

A Decade of Transylvania Trips: the trials of a tour group organiser!

The first ever trip in 1994 - Group photo taken outside of Castle Dracula Hotel in Transylvania - note the obligatory dog, both feral and mangy. These people are all ten years older now, and where are they all ?



“You've been there before - to Romania - twice I think. Why don't you organise a trip for the club so that we can all go together - wouldn't that be fun?” I can remember the time and place of this conversation in late 1993, and the people involved. We were in a vampire society which boasted hundreds of members, and, if you were into Dracula it must be perfectly natural to want to go to "Transylvania"...

And so the mould was cast. From not having a clue where to start to having the whole trip shaped up took about four weeks - UK agent sorted, Romanian agent sorted, leaflets sent out and potential travellers asking questions.

What didn't help was that there was a certain ambiguity about who was behind it all. The club was all in favour, but avoided fully endorsing it, in an official kind of way, so the preparation took the aspect of a dodgy cockney operation in my hands and some erstwhile clients were asking "questions". In the event, and helped by the fact that the tour company got the price wrong and undercharged us, twenty three punters had paid their money and were ready to go in Easter 1994 after only three weeks frantic correspondence. If only it were that easy now.

The first tour of Romania lasted thirteen days, no-one was injured, all luggage was easily found and we arrived back at Heathrow knackered and with loads of vampire/Dracula mementoes, most of it wanted and most of it "tat". This process is immortalised now in one of Klif Fuller's songs, and mostly, the five trips which came after the first followed the same kind of pattern. Oh, and each time I promise I will never organise that trip again!

Highlights of that first tour were:

..When arriving at the airport in Bucharest, the Security commando was called out with so many black clad tourists getting off the plane (this could be an urban legend!)

..Being totally confused, inebriated and not knowing where we were on the second night and saying "this is only day two!"

..Getting pursued by the Romanian daily press for interviews and doing a broadcast for a local radio station.

..Going to Hotel Castle Dracula for the first time

..Visiting Peles Castle (neat stuff here) and being privileged to take any amount of photos - this is normally forbidden.

...On the final night in Bucharest going to see a famous Romanian rock band and ending up at an all night party.



Many Romanian orthodox churches have splendid murals depicting the choice in the afterlife. Heaven is peaceful and serene, Hell is full of debauchery and things involving naked writhings - which appears most interesting?

One of the regular coach stops - coaches can be tedious, but on board entertainment can alleviate this. Here we stop in the Caucasus for a leg stretch and the taking of photos, which was almost as popular as shopping. The old 35mm era meant people took maybe a hundred photos. The digital camera means not stopping at four hundred! Can you imagine what it is like when, post travelling, everyone brings their holiday pics to a meeting?



most recent > developments

We have recently been planning a group trip to the Czech and Slovak Republics for early October 2006. The tour will include lots of castles, including those of Erszebet Bathory and the one in the set for the 1922 film Nosferatu, the bone decorated church at Sedlec and, of course some days in Prague. Watch the website at www.revamped.co.uk for details to come.

We nailed the dodgy cockney image by giving the organising body the name "Out for the Count Promotions" and, funnily enough, this is regarded with some seriousness by agencies on the tourist scene. Over the years, some people have gone again and again, and yet over a hundred different individuals have indulged in one of these trips. More are now involved in the actual organising legwork and we try to introduce new variations each time. In 2004, a tongue in cheek addition was a visit to a salt mine, and this turned out to be brilliantly popular and being in a vast underground cavern was just mind blowing. However, the aspect that regulars have really accepted is the thing called the "Romania effect". Basically, even though new individual travellers have lots in common with others on the trip, they come along not really knowing anyone, and this leads to apprehension and some anxiety. Watching this being overcome and dispelled is a marvel for social observation and is probably one of the big rewards for the group organisers. One traveller summed it up with "leaving as a load of individuals, and arriving back as a bunch of mates". Needless to say, even with the greatest efforts, this doesn't work for everyone. Some Goths seem to be professionally miserable and we refer to this in our promotional literature.

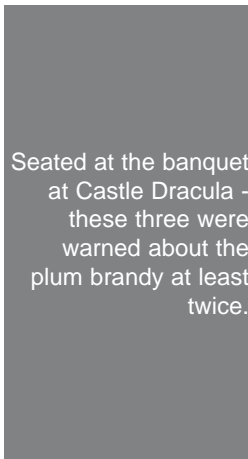
Strange threads always reappear on these trips. One is that we always have a guide who is keen to improve their range of English idioms. Most trips I get taken aside to explain to the guide the meaning of various phrases, like "Bob's your uncle" and "long in the tooth", but I positively refuse to account for the phrase "monkey spunk" which has now arisen three years running.

Another is when organising the tour, there will always be procrastinators who can't make up their minds. One has said "I'll come along next time" for five trips running now. This is doubly sad since the country is changing so rapidly now that it is getting difficult to recapture the old flavour. I feel some people could get by with calling cards which say "I'll come the next time."

In addition to the "Romania Effect" a trend has been established in the small group tourist industry called the "Mick Smith effect" (their words, not mine!). The first English tourist agency called *Friendly Travel* went bust the second time we tried to use them. *Fregata Travel* went bust whilst we were in the middle of negotiations. Another company went insolvent after our return from Romania and another one in South Leicester closed for business before we could use them a second time. The current one went bust and then refloated with a different name and, hopefully is still well. I have visited a lot of travel agencies! Is this the Midas touch in reverse?



The success of a trip often depends on building up trust, respect and a rapport between the group leader and the local guides. This pic with Mick on the left and the museum guide on the right illustrates this exactly.



Seated at the banquet at Castle Dracula - these three were warned about the plum brandy at least twice.



We always try to include the boat trip to Snagov island where the remains of Dracula's remains are buried (allegedly). Here is a pic of people on a boat taking pics of the photographer. Plus a UFO on the right edge.



Who says Goths and bonfires don't mix? Keeping warm in the Carpathians.





An unusual picture taken in a school-room. Note Ken Naylor with thumb in mouth at the front, and Scott Whetton in turban at the back. Rob o 'Connell asking to use the toilet. Freddy Mercury in the front row?

On the first trip again, with Mick begging money from local orphan children. The arch at the back is typical Romanesque.



Now, nearly all people take cameras - the subjects for pictures will be predictable - streets, mountains, people walking, people asleep on the coach, people in Dracula's coffin, the buildings, stray dogs, stray cats, people dressed up, compromising pics, but greatest of all are the Group Photos. It can take half an hour to complete a group photo, especially in the digital era, meaning repeats are easy. A group shot of twenty people means one picture, then the photographer wants in, but, hold on, that's too much like the other picture, so move about a bit. Oh no, you wanted me to take that picture with your camera? Each group shot of twenty ends up being taken about fifteen times and I reckon, now we all have gone digital, that, on the last trip there were about ten thousand pictures in all - luckily we didn't all have to sit round going through them all at one time.

The highlights of ten years of trips are the looks on people's faces and all those photos are a valuable record. The "Romania effect" is well understood and manipulated by the organisers. But hey, in all the clubs we might belong to, how many times do you really get a chance to explore being with the people you think you like being with? Thirteen days together with folk who are just "interesting" to start with means that you end up making some serious bonds with them, and surely this is what trying to be a part of a community is all about. At the end of the holiday it can be tearful watching people separate, unfortunately, in some cases this was people who have been together for years!



The back of the first tour T shirt - and here's a warning - print more than you need as loads of people who didn't go will want one, - presumably to make out they did!

Transylvania trips! - I'm never organising one of those again.
But I do have a hankering to go back to Romania to see the Danube Delta, and maybe go to the Murfatlar vineyard, and maybe pop over to Brasov.....

Watch this space patiently.....

Mick Smith

Another trip, another group picture. This time the last tour in 2004! They don't all look like Goths, eh?

