



On the Trail of Dracula

Touring Romania With Vlad On the Mind

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When the Irish novelist Bram Stoker wrote the dark Gothic novel *Dracula* in 1897, the world of mysticism, the occult, and belief in the underworld were held in a very different regard than today. His novel dabbled in the unknown and was indeed made of scary stuff. Doubtless he would be amazed that his fictitious vampire character not only spawned numerous cult movies but also an entire tourism industry for the district of Transylvania in Romania.

So who was Dracula and where might I find him or evidence of him? My quest first took me to Bucharest where I picked up travel partner Zed Zawada, guide Gabriel Jderu, and a couple of BMW motorcycles.

Old Town Bucharest with its cobbled streets, quaint hotels, and outdoor cafés provided the perfect atmosphere from which to launch our journey. We left on Saturday, perhaps not the best idea given the two-lane main roads and abundant weekend tourist traffic. But with our guide, a very experienced rider who happened to have a PhD in motorcycle sociology, we were able to run down the outside of sometimes miles of stationary car traffic with little or no hindrance.

The real life Dracula was Vlad Dracula or Vlad the Impaler (because of his well-earned reputation), who lived between 1431 and 1476. He was the son of Vlad Dracul. Dracul can be interpreted in two ways: Dragon or Devil. Dracula has been interpreted as “Son of the Devil,” but I am told that was not until after his death.

Evidence of Dracula’s castles are scattered all over Transylvania and our first stop was the elegant Peles Castle some 75 miles and two hours of easy riding north of Bucharest. Built in the late 1800s, this castle is relatively new. But it was on an existing medieval route linking Transylvania to the north with Walachia to the south, which quite likely would have been defended by Dracula in his day. However, there was no evidence of his presence at Peles Castle or its environs, so our trio headed north to the next castle, the much more famous Bran Castle.

The August weather as we headed into the mountains was clear and hot. The sinuous roads made wonderful riding and once off the main north/south highway the traffic was

light. Our respite that night was at the modern and architecturally dramatic Hotel Orizont in Predeal, leaving us a fast and twisty 20-minute ride through the mountains to Bran the next morning.

Bran Castle, which has become the center for “Dracula tourism,” lies 18 miles south of the city of Brasov. Those who visit Romania in search of vampires and Dracula are told to visit Bran. The small town has welcomed the myth with open arms. As our castle guide told us, if they had asked Disney to invent such a marketing tool, it would have cost millions. Bram Stoker’s novel and a plethora of movies starring Bela Lugosi as Dracula in 1931 and Christopher Lee’s portrayal in the late 1950s created a major tourist attraction for free. Finding hard evidence that Vlad spent any time at Bran Castle is difficult, but many historians agree he could have spent some time there en route to Brasov.

With our bubble burst and no empirical evidence of Vlad Dracula, we headed north to Brasov. Romania is a country in transition. It is scrambling out of the repressive communist regime into a free market capitalist system. But growth and change are not without their own struggles. Sometimes old habits are hard to break and old demons hard to shake. Whatever the eventual outcome, I found the people to be one of Romania’s greatest assets. We were welcomed and befriended wherever we went.

Every town in Transylvania can trace its heritage back to the time when Leif Eriksson landed in America circa 1000. And many of the foundations of the original buildings can be identified and even viewed. The very narrow roads are for the most part paved, but cobblestone streets can still be found and make for interesting riding.

Our first experience of Brasov, where Vlad was said to have led raids against the Saxons merchants, was a visit to an artisan motorcycle builder called “Basty,” short for Sebastian. He has a very eclectic collection of his work on display and is quick to show you his “Polski Zaklad Lotnicze” (Polish Aircraft Works) radial aircraft engine. Imagine that in a chopper frame! Basty built our guide’s bike, and it was here where Gabriel left us to return to Bucharest. Zed and I were now on our own.



This is potentially the greatest road hill-climb track anywhere. Standing at the top of the Transfagarasan pass can make any road-racer salivate. Bring toe sliders!

Old Brasov, founded by Teutonic Knights in 1211, sits protected in a valley about 110 miles north of Bucharest and is the most visited city in Transylvania. In its beginning, Brasov was located at the intersection of the trade routes linking the Ottoman Empire and Western Europe. The old city is well preserved and can be seen almost in its entirety by taking the cable car to the top of Tampa Mountain. For us, drinking a local beer in the town square after a full day of riding in the heat was a delight. As the sun disappeared, the sidewalk cafés blossomed to the sound of universally identifiable music. And the summer antics of the “young at heart” filled the cooling air.

After a night’s rest at the Villa Prato boutique hotel, a walking tour of the “old town” and still no empirical evidence of Dracula’s presence, we took to the winding roads in the direction of Sighisoara. Once out of town, the roads were free of traffic on this weekday, allowing us to enjoy the long sweeping bends as motorcyclists often do. But there is one caveat. Never assume that there is not a tailback around a blind corner, as my friend Zed found to his chagrin. Several trucks and cars were backed up



The essence of Dracula is everywhere around the town of Bran. Kind of like Mickey Mouse and Anaheim, but driven by historical tradition, not the Disney marketing machine.

trying to get around a horse and cart. That’s why they call it adventure touring!

I was excited at the prospect of spending the night in the citadel at Sighisoara, not the least reason being that it is the birthplace of Vlad Dracula. But first we took a 5-mile detour down a narrow and mainly unpaved road to Viscri. It was a challenging road, but given that Britain’s Prince Charles has bought and restored two 18th-century houses in this Saxon village, I felt the effort was worth it. The central attraction, however, was the fortified church built in 1100 AD. There were three or four other motorcycle tourists there when we arrived including a family with an Africa Twin with sidecar, which made for some good stories. Many people in Romania speak English, making communication easy for us monolingualists. With more miles to go we headed north, dodging the sheep and other farm animals meandering across and along the dirt road, and set our sights on Sighisoara.

Sighisoara is a fine example of a small, fortified medieval

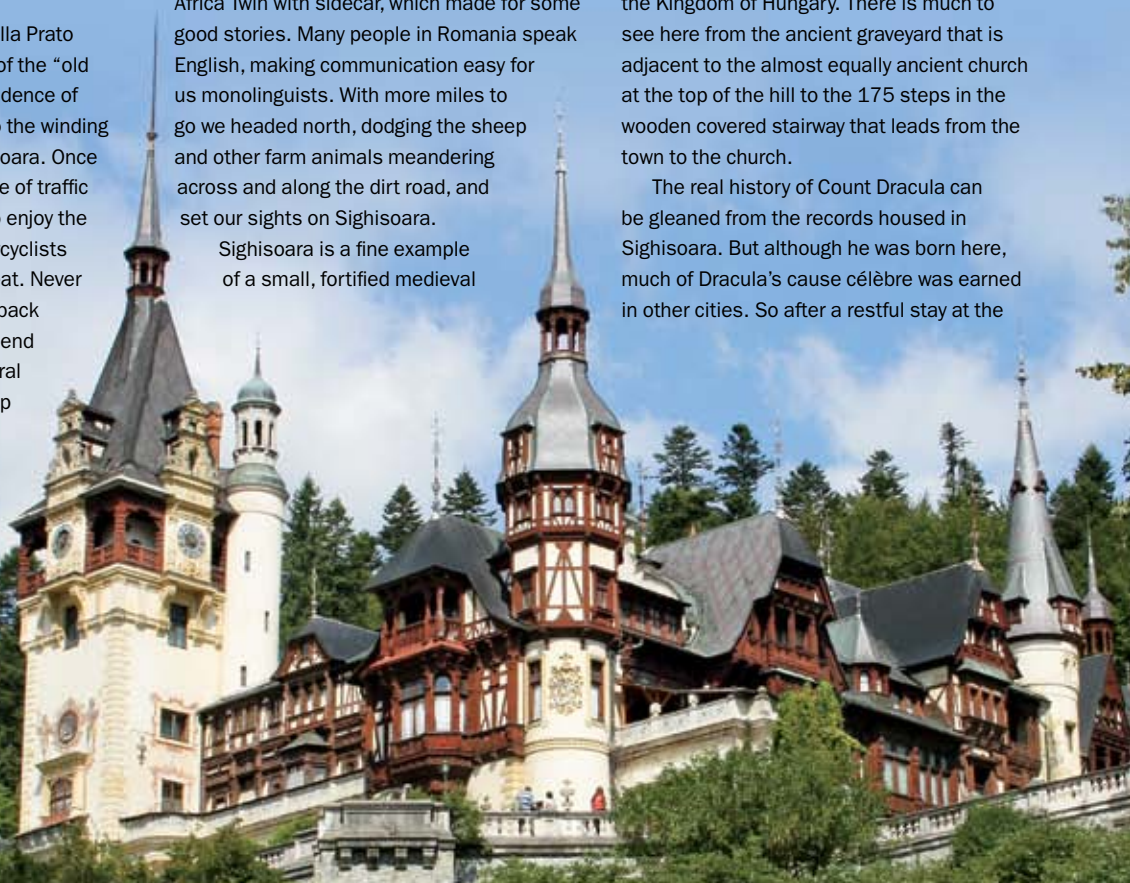


Casa Vlad Dracul is a restaurant located in the house where Vlad Dracula was reputedly born. There are, however, no bloodthirsty items on the menus.

town that sits on the banks of the Târnava Mare River and has been inhabited since the 6th century BC. It is also the birthplace of the object of our quest, Vlad Dracula III. Finally some hard evidence! At the city center on a hill is the walled citadel, or the old fortress town. We entered through a portcullised gate, and it was as if 21st-century people had suddenly descended on a 12th-century community replete with spired towers, cobblestones and central drainage. Walking through here is like stepping back in time, and only a little imagination is required to visualize the mystical days of yore. When Vlad III was born, Sighisoara, Transylvania, was a part of the Kingdom of Hungary. There is much to see here from the ancient graveyard that is adjacent to the almost equally ancient church at the top of the hill to the 175 steps in the wooden covered stairway that leads from the town to the church.

The real history of Count Dracula can be gleaned from the records housed in Sighisoara. But although he was born here, much of Dracula’s cause célèbre was earned in other cities. So after a restful stay at the

The Castle is the centerpiece of the small town of Bran, which has wholeheartedly adopted the modern-day legend of Count Dracula.





In the medieval village of Viscri, we ran into a family with their Honda Africa Twin touring sidecar. Sidecar touring is still quite popular in eastern Europe.



A true motorcycle artisan, "Basti," creates a variety of motorcycles from whole cloth, which means just about anything he can lay his hands on. He lives in Brasov.



Our guide for the first two days was Gabriel Jderu, Professor of Sociology at the University of Bucharest. His Ural-powered chopper was built by Basti.

delightfully unique Fronius Residence, we headed southwest to Sibiu with a planned stop at Biertan to find another of Romania's fine fortified churches. The interesting thing is that although there are many tourists seeking to delve into this medieval history, those on motorcycles always attract the attention of the local children. Biertan's inquisitive urchins were no exception.

There are no freeways in this part of the country, which means motorcycle riding the way I like it, with all of its rural challenges. The roads are generally good as long as you stick with the ones more traveled. From Biertan we rode the less traveled road and found a dusty, dirt-only track that climbed from the valley back to the main road to Sibiu.

There are many aspects of Transylvania that make it a popular motorcycle tourist destination; the challenge of constantly twisting

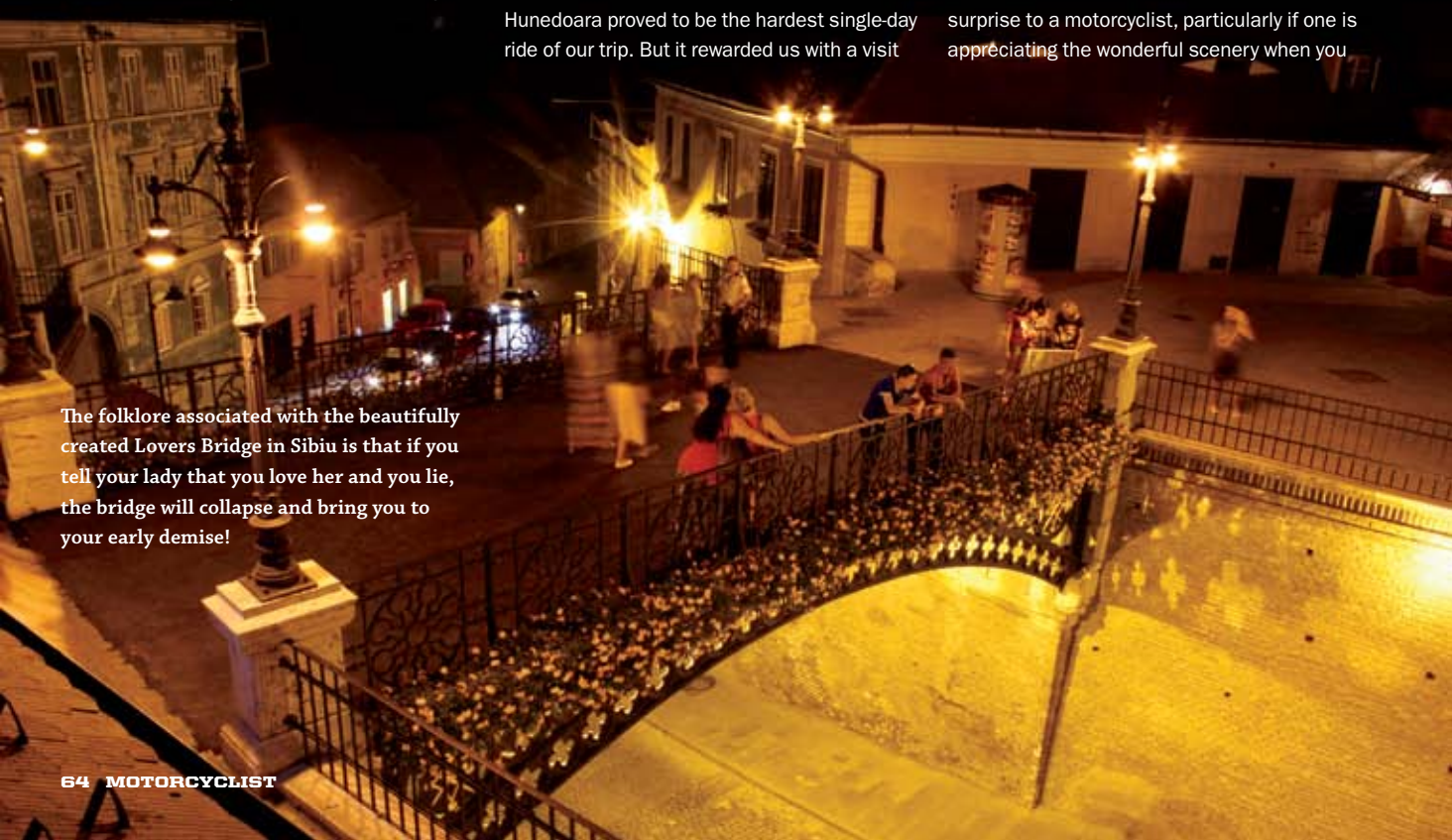
roads and sparse traffic being two. Another is the availability of local motorcycle tour guides like Claudia Palfi, who also has a stock of the latest BMWs. Claudia rode the two hours down from Turda to meet us and presented us with her special "I survived Transylvania" certificate. Claudia knows south-eastern Europe very well.

As interesting as towns and architecture can be, it is the people I met who provided me with the variety of character that brings it all to life. Across from the Imparatul Romanilor hotel, Zed spotted a purple Harley parked in front of the Transylvania Tattoo Parlor. Curiosity, not being the sole domain of cats, led us to introduce ourselves and that led to more tales of motorcycle culture in Transylvania courtesy of Ovidiu, master tattoo artist and Harley partisan.

A one-day round trip from Sibiu to Hunedoara proved to be the hardest single-day ride of our trip. But it rewarded us with a visit

to a known Dracula castle: the picturesque, Gothic-style Corvinilor Castle built in the 14th century, where Dracula was imprisoned for crimes against the Turks. Legend has it that it was here Dracula designed the punishment that made him the scourge of the Turks, honing the bizarre rituals of blood and torture, extending them to rodents but making friends with the bats. He continued to eat rare meat that still had blood remaining in it.

By now the heat was having its effect, and it felt much better to ride. So ride we did, south to Petrosani and then east along a very narrow, twisty, mountainous road to join up with the northbound Transalpina highway back toward Sibiu. The altitude gave us a much cooler ride. Although the Transalpina highway was declared open, it is far from finished. It is not so much of a problem for cars, but the unpaved, crossroad culverts can come as a surprise to a motorcyclist, particularly if one is appreciating the wonderful scenery when you



The folklore associated with the beautifully created Lovers Bridge in Sibiu is that if you tell your lady that you love her and you lie, the bridge will collapse and bring you to your early demise!



BMW-mounted Police check out my International Drivers license. They were polite but very professional. Fortunately, I had not broken any laws.



A relic of the communist regime, this Antonov An-2 is displayed near Petrosani. Interestingly, these circa-1946 utility airplanes still fly in some countries.



Complete with portcullis, this main gate wall fortified the citadel of Sighisoara, birthplace of Vlad Dracula. Cobblestone streets are everywhere.

should be looking forward. Quite exhausted, we got back to Sibiu for our second night at the elegant Imparatul Romanilor hotel.

Our final day of riding was the 56-mile Transfagarasan pass that links Transylvania to Walachia and climbs to almost 7000 feet before passing under the mountain peak through a half-mile tunnel and down the other side. The BBC television show *Top Gear* called it the best road in the world, and the featured section on the north side of the pass is quite wonderful and exciting by any standard. I have no idea if Dracula ever made it over this pass. But I am glad to say that I did, and I enjoyed every rising foot of it. The down side of the pass is longer and travels along the Arges River and the 6.5-mile-long Vidraru Lake through forests, and as such lacks the sheer vistas of the north slope. But it is an engaging road that will keep you amused and, depending on skill level, challenged.

Just as I was wishing for somewhere to stop, we arrived at a watering hole without which I might have ridden right past the last of Dracula's castles and the one that firmly established Vlad the Impaler as Eastern Europe's most feared leader. Poenari Castle, considered to be the authentic Dracula's Castle, sits on top of a peak that is impossible to see if you are traveling south. The parking lot at the base leads to a 1480-step staircase to the castle. This wasn't something we wanted to do in 100 degree heat and full riding gear, but perhaps something we might have done at the beginning of the ride.

Poenari is where Vlad III put into practice the punishment of impaling, which he had learned from the Turks during captivity in his youth. After marching the boyars 50 miles

without rest, he ordered them to build a new fortress on the ruins of the original Poenari Castle. Those who were old and weak he impaled for any advancing army to see. It was a great deterrent to potential invading forces and his own citizens. Almost any crime could be punished by impalement, yet Vlad III was looked upon as a hero by his people because crime and corruption ceased while commerce and culture thrived.

There is much known history yet much speculation about the life of Vlad Dracula. After six days, almost 900 miles, plenty of memories and Poenari behind us, our six-day quest was almost over. All that was left was the 100-mile ride to return to Bucharest to spend one more day enjoying the remarkable city that is spearheading Romania's transition from repression to freedom. So many roads to ride and so many reasons to put riding Romania on your bucket list. **MC**



Nicolae Ceaușescu was the last Communist leader. His house included 1100 rooms, one as big as a football field, four underground levels and 3,700,000 sq.ft. of floor space.