

Discover the Soul of Romania: A 18-Day Private Tour

Perfect as a Danube Cruise Extension

Discover the soul of Romania and Bulgaria on this 18-day private journey designed as the perfect pre- or post-extension to your Danube cruise. From the elegance of Budapest to the vibrant capital of Sofia, travel through time as you explore medieval towns, majestic castles, ancient fortresses, and remote monasteries. Experience local life through home-cooked meals, folklore traditions, and encounters with artisans who keep old crafts alive. Breathtaking landscapes — from the Bicz Gorges and the Transfăgărășan Road to the historic hills of Veliko Târnovo and the sacred mountains of Rila — complement the region's rich cultural heritage. This carefully crafted itinerary offers a deep, personal connection to the history, traditions, and spirit of the Balkans, all enjoyed in comfort with handpicked experiences along the way.

Day 1: Budapest to Timișoara | Gateway to Romania

Leave the Hungarian capital behind and cross into Romania, where the journey begins in the vibrant city of **Timișoara**—a cultural jewel with a rich Austro-Hungarian legacy. Often dubbed *"Little Vienna,"* Timisoara's baroque squares, colorful facades, and lively cafes make for a charming first impression. Enjoy a guided city tour, including Victory Square, Union Square, and the Orthodox Cathedral, where the anti-communist Romanian revolution ignited in 1989.

Hotel Opera 4* or similar



Day 2: Timișoara to Sibiu | Castles and Citadels

Today, travel into the heart of Transylvania, stopping first at the imposing **Corvin Castle** in Hunedoara—one of Europe's most dramatic Gothic castles, steeped in legend and history. Continue to **Alba Iulia**, the spiritual capital of modern Romania, where the 18th-century Vauban fortress tells the story of the country's unification. In the afternoon, arrive in **Sibiu**, "the city of the eyes", one of Transylvania's most beautiful cities, nestled in the foothills of the Carpathians.

Hotel Republique 4* or similar



Day 3: The Ultimate Road: Transfăgărășan Adventure

Begin with a walking tour of **Sibiu**, exploring its grand squares, medieval walls, and the iconic Bridge of Lies. Then, embark on a thrilling drive along the **Transfăgărășan** Highway, hailed by Top Gear as one of the world's best roads. Wind your way past alpine lakes, waterfalls, and craggy peaks. In the evening, arrive in **Sighișoara**, one of Europe's best-preserved medieval citadels and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Walk the cobbled streets on a guided tour through the birthplace of Vlad the Impaler - Dracula.

Hotel Fronius 4* or similar



Day 4: Sighișoara to Cluj Napoca | Gipsy cultural exchange

Today's route winds through the hills to the atmospheric **Bethlen Castle** ruins, a noble stronghold being slowly reclaimed by nature. Continue with an experiential visit to a local **Roma (Gypsy) community**, which will allow for cultural insight and candid exchange. For the afternoon activity, choose between a **wine tasting** in a 16 century castle and an exploration of the spectacular **salt mines** in Turda. The evening will be spent in Cluj Napoca, a large central-European looking city and major university and technological center.

Hotel Beyfin 4* or similar



Day 5: Cluj – Vadu Izei | A journey back in time: Maramureș

Travel into the heart of Maramureș, a land of wooden churches and timeless traditions, where families display their status in the community by building massive elaborate **wooden gates**, carved by hand. Their loom-woven rugs and blankets are still washed using centuries-old devices, that harvest the force of nearby rivers and streams. Visit one such **authentic place** (which is still used daily by the locals) where rugs are being washed, grains are being milled and moonshine is being distilled, all with the help of the Iza river. End the day with a **home-cooked dinner** and a **private folklore show** in a local guesthouse in Vadu Izei.

Rural family stay: Casa Covaciu or similar + traditional dinner and private folklore show



Day 6: Vadu Izei | Maramureș in depth

Day entirely dedicated to the exploration of Maramureș. Begin in nearby Săpânța, where you can marvel at the vividly painted **Merry Cemetery**, then continue to the towering wooden church of **Peri Monastery**. Visit Sighet's moving **Memorial to the Victims of Communism** and the unusual **open market**, where the fruits and vegetables are vying for space with products originating from Ukraine, only a couple of miles away. Sighet is also the birthplace of **Elie Wiesel**, Nobel Peace Prize laureate and author of the haunting *Night* — you may visit his memorial home. End your day with another **home-cooked dinner** in the same village.

Rural family stay: Casa Covaciu or similar + traditional dinner



Day 7: Vadu Izei – Gura Humorului | Into Bucovina's Painted World

Discover the graceful **Bârsana monastery**, its slender wooden spires rising towards the sky. After a beautiful **chairlift ride**, step into nature with an **easy trek** to the spectacular Horses' Waterfall, Romania's tallest. Later, stop to admire the **painted houses** of Ciocănești, uniquely adorned in a local tradition seen nowhere else in the country. In the afternoon, the journey takes you into Bucovina's rolling hills to the luminous **Voroneț Monastery**, often called the "Sistine Chapel of the East." Its celebrated frescoes — still radiant after five centuries — offer a serene and fitting close to a day that moves from living tradition to natural grandeur and finally to spiritual art.



Hotel Sentir 4* or similar



Day 8: Gura Humorului – Văratec | An Exploration of Monastic Life

Delve deeper into monastic Bucovina with visits to two more remarkable monasteries: **Moldovița** and **Sucevița**, UNESCO-listed for their intricate exterior frescoes. Don't miss the delightful **Painted Egg Museum**, where the centuries-old tradition of egg-painting is being both preserved and beautifully displayed. Your day concludes at Văratec Monastery, a living spiritual community where you'll **dine with the nuns** and **sleep within the monastery walls**. A unique opportunity to glimpse into the nuns' way of life.

Unique accommodation within the walls of the Văratec monastery + dinner cooked and served by the nuns.



Day 9: Văratec – Miercurea Ciuc | Back to Transylvania

A day blending history, craftsmanship and dramatic landscapes begins at the imposing **Neamț Fortress**, standing guard over the valley for more than six centuries. From here, continue to the **Popa Museum** in Târpești, where traditional masks and folk art reveal the imagination of rural Romania. The route then winds through the spectacular **Bicaz Gorges**, sheer cliffs rising above the narrow mountain road, before the scenery softens into the Székely Land as you arrive in **Miercurea Ciuc**, a quiet Transylvanian town shaped by its Central European heritage.

Hotel Gambrinus 4* or similar



Day 10: To Brașov | Hungarian Cultural Heritage

Delve deeper into the Hungarian heritage of southeast Transylvania. Discover the quirky Ika Tower and Haszmann Pál **ethnographical museum** with its open-air collection of rural tools and agricultural machinery. Explore a functioning water mill that still grinds flour the old-fashioned way. Join a local family for a two-hour long **hands-on bread-making workshop** followed by a **traditional Hungarian lunch**. On route to Brașov, don't miss the impressive **Prejmer citadel**, a UNESCO site, where each local family had their own refuge-room built into the defensive wall.

Hotel Prinz Gregor 4* or similar



Day 11: Braşov – Bran – Braşov | Myths & Mountains

A day of legends and leisure begins with a visit to the iconic **Bran Castle**, famously linked to the Dracula myth, but historically tied to Queen Marie of Romania. Explore its ramparts and hidden passages before returning to Braşov. You may choose to have a relaxing afternoon or to visit the **Libearty Bear Sanctuary**, a heartwarming refuge for rescued brown bears set in a tranquil forest, outside town.

Hotel Prinz Gregor 4* or similar



Day 12: Braşov – Bucharest | From Royal Trails to City Lights

Journey south toward Bucharest, stopping at the fairy-tale **Peleş Castle** nestled in the mountains of Sinaia. One of the most spectacular castles on the continent, Peleş was the favorite project of the country's first king, who devoted it 42 years of his life and a large part of his considerable fortune. With its ornate woodwork, secret passages, and royal legacy, it's a tour highlight.

Continue through the rolling countryside, towards the capital. Arrive in **Bucharest** and settle in for the capital's vibrant mix of past and present.

Hotel Capitol 4* or similar



Day 13: Bucharest | Highlights of the Capital

Take in the capital's layered identity on a guided city tour. See wide boulevards, Belle Époque architecture, and the imposing **Palace of the Parliament** — the world's heaviest building. Admire the **Arch of Triumph**, a proud symbol of Romanian unity, and enjoy an interior visit of the splendid **Romanian Atheneum**, the city's beloved concert hall. Wrap up with a culinary stroll through the lively **Obor Market**.

Hotel Capitol 4* or similar



Day 14: Arbanassi and Veliko Târnovo | From the Danube Gateway to the Tsars' Hill

We cross the majestic **Danube**, the natural gateway into Bulgaria, and enter a region deeply marked by medieval history. Our first stop is **Arbanassi**, a remarkable village known for its **unique architecture**, where wood and stone combine in solid traditional houses that evoke the prosperity of past centuries. We visit the ancient **Church of the Nativity**, famous for its frescoes and historical significance. We then continue to Veliko Târnovo and ascend to **Tsarevets**, “the Machu Pichu of Eastern Europe”, whose fortress dominates the surrounding landscape. At the summit, the reconstructed church blends Byzantine inspiration with the monumental aesthetic of the 20th century. At dusk, the artistic illumination of the complex creates an unforgettable visual spectacle.

Hotel Gurko 3 or similar*



Day 15: Thracian Tombs and Plovdiv | History Dive

We travel to the Valley of the Thracian Kings to discover the legacy of this fascinating ancient civilization. We visit the **Thracian Tomb of Kazanlak** (a visitable replica), renowned for its Hellenistic frescoes that reveal rituals and beliefs from more than two thousand years ago. We continue to **Plovdiv**, considered the most beautiful city in Bulgaria and, recently, the European Capital of Culture. Its **Old Town**, with its cobbled streets with mansions from the Bulgarian National Revival, offers an elegant setting where history and modern life coexist harmoniously.

Hotel Villa Flavia 3 or similar*



Day 16: Plovdiv and Sofia | The Bulgarian Capitals

The morning is free to **continue exploring Plovdiv**, one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in Europe, where layers of history coexist naturally. You may visit the magnificent **Roman theater**, still used for performances, stroll through its charming streets or discover the **Ottoman district** of Kapana, now transformed into the city's creative heart, full of workshops, cafés, and vibrant street art. Also notable is the historic **Dzhumaya Mosque**, a testament to the city's multicultural past. In the afternoon, transfer to **Sofia**, the Bulgarian capital at the foot of Mount Vitosha.

Hotel Rosslyn Thracia 4 or similar*



Day 17: Sofia and the Rila Monastery | Soul of Bulgaria

We devote the day to **discovering Sofia**, one of the oldest capitals in Europe. We visit the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral, the Russian Church, the Roman Rotunda of St. George, and the remains of ancient Serdica, witnesses to its millennia-old past. The day is completed with an excursion to the spectacular **Rila Monastery**, set among forested mountains. Its vibrant frescoes, painted galleries, and spiritual atmosphere make it **the country's most emblematic monument**—a place where art, faith, and nature merge in unforgettable harmony.

Hotel Rosslyn Thracia 4 or similar*



Day 18: – Departure

Private transfer to the airport for your return flight, taking with you memories of medieval fortresses, ancient civilizations, vibrant cities, and the serenity of the Balkan landscapes.

What's included:

- A private tour – just for you and your family or friends;
- The services of an English-speaking guide throughout the trip (guiding available in Spanish or French upon request);
- Pick-up directly from your Danube river cruise ship in Budapest;
- Transportation in a modern, comfortable vehicle, with all associated costs covered;
- 17 nights in centrally located 4-star hotels, charming B&B and monastic accommodation*;
- Daily breakfast, 3 traditional home-cooked meals and one monastic dinner;
- A wine tasting of Romanian wines or a visit to the salt mines;
- A bread-baking workshop;
- A private folklore show;
- All entrance fees and guided visits as outlined;
- A beautiful, welcoming country ready to be explored.

**Staying one night at the monastery is subject to availability and cannot be guaranteed in advance — however, it is usually not a problem to arrange, especially if requested early.*

What's not included:

- International flights or other transportation to/from the start or end of the tour;
- Meals not specifically mentioned above;
- Gratuities for your guide (at your discretion).