



Transylvania to tourists: There's more here than Dracula

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Upper town: Sighisoara's clock tower has been marking time since the early 17th century.

Fun and games: A shop in Sibiu uses Dracula as a

kitschy lure, but Vlad the Impaler is considered a national hero.

By Jayne Clark, USA TODAY



SIGHISOARA, Romania — The disciples are already trickling into this medieval hilltop town in which Vlad the Impaler, aka Dracula, may — or may not — have been born almost six centuries ago.

Gussied up in dark-lipped Drac face, the revelers will convene Sunday in a local 16th-century cellar for a vampire-themed dinner party featuring spicy beef and lots of red wine.

Sorry, it's sold out. Ditto for 2011.

"Halloween is very big here," says Ioan Lazare, owner of the Hotel Sighisoara, where the annual soiree takes place. "They dress up, hang out in the cemetery. They just like the novel and the movie so much, they want to see these places."



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Meanwhile, 90 miles south in the heart of [Transylvania](#), the proprietors of the 12th-century [Bran Castle](#), where [Vlad/Dracula](#) may — or may not — have dropped in during jaunts through the region, are preparing for an all-night Halloween bash, with theme music, horror movies, neck-nibbling, the works!

PHOTO GALLERY: [In the shadow of Dracula](#)

The facts of Vlad the Impaler's life are a tad ambiguous. Not so the myth, spurred by [Irishman Bram Stoker's](#) 1897 novel, *Dracula*, whose namesake character and setting he borrowed from the Carpathian plateaus in central [Romania](#).

But as much as some Romanians would like to drive a wooden stake through the heart of that myth, it shows no signs of dying, no small thanks to current pop culture phenomena like the *Twilight* trilogy, and *True Blood* and *The Vampire Diaries* on TV.

In an attempt to communicate that there's more to this country than vampire legends, greedy dictators, neglected orphanages and even perky gymnasts, tourism officials are touting Romania's natural assets and cultural heritage bounty. Well-preserved medieval towns, painted monasteries and ancient Dacian ruins occupy a landscape that has yet to be overrun by mass tourism.

Indeed, the Transylvanian countryside retains a lost-in-time quality, revealing sights you don't find just anywhere.

A step back in time

In a Roma village, men with prodigious beards craft copper pots used to distill the potent plum brandy Tzuica, while Gypsy women in flowing skirts and headscarves tend the children. Along two-lane roads linking centuries-old villages, horses sporting puffs of bright red yarn, meant to ward off curses, pull wagons heaped with farm goods. Haystacks dot the fields. Market stalls are piled high with fresh cheeses made by the sellers from their own herds. Higher in the mountains, bears, lynx and wolves still prowl the fir forests.

Adventure travel is growing. And in the village of Saschiz, the non-profit foundation ADEPT organizes village-to-village hikes and arranges slow-food-themed outings such as truffle-hunting with dogs.

"Instead of a plate with Dracula teeth, you can buy a homemade basket of local jams," says ADEPT co-

founder Cristi Gherghiceanu, a bit cryptically.

Still, it's tough to look a gift vampire in the mouth — fangs or no — given its mass appeal.

"The reality is that many Americans, when they think about Romania, think about Dracula," says Simion Alb, director of the Romanian National Tourist Office in New York.

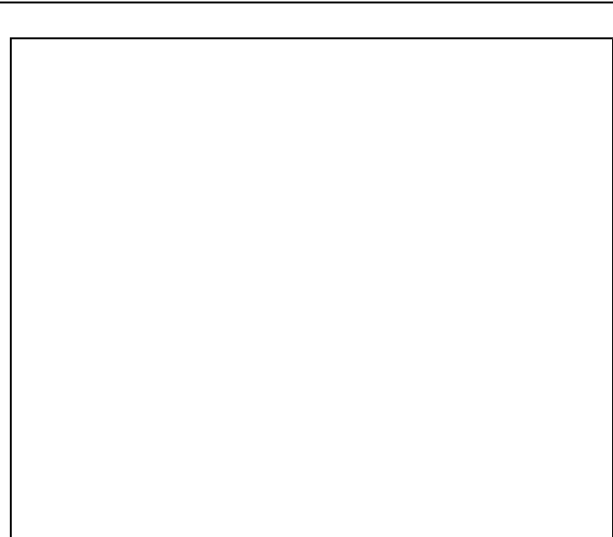
You don't need to tell tour operator Eduard Popescu that. He's near Sighisoara (pronounced See ghee swahr' ah) when the first Dracula sign appears directing motorists to a namesake hotel.

"A lot of guys put the Dracula name out there. Americans see it and they'll go," he says. "Americans are crazy about (the legend). They'll see a sign for the Bank of Transylvania and say, 'Stop! We must take photo!' And in the next town they see *another* Bank of Transylvania and say, 'Eduard, stop! We must have picture!'"

Sighisoara is hallowed ground for Dracula devotees. Its lower town is a cheerful jumble of green, yellow, pink and blue 18th-century buildings that were spared communist-era gray wash. Its fortified upper town is remarkably well preserved, with a 14th-century city hall, guild towers, churches and a monastery.

A 2001 proposal to create a Dracula theme park nearby created such an uproar that the project was scuttled. But the controversy drew more visitors, says Hans Bruno Frohlich, the local Lutheran priest.

A house in the center of the citadel purports to be





the birthplace of Vlad the Impaler, though the priest says it's a 1600s-era structure, and Vlad had been dead more than a century by then. ("Not that a vampire worries about time," he quips.) It was a church-owned home for the aged when the communists seized it in 1948. After 1989, it went into private hands. Now the church is suing to get it back.

"If we win, the first thing we'll do is take away the marble plaque outside that says it's the house of Vlad Dracul (Vlad the Impaler's father)," Frohlich says. "Why should we have to sell doughnuts when we have the real stuff?"

Telling 'the real stories'

For now, however, the stone building houses a New Age-y coffee bar/gift shop/hookah lounge on the lower floors and a restaurant upstairs where the tomato soup is a big seller. Mark Tudose rents a prime spot out front, where he sells hand-carved wooden spoons that portray Romanian legends, none of which has to do with vampires.

"I think it's really clever to bring tourists in with the Dracula myth. But it's our duty to share real stories with tourists."

Serious vampire kitsch can be found near Bran Castle. The origins of the fortress, 15 miles from the city of Brasov, date to 1377, and it's plausible that Vlad the Impaler was here. Vlad is portrayed as a fierce and brave leader who was skilled in psychological warfare, but lacked a good PR guy. (The Impaler moniker comes from his penchant for skewering his enemies with 15-foot wooden stakes and displaying the bodies as a graphic warning.)

From the 1920s until the post-World War II communist takeover, the castle was a royal residence. Descendants living in the USA got it back in 2007. About 518,000 visitors traipsed through the 57-room castle last year. It's also the setting for private events, including a romantic dinner for two that starts at about \$3,300. The owners are considering installing an apartment in one of the towers for overnight guests. Notes marketing director Alexandru Priscu, "It's not a friendly place to be at night. It's a 1300s castle built on a hill in the woods. It's drafty and squeaky."

Sibiu, a 13th-century town that is among the region's oldest, completes Transylvania's Dracula triangle. Its inviting historic heart is a mix of cobbled walkways and broad plazas ringed by red-

tile-roofed Saxon-style dwellings. With 14 museums and a celebrated annual theater festival, Sibiu is more suited to culture vultures than vampire seekers. Vlad's son is buried inside the landmark Lutheran cathedral there. But Alb, the U.S.-based tourism director, is hopeful that even die-hard vampire tourists will find something more here and elsewhere in Romania.

"After 50 years of communism, some visitors expect a dark country with aloof people," he says. "But once they get here, they're surprised at the diversity and the friendliness of the people."

Still, he adds, "The Dracula legend is a big draw. It would be foolish not to let people imagine what they want."

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