic inn with buxom waitresses in traditional Romanian dress. Instead, we discover a hulking building in the midst of renovation, with a corporate air that makes the Holiday Inn feel like a Shakespearean tavern.

Curiouser still, the Harker meal we're served is a plate of near-inedible pig fat with a dollop of cheese sporting a comical face. In *Dracula*, Harker said his meal included "bacon, onion and beef, seasoned with red pepper". I don't recall anything about a cheese-ball resembling a grinning snowman. If Harker polished off this cholesterol-fest, it's likely he would have dropped dead from heart failure before he made it to the Count's gloomy abode.

COCK FOR DINNER?

Next we follow Harker's trail to the Count's castle along the mystical Borgo Pass, high up in the Carpathians.



THE AMAZING SPIDER WEB MAN

In the city of Medias, we meet 84-year-old outsider artist Emil Muresan, who makes pictures with cobwebs. He also sculpted his kidney stone into a figurine. He's a pretty cool dude...



How long have you been making art with cobwebs, and what first prompted you?

Since 1998. My wife was always moaning at me to clean the cobwebs from our birdhouse. One day I went there and saw sunrays falling on the webs and had a bolt of inspiration to use them in my art. But I was ashamed at first. I didn't show anyone my art for the first four years.

Why were you ashamed?

Using cobwebs was new and I wasn't sure if it was art or not. I was traditionally a sculptor. But when I exhibited the art at a festival in 2002 I had massive success. People were fascinated and I did TV and radio interviews.

How long does each painting usually take?

I started 'painting' boats, which were easy. But after 10 years, as I became more specialised, I made characters from fairy tales, portraits and ballerinas. They take about a week to make.

(There is also a giant ship in Emil's studio, which he claims took two years.)

Where do you find the cobwebs?

In abandoned houses and village barns. Every spider web has a different colour depending on the location. If it's dusty, the sediments give the webs different colours.

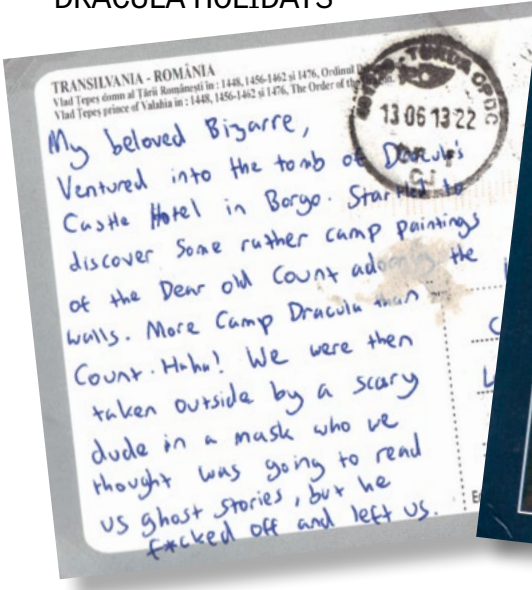
Is it a tricky material to work with?

It was difficult at the beginning because spiders are carnivores and they often stang me. I have anti-tetanus injections twice a year to stop infection. But the biggest challenge is collecting the cobwebs: I use cardboard to stop them from sticking to each other. If it's rainy, they also stick to my hand.

Do you sell your art?

A collector from India bought four paintings and a collector from Australia bought another. I try not to sell many, otherwise I would have nothing to exhibit!





Harker circumnavigated this mountain passage by stagecoach, but we do it in a minibus that stinks of booze, sweat and farts.

Our destination is Hotel Castle Dracula, a newish tourist attraction built to replicate the novel's fictional castle. The hotel has a faux-medieval splendour, and the views it affords of the Carpathians are divine. Now I genuinely feel immersed in all that is Gothic and romantic. This feeling, however, only lasts until dinnertime when the hotel staff begin playing Elton John records. Suddenly we're whisked away from brooding, whimsical Southeast Europe and into Greasy Ken's Diner on Bethnal Green Road.

Incredulously, Hotel Castle Dracula's dining experience is incomparable to the one that awaits us in the city of Turda. Booked into the Hunter Prince Castle, a stunning medieval fantasy retreat with stone walls and stuffed animals, we are served

a meat and polenta dish that's been laid out to resemble a large cock and balls. Oh, and there's some unidentifiable creamy goo. What is the chef thinking? The meat's thick, rubbery texture only heightens its unappetising appearance. Any table etiquette is swiftly jettisoned and conversation erupts into a battle of drunken banter with such queries as "is anyone eating the shaft?" and "are the peas supposed to be chlamydia?"

Bellies stuffed with pretend penis, the vampirish mood returns when, outside the hotel, a group of actors re-enact a traditional vampire-killing ritual, faithful to Romanian folklore.

During the Middle Ages, many people in Eastern Europe believed that undead souls known as Strigoi could return from the grave. These cursed horrors would feed on the life of normal folk, and to 'kill' a Strigoi one had to wear garlic while hammering a stake through its rotting heart.

Not surprisingly, Bram Stoker took inspiration for his modern vampire from these ancient rituals. However, the writer researched his novel from the comfort of the British Museum in London, without ever setting foot in Transylvania (what a cheat). And while Vlad Tepes was the main historical influence on his tale of terror, inspiration for *Dracula* also came from Hungary in the form of Elizabeth Bathory (1560-1640), the noblewoman who, legend has it, bathed in the blood of virgins to rejuvenate her skin.

More fierce entertainment awaits us in Sibiu, another beautiful town where Vlad Tepes yet again (may have) impaled a huge proportion of its Saxon populace. Here, some local knights demonstrate what warfare was like in Dracula's time. These hulking athletes - lovely guys when not twirling 4ft broadswords - hit each other full-force using heavy replica weapons that have been blunted



Our crazy tour guide Claudio tries to hang himself in Sighisoara



"CONTRADICTIONS, TOURISTY DAFTNESS AND DARK HISTORY"

to ensure they don't lose limbs. One of the warriors, a burly chap weighting at least 20st, shows me several career scars from his chosen hobby. His injuries have included 14 fractured fingers, three smashed wrists, a cracked collarbone, a shattered jaw and a broken nose. He also tells me that he competes in a yearly re-enactment event in Poland, which features two organised armies of 300 soldiers battering each other to bits. He says the Russians are the best at it.

WILL THE REAL DRACULA CASTLE PLEASE STAND UP?

While the last three days of our trip were remarkably surreal (and that's without even mentioning the Camp Dracula in a hotel crypt, bonfire stories with a masked 'scary dude' who doesn't speak English, and the 84-year-old artist who carves a figure out of his kidney stone), the final day of the tour rewards us with a visit to the ruins of Poienari Fortress, situated bloody miles away in the northeast corner of Transylvania.

Sometimes dubbed the 'real Dracula castle', it's a small military fortress strategically built on a steep cliff precipice, making it almost impossible for invaders to storm. Originally constructed in the 13th century, Vlad Tepes had the fortress expanded during his reign, and worked disgraced noblemen to death during its gruelling construction. It's also here that Vlad's wife is said to have died, choosing to jump from its high walls rather than be captured by Ottoman forces. But the fact that Poienari is in a semi-ruinous state has little to do with warfare, and more to do with an earthquake in 1915.

The drive to Poienari is otherworldly, and amongst the highlights are a river that shimmers in the golden sunlight as lightning crackles over the greying horizon, and the ghostly stone stump of The Red Tower, so-called because it was once splashed in the blood of Turkish soldiers.

Once at Poienari, we have to climb a lung-busting 1,480 steps to reach its summit. My sympathies go to the souvenir shop guy, who endures this hike every day... though his thighs must be huge. Meanwhile, our own superhuman 64-year-old tour guide races to the top, barely breaking a sweat and making a mockery of my pale, weakening form skulking behind. At the top, the view is epic.



With our fun and crazy pilgrimage complete, our group returns to Bucharest and disbands with some emotional man-hugs and kisses. It's here that I realise I must have spent at least £250 on kitsch Dracula-themed souvenirs, or as we came to nickname it 'Drac Tat'. My personal highlight is a goggle-eyed wood carving of Vlad Tepes' chiselled mug, purchased in Sighisoara, with hair that sways regardless of whether the windows are open or shut. But I still can't resist departing without acquiring the ultimate in Dracula-themed souvenirs: a vampire bat, tattooed on my arm by the guys at Roxy Tattoo (Roxy-Tattoo.com). How's that to end the trip, eh?

And so there you have it: Transylvania is a startling place of swirling contradictions, with phenomenal landscapes, touristy daftness and a dark, compulsive history that is unsurpassable for anyone who enjoys Gothic thrills. At its most romantic, visting Transylvania is like being sucked inside an ethereal fairy tale. At its most touristy, it's like getting stuck on a fairground ghost ride in Essex. Trying to cram in all the region's history and wonderful sights in seven days is a crazy, impossible task - but as an intense, testing and, at-times, hilarious taster of these fey and fascinating lands, these tours won't be forgotten easily. Would I recommend it? Of course I would. Romania is beautiful. But I wouldn't recommend ordering the cock... ¹⁵

Big, hearty thanks go out to Claudiu and the awesome people at Transylvania Live for all their hard work. If you fancy a holiday with them, head to Visit-Transylvania.co.uk and check out their full selection of Dracula-themed tours



Paying respects to Bram Stoker at Hotel Castle Dracula



Doing my best Peter Cushing impression