



Final Frontier

Romania's second largest city is oft considered the 'Wild West' of Eastern Europe. By Leif Pettersen

LIKE THE REST OF ROMANIA, Iasi is in an ongoing process of recovery. More than 20 years of rule by Nicolae Ceausescu left Romania in economic and social ruin, with corruption rampant. Ironically, Romania's fate was momentarily bright in the late 1960s: when Ceausescu consolidated power and took the helm as supreme ruler, Romania was one of the few countries to brazenly defy Soviet supremacy. Sadly, the dictator's painfully shortsighted, often bizarre, vision of Romania's future, compounded by blatant personal profiteering schemes, led to such devastation that Romania's population finally rose up in protest in 1989. Ceausescu and his wife, Elena, were tried and executed, and Romania became the only Eastern Bloc coun-

try to violently overthrow its Communist regime.

Sweeping reform efforts are well under way as Romania prepares for its 2007 bid to join the European Union. In Iasi, Ceausescu's legacy took the form of abject poverty, homelessness, packs of stray domestic animals and crumbling city blocks where half-built apartment buildings were finished by residents using whatever materials were on hand.

On the whole, the landscape gives one the distinct feeling of being in the "Wild West" of Eastern Europe, as at least one popular travel guidebook gamely describes it. Yet there is undeniable attraction and beauty to be found in Iasi. It's not a gilded beauty like what you'll find in Florence or Salzburg, but it's nevertheless a beguiling and fascinating place.

Founded before the 14th century, Iasi experienced its heyday as the original capital of the former principality of Moldavia from 1565 to about 1860. Iasi temporarily replaced Bucharest as the capital of Romania during World War I (1914-1918), but has otherwise been relegated to second-city status. Home to 400,000, Iasi lies in the northeast corner of Romania, a stone's throw from the Moldavian border. While chemicals, pharmaceuticals, plastics and wine rank among the region's chief products, the city's true power seems to lie in its thriving, young and ambitious population. Iasi is home to the country's first university, founded in 1860, and consequently boasts Romania's largest student presence.

This sizable and lively demographic seemingly defies its abysmal economic limitations — the average scholarship payout for the few students lucky enough to receive it averages just \$30 per month. Yet it's the



presence of those students that is transforming Iasi into a hip, Euro-savvy hot spot full of beautiful people who are anxious to live beyond the limited existence of their antecedents.

There's a definite sense of having arrived somewhere exotic when you walk the streets of Iasi. While Western influence — and even a trickle of notable tourism — has started to creep in, you can rest assured that Iasi will be an off-the-beaten-path destination for years to come. During my three-month stay in Iasi, I met only one Westerner, an American aid worker. If you get a charge out of escapism, you will be very content here.

While you undoubtedly will be one of only a handful of native English speakers in town at any given moment, you needn't fret about the communications barrier. The Romanian language is the closest surviving relic of classic Latin — meaning that Romanians are veritable language dynamos. Moreover, the prevalence of American television series in Romania means that almost

everyone can meander through a simple English transaction without too much trouble.

In terms of weather, summer is the best time to visit Iasi, but an October visit has the added treat of coinciding with "Iasi Days" (Oct. 9 to 17), a religious event devoted to St. Parascheva, considered the region's patron saint. Take note: Mixed in with praying, there's a serious party going on.

LODGING

HOTEL EUROPA

Located in the World Trade Center complex (www.wtci.ro/en), Hotel Europa is Iasi's sole five-star hotel. In addition to the usual amenities (bar, restaurant, conference rooms), the hotel benefits from the exhibition areas offered by the World Trade Center. Unfortunately, it's a bit of a hike from some points of interest, but with a crosstown taxi fare being just about \$1, the sacrifice is slight.

Breakfast is included in the room price. \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$

HOTEL EUROPA

26 Anastasie Panu Str.
tel 40 232 242000, fax 40 232 242001
www.hoteleuropa.ro

HOTEL MOLDOVA

Located in the civic and historical center of the city, the three-star Hotel Moldova doesn't look like much from the outside, but like Romania itself, it's what's on the inside that wins you over. Beautifully renovated, it features a large restaurant with regional and international cuisine, sauna, fitness center, pool and massage services, and is within walking distance of several tourist sites. \$

HOTEL MOLDOVA

31 Anastasie Panu Str.
tel 40 232 260240, fax 40 232 255975
www.hotelmoldovaiasi.ro

HOTEL ASTORIA

The three-star Hotel Astoria is simple in style and looks, but it is comfortable and centrally located. \$

HOTEL ASTORIA

1 Alexandru Lapusneanu Str.
tel 40 232 233888, fax 40 232 244777
www.hotelastoria.ro

HOTEL TRAIAN

This three-star hotel is dripping with unlikely extras: beauty salon, in-room movies, laundry service, car rental desk, minibar, outdoor pool and a choice of three restaurants. The hotel is housed in a palatial, historical Venetian building. Shops, tourist offices, the central rail station, museums and several places of interest are all within walking distance. \$\$

HOTEL TRAIAN

Piata Unirii
tel 40 232 266666, fax 40 232 212187

LITTLE TEXAS

If you're hankerin' for a little slice of home (well, Texas, anyway), you might like to escape to Little Texas. As it's located on the outskirts of town, you may find yourself slightly isolated, but Little Texas has just



SHOPPING

Iulius Mall (*Tudor Vladimirescu Boulevard*) is across town from most other attractions, but this flashy Westernized mall is one of the new gems in Iasi's quickly developing cityscape. Stores and offerings are similar to those of any mall across Europe or the United States, but are filled with intriguing Romanian touches, mysterious Eastern European brand names and rock-bottom prices (by Western standards). The Caraffa restaurant is on the first floor, and several hot nightspots are nearby.

With a supermarket, a restaurant and the usual mall offerings, **Hala Centrala** (*40 Anastasie Panu*) is an easy impulse stopover if you're sight-seeing on Stefan cel Mare Boulevard. Look for the giant glass half-globe.

If you're looking for more-genuine Romanian crafts and goods, **Alexandru Lapusneanu Street** has a collection of smaller shops selling antiques and art in addition to a cinema and a very happening outdoor bar called Corso. A. Lapusneanu is convenient to Hotel Astoria and Stefan cel Mare Boulevard. Hotel Traian is on Piata Unirii at one end of A. Lapusneanu, and is a recommend dropoff point for those arriving by taxi.

about everything you'll need on the premises: four-star accommodations, conference facilities, in-room Internet access, cable television, minibar, private balconies with panoramic city views, room service, laundry service and an authentic Tex-Mex restaurant. And it's only a five-minute drive from the airport. \$

LITTLE TEXAS

31-33 Moara de Vant Str.
tel 40 232 216995, fax 40 232 272545
www.littletexas.org

DINING

CASA BOLTA RECE

Near the church of St. Theodor, Casa Bolta Rece (Cold Cellar) Restaurant, dating to 1786, has long been a place for Romania's intellec-

tuals to meet and eat. Casa Bolta Rece serves traditional Romanian/Moldavian food and only local wines. \$-\$\$

CASA BOLTA RECE

10 Rece Str.
tel 40 232 212255
www.casaboltarece.ro

CASA POGOR

This restaurant features a quaint courtyard dining area (summer only), and serves up traditional Romanian cuisine supplemented by a few eclectic additions. \$

CASA POGOR

4 Vasile Pogor Str. (just off Carol I Boulevard)
tel 40 232 243006

LA CAO

Startlingly good ethnic food. Traditional Chinese cuisine with a dazzlingly large menu. I ate lunch

here six days a week for three months and never got tired of it. \$

LA CAO

8 Arcu Str.
tel 40 232 241499

CARAFFA

This place runs the table with food styles (Mexican, Italian, Greek and Romanian), and its location in the swankiest mall in Iasi makes for a nice backdrop, day or night. \$-\$\$

CARAFFA

Iulius Mall, 1st floor
Tudor Vladimirescu Boulevard
tel 40 232 262626
www.caraffa.ro

TOSCA

A small, quiet, centrally located Italian restaurant that's a favorite among locals for its food and décor. \$

TOSCA

30 I.C. Bratianu Str. (near Stefan cel Mare Boulevard)
tel 40 232 216664

CASA BILIUS

Romania does French, too! Great food and great atmosphere, near the Botanical Gardens. \$

CASA BILIUS

8 George Toparceanu Str.
tel 40 232 218085
www.casabilius.ro

FAMILY PIZZA

You might not automatically associate Romania with fabulous pizza, but you will be ecstatic when you visit Family Pizza. The delicious selection and prices (\$2 for a large!) will make you swoon. And they deliver. \$

FAMILY PIZZA

Carol I Blvd. 26-28
tel 40 232 261647 or
Agatha Barsecu Street
tel 40 232 262400

SIGHTSEEING

Carol I Boulevard and **Stefan cel Mare Boulevard** are where you will find a concentration of attractions in Iasi, in addition to being very pleasant places to wander. Carol I

Boulevard hugs Alexandru Ioan Cuza University and skirts one side of the Botanical Gardens, as well as Family Pizza and Casa Pogor restaurants (see Dining). Stefan cel Mare Boulevard is stopped at one end by the **Palace of Culture** and **Palace Square** ("Palat Plazza") and runs past the **Three Hierarchs Church**, the Orthodox cathedral, as well as the second Family Pizza location, adjacent to the **Vasile Alecsandri National Theatre**. The stretch of Stefan cel Mare Boulevard from the Palace to the National Theater is closed to vehicular traffic each weekend, so people can spill into the street for walking, biking and in-line skating.

The Palace of Culture (Piata Stefan cel Mare, tel/fax 40 232 218383) was built between 1906 and 1925 over the ruins of a medieval royal court dating to

INFO TO GO

Iasi International Airport (IAS) is 10 miles from the city center and is serviced by only two airlines: **Tarom** (www.tarom.ro/english/index.php), operating out of Bucharest and serving numerous cities throughout Europe and New York, and **Carpet Air** (www.carpatair.com) operating out of Timisoara and Romania and serving major cities in Italy, Germany and Hungary. Transport into the city is best done by taxi.

Iasi is 248 miles from Bucharest and has plentiful train service. Trains depart from Bucharest's Nord railway station with a transit time of six to seven hours, depending on the number of stops. It's best to take the **Rapid (fast)** or **Intercity (fewer stops)** trains. A single first-class ticket ranges from \$17 to \$23.

Iasi has a robust bus, minibus and electric tram service, but taxis are shockingly inexpensive and probably best for visitors.

There are many taxi companies in town, but there are just as many unlicensed "independents" that should be avoided. The reputable taxis are usually painted yellow.

1434. The exterior, designed by Romanian architect I.D. Berindei, looks every bit the regal part, but by palace standards, the interior decorations are a touch underwhelming. This shortcoming is fully compensated for by the four museums housed in the palace, which are devoted to Moldavian history, ethnography, art and science/technology. Entry to the palace is free, but there is a small entry fee for each museum (less than \$1). Open Tuesday to Sunday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

It takes some getting to (the walk up the hill is quite long — unless you enjoy serious exercise, it's best to take a taxi), but the hilltop **Cetatuia Monastery** (1 Cetatuia St., Cetatuia Hill), built between 1669 and 1672, is not to be missed. Its being one of the few structures from this time period to survive wholly intact compounds the allure of the gorgeous monastery complex. The primary attractions are the royal palace, the Gothic Room and the kitchen, all housed within the fortified monastery walls.

Numerous Moldavian paintings and frescos done in the Neo-Byzantine tradition survive within the church, though some were damaged by Ottoman Turkish reprisals. The 17th century royal palace has been turned into a museum of religious art, while the Gothic Room features original hexagonal brick pavement. The complex also features wine cellars and, puzzlingly, a Turkish bath. Entry to the monastery is free, but there is a small photography fee.

Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Romania's first university campus, stretches elegantly down Carol I Boulevard. While the campus is pleasing in and of itself, the larger, less tangible attraction is the mere fact that it has survived world wars, Ceausescu and staggering financial hardship. (Even now, full professors are paid only about half of what can be earned waiting tables in Italy. It's a miracle anyone chooses to stay.) The main university building was

constructed between 1893 and 1897. Initially, the building contained only the Hall and the Library. The Hall, which has not been altered from its original design, was briefly utilized as a parliamentary debating chamber (1917–1918). The arcades of the Hall (a.k.a. "The Hall of the Lost Footsteps") are decorated in frescoes by the painter Sabin Balasa.

Romania's first and largest **Botanical Gardens** (Carol I Boulevard at Dumbrava Rosie Square) are just a few minutes down the road from Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, off Dumbrava Rosie Square. The first incarnation opened in 1856, but it quickly outgrew its space and had to be moved to its present location. The gardens were entirely redone in 1963. There are natural springs, a rose garden with more than 800 species from all over the world, and greenhouses with superb collections of tropical plants, cacti, orchids and carnivorous plants. Also on the grounds is Vasile Lupu's Church of the Living, dating from 1638, and a huge recreational park with a small lake. The entry fee changes frequently, but remains less than \$1.

Nearly the entire exterior of the monastery of the **Three Saints Ierarch** (28 Stefan cel Mare Blvd.) — also known as the Three Hierarchs Church — is decorated in a "stone embroidery," which was reportedly covered in gold, silver and lapis during the 17th century (the monastery was built between 1635 and 1639). There are 30 different sections containing individual patterns, with an architectural history that is still under debate. Inside there is a museum featuring fragments of the original Russian fresco adornments and various royal tombs. The neighboring Sala Gotica (Gothic Hall), the monastery's old dining hall, houses the Museum of Religious Art, which displays valuable objects belonging to the monastery. Entry to the church is free, but there is a fee (less than \$1) to enter the museum. Open daily 9 a.m. to noon, and 2 to 5:30 p.m. ■■