

## Forgotten lands of eastern Europe

**Thomas E. Muller's** thirst for travel takes him to the little known region of eastern Europe. Here he experiences the intriguing Romania, Ukraine and Belarus, and the best kept travel secret: Moldova.

Dracula's castle was giving me the creeps. As the late-afternoon shadows lengthened, the grey stone fortress looming above me looked ominous. At the base of this 60-metre-tall castle stood a black granite cross. All that was missing to curdle my blood was the rustle of a stiff autumn breeze and a moonless night. It was late-September and I was at Bran Castle, in Romania's fabled Transylvania. Count Dracula – Prince Vlad the Impaler Dracool, to be historically correct – spent just one week of his life in a cell within this fort, as a prisoner of the Ottoman Turks.

But the blood-sucking vampire legend lives on, thanks to countless horror films and today's obliging souvenir stalls and tourist guides, packaging your Bran Castle experience with stories of this legendary 15th century warrior who was fond of impaling captured Turkish soldiers by having their torsos skewered vertically, from rectum to throat, with a wooden pole, to let them die upright and slowly.

My guide was Liviu Tudor, a retired civil engineer whose phenomenal knowledge of Romania's history might make him one of the country's finest tour guides. Mindful of the

time on this private, 12-hour foray into Romania's past, Tudor whisked me through the 14th century Bran Castle which served as the summer retreat of British-born Queen Marie, wife of Romania's King Ferdinand I, during the 1920s. After she died in 1938, Marie's heart was removed and placed in a gold box, which now lies in a marble tomb in Bran. More gory Dracula stuff!

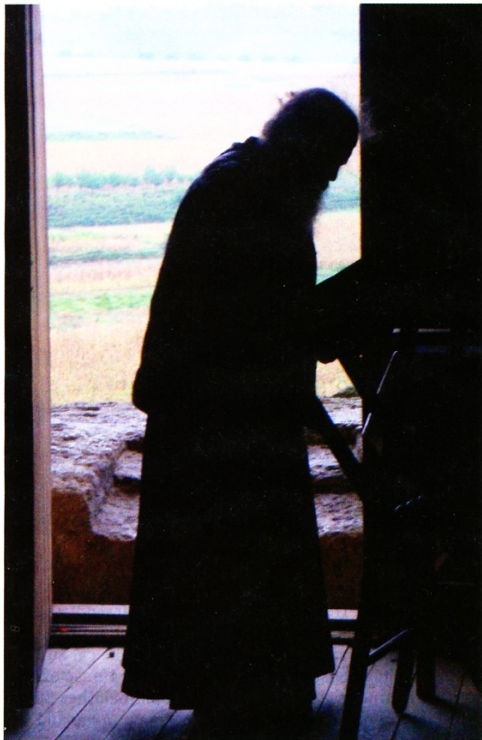
Tudor had driven me northward from Romania's capital, Bucharest, to Braşov along the Prahova Valley into the fir-covered Carpathian Mountains, where we stopped to savour some palatial magnificence in

the town of Sinaia. Romanian monarch, King Carol I, chose this area for his summer residence in 1870, and Sinaia soon became a major resort.

Peleş Castle was Carol I's showpiece of the new Romanian monarchy. I tried to fathom the staggering cost and labour that had gone into the intricate wood carvings, hand-woven tapestries and marble decorations that embellished every corner of this palace. Nearby Pelişor Palace is filled with German-medieval weapons and phantom knights, suited up in their armour, eerily staring at you through the eye slits of their helmets until you have left the halls.



Golden wonder The Dormition Cathedral in Kiev.



**Ancient traditions** A solitary monk in Moldova.

I had started this journey through eastern Europe's lesser known republics by first taking a train across Russia, from Vladivostok to Moscow, before visiting Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Transdnestr, and Romania: in that sequence. Having crossed eight of Russia's 11 time zones, I arrived in Moscow and found Russia's largest metropolis steeped in traffic anarchy on steroids. It took my taxi four hours to get me from a hotel in the city centre to Moscow's second international airport, Sheremetyevo. And, so chaotic was the airport scene, that I never got through passport control and left the country without an exit stamp.

Coming into Minsk, the capital of Belarus, was a big surprise. Here I savoured the broad boulevards, lined with colossal buildings – examples of Stalinist architecture without a trace of industrial soot – manicured park grounds, spotlessly clean streets, and astonishingly orderly traffic. I found an ATM in the street and withdrew some Belarusian roubles from my savings account in Australia. Did I want a receipt for this transaction? Not believing it would also give me my remaining bank balance, I hit the “yes” button out of curiosity.

war monument: Victory Square, with its 38-metre obelisk and eternal flame for the fallen in WWII, a fitting place for the wedding couple I spotted posing for photographs, both dressed in white. Edith, my guide for the day, took me for a walk through a Soviet time warp, passing the monolithic, block-wide building that is the KGB headquarters. A while later, she stopped and pointed at the top floor of a yellow, neoclassical apartment building. This is where Lee Harvey Oswald and his Minsk wife, Marina, lived for two years before he returned to the United States to assassinate John F. Kennedy. Our last stop was the 17th century St Catherine Church. This stands out in a city noticeably devoid of churches and cathedrals, for it is still a land where atheism predominates.

My next destination was Kiev (or Kyiv), the capital of Ukraine. In contrast to Minsk, Kiev is full of churches and monasteries. The greatest of these is the Caves Monastery, at Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra, the city's single most visited tourist site, with a colourful history dating back to 1051. I bought a slender candle, lit it at the entrance, and descended into labyrinthine darkness. It was Sunday, and the unnervingly narrow one-way

The Republic of Moldova has to be Europe's best kept secret. It is considerably smaller and poorer than its immediate neighbours, yet what it lacks in infrastructure, it more than makes up for in the warmth and willingness of its people and the quality of its wine.

The paper printout made my day: my current bank balance made me a multimillionaire in Belarusian roubles. I could stay here forever.

My private city tour included the Island of Tears, a memorial honouring the mothers and sisters who had lost sons and brothers in Afghanistan during the Soviet invasion of that country. Next, came a more grandiose

tunnels were hot, humid and packed with local worshippers holding candles and stopping by each of the 48 glass-topped coffins, spread throughout the underground complex and containing the blanketed bodies of naturally mummified monks, all of them canonised to sainthood. At each coffin, they would kneel, say a prayer, then rise to kiss the glass top before moving on.

The churches and cathedrals spread around Kiev are utterly magnificent. Rebuilt and restored many times over the centuries, they look as though they were freshly painted every day, their shiny gold cupolas topped with the Eastern Orthodox cross.

The Republic of Moldova has to be Europe's best kept secret. It is considerably smaller and poorer than its immediate neighbours, yet what it lacks in infrastructure, it more than makes up for in the warmth and willingness of its people and the quality of its wine. This destination could well be Europe's best travel bargain. And here I was, completely on my own, my Australian travel agent having been unable to do any more than book me a hotel in the capital, Chişinău, because he had “nothing” on Moldova.

While there, I found a way to make a brief foray into Transdnestr and its “capital” of Tiraspol. Not wishing to drive a rented car on alien roads, I managed to persuade a very reluctant local driver to take me from Chişinău into what surely ranks as Europe's top political oddity – Moldova's breakaway, self-declared republic of Transdnestr, which no government recognises, least of all the Moldovan one. It is one of the planet's last remaining bastions of communism, and has its own police, army, borders and currency that, outside Transdnestr, is just a collector's curio. After four separate inspections of our car boot at the border, two getting out



**Dracula's castle** Transylvania's Bran Castle is steeped in legend.

of Moldova and two into Transdniestr, we reached Tiraspol and spent several hours driving around this surreal living relic of the Soviet Union. My Moldovan driver, Sergiu, stopped the car so I could photograph a huge bust of Lenin, guarding the House of Soviets standing behind it. As I clicked away, a plainclothes State Security agent leaped out of his parked car, came up to me and flashed his ID card.

"Why are you taking photographs?" he demanded in Russian. I was about to utter a response, when up came Sergiu to answer for me.

"He is a tourist, just taking pictures in public places," countered Sergiu.

"What country is he from?" snapped the agent.

"He's from a foreign country," offered Sergiu, not giving away any more than was needed. The agent let me go. We had a leisurely lunch at an al fresco restaurant, then paid a visit to the Kvint factory, maker of the finest brandy, before heading back toward Moldova, only to be detained for two hours at the Transdniestr border because my passport didn't have an entry permit. Eventually (this is a perpetual border game that's played), they took a bribe of 30 euros and let us leave the country.

Sergiu is a Moldovan man of honour, and offered to make up for what he felt had been a let-down for this Russian-speaking visitor from Australia. We drove another 120 km, past acres of Moldovan vineyards, to reach the Orheiul Vechi Cave Monastery, carved into a massive limestone cliff, high above the Răut River, by 13th century Orthodox monks. This isolated place of worship is, today, occupied by a solitary, ageing monk who prays and reads all day, and relies on villagers down in the valley to bring him food and water. Sergiu and I climbed up the rocky path until, breathless, we reached the entrance to the cave at the top of the cliff's plateau. There, in the fading light, we saw the catacombs where monks had lived and slept, centuries ago. Above that was a tiny chapel, where we found the bearded monk standing over his biblical text, printed in Cyrillic, and whispering what he was reading.

This is the forgotten region of Eastern Europe, filled with history, monasteries, monuments, churches, castles, caves – and great wine.



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Cover: **Queen of 'hen lit'** Wendy Harmer talks about her new novel, *Roadside Sisters*, and writing for Aussie audiences.

## editor



In a recession it is easy to come away feeling down after reading a newspaper or watching the news. I hope that after reading this issue of *50 something*, you'll come away informed, entertained and

uplifted. My belief is that there should be a healthy balance between the bad things one needs to know and ensuring we still focus on the positives around us. Putting your head in the sand serves no purpose; nor does taking in only the doom and gloom.

The biggest story of the month is the Federal Budget. National Seniors has secured some great outcomes for members in a time of economic uncertainty. On the whole this Budget holds a lot of promise for the over 50s. For details on how it will affect you, turn to page 21.

On the serious side of things, we've got practical information on borrowing money from a family member (page 30) and supporting carers (page 26). Plus there is the ever-popular Agony Planner to help answer your money questions.

When it comes to the lighter side of life, simple pleasures can mean so much. We've got some uplifting ideas for you, such as a healing Greek soup (page 36), one take on the meaning of life (page 34) and a light-hearted chat with funny woman Wendy Harmer. See page 18 for Wendy's thoughts on road trips, humour and writing for Australian readers.

Turn to page 57 for our new cartoon, "Clothes for Emperors". This strip explores the many things today (be they products, ideas or people) that we're convinced are valuable, but don't stand up to scrutiny.

As icing on top, we've got lots of giveaways sprinkled through this issue. Keep an eye out for movie tickets, CDs and DVDs.

Abby Campbell  
Acting Editor

## contributors



Margaret Arthur is a lawyer in the Elder Life Services team at Carne Reidy Herd Lawyers in Brisbane. Her work encompasses a broad range of legal issues affecting older people including wills, estates, enduring powers of attorney, guardianship, Centrelink, superannuation, family succession and disputes.



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Kaye Healey is a retired counsellor now living on her five acre farm in the Southern Highlands of NSW where she has established a permaculture food garden. She is currently convening the Crazy Cozies project with the Exeter CWA to raise funds for women with breast cancer in rural and regional Australia (<http://crazycozies.blogspot.com>).



Thomas E. Muller was born to travel and, 69 years later, he is still doing exactly that. He now focuses on exploring the Earth's remote and less-visited places and writing about his encounters with people and their own corners of the planet. He is a National Seniors life member and before retirement was a professor researching and writing about the travel psychology of seniors and retirees.



Casey-Ann Seaniger, a member of the National Seniors public affairs team, hails from Mackay in North Queensland. Casey-Ann has a Bachelor of Journalism (Hons) from James Cook University in Townsville, a background in print media and a passion for community volunteering.



Graham Stephenson has 20 years of global travel experience with a personal collection of over 12,000 photographs. He is a freelance travel writer and photographer with a passion for Europe. Graham also has experience in tour conducting and consultation. Recently he has developed an interest in exploring his family tree.

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