

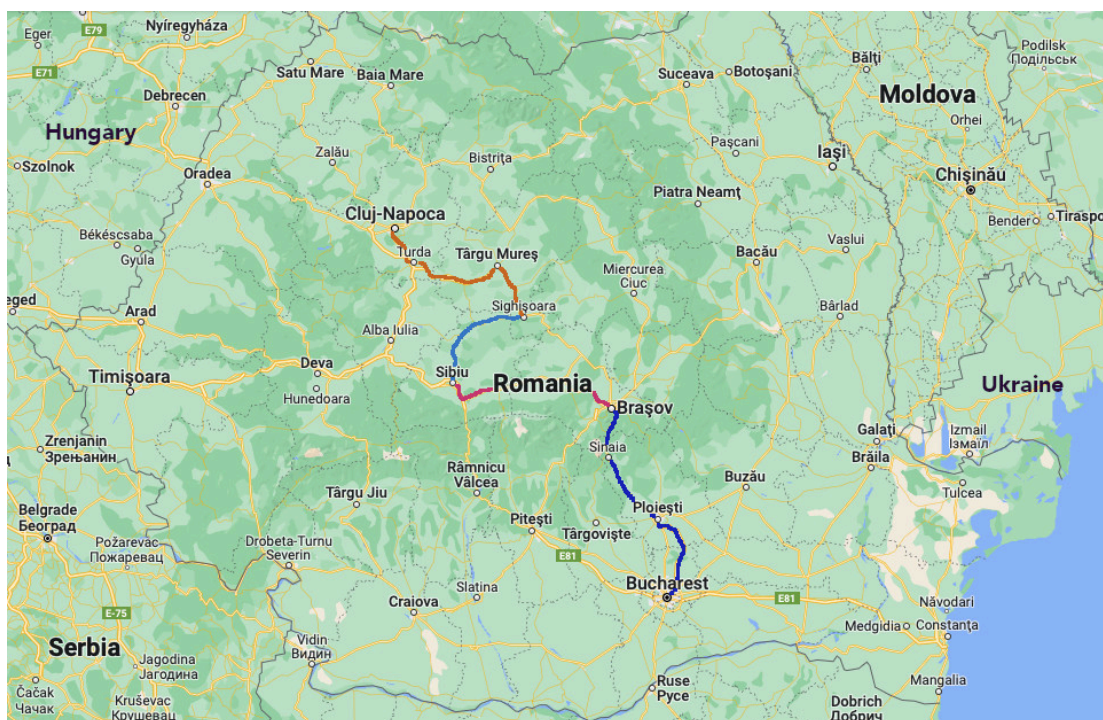
A WEEK IN
ROMANIA
(2017)



CHARLES GANNON © 2023



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Cover photos: an aerial shot of Braşov (top), and Cişmigiu Park, Bucharest (bottom).

My thanks, once again, to Andrew Robinson for proofreading this travelogue.

INTRODUCTION

I had first become curious about Romania when, as a teenager, I had found a Romanian radio station on one of the short-wave bands of my father's large transistor radio. I was quite astonished to discover that I could understand a little of what the announcer was saying, for many of the words seemed to be similar to those in Italian, Spanish and French. The folk music played on the station also interested me; when I was older, I often listened to performances given by the famous Romanian pan pipe player Georghe Zamfir and his band on BBC Radio 3.

In more recent times what had really made me want to visit Romania was one of Michael Portillo's programmes on BBC television, in which he was shown travelling through Transylvania and Romania by train. I was particularly interested by the Saxon town of Braşov in Transylvania, and also the unspoilt countryside and mountains. I had watched the programme in 2016 and so, when I discovered that the Travel Department would have a week-long tour of Romania in October, 2017, I asked for week's holidays from work and booked myself on the tour straight away.

Apart from remembering what little I had learned about Romania when at school (that it was founded by the Romans and that the capital was Bucharest), I knew very little about the country, and so began reading about it and tackling a little of the language, which I soon discovered was quite difficult. Not only was the grammar as complicated as that of Latin, with three genders and endless case endings, but the vocabulary was made up of modified Latin words, Hungarian words and a smattering of Bulgarian words (such as *da* for 'yes'). The correct pronunciation of the name of the country came as a surprise: *România* (Ro-mü-nee-a). I noted that accents were used on certain letters, the main ones being:

ă – like the 'e' in 'end';

â – like the 'ü' in German, or the 'u' in French;

î – like the 'i' in 'it';

ş – as in the 'sh' in 'ship';

ţ – as in the 'ch' of 'chin';

c – as in English; like 'k' before a, o, u, and like 's' before e and i;

g – as in English; like 'g' of 'got' before a, o, u, and like 'j' before e and i;

gh – as the 'g' of 'got' before e and i;

i – in certain cases, the 'i' at the end of a word is barely pronounced;

j – as in the 's' of 'pleasure'.

Many Romanian words sound quite familiar to those of us who have a knowledge of Spanish or Italian; for example, *casa* means 'house', *lup* means 'wolf', *ochi* means 'eyes' and so forth. Common greetings can often be easily understood, such as *bună ziua* ('good day' or 'hello' – *bom dia* in Portuguese, *buenos días* in Spanish), *bună seara* ('good evening' – *buona sera* in Italian), and *cum este?* ('how are you?' – *¿como estás?* in Spanish).

1 – CLUJ-NAPOCA

Sunday, 8 October

I arrived in Dublin Airport at 10.30 this morning with a small bag and a copy of Dervla Murphy's book *To Transylvania and Beyond*, and joined a very long queue that wound its way slowly to a check-in desk. I had no trouble spotting the Romanians among the people.

After an interminable wait, during which I became anxious about having enough time for the security check and the long walk to the departure gate, an extra official arrived at a vacant desk and the check-in procedure speeded up. At last I was able to leave and go through the security area and on to the departure lounge which, as I had anticipated, was quite a distance away. After just a short wait, I joined the queue and crossed the tarmac on foot to board the Blue Line flight to Cluj-Napoca in the north of Romania. The plane, which looked and felt like a cross between an Aer Lingus and a Ryanair aircraft, was quite crowded. I found myself in a window seat, beside a young Romanian couple. The young lady, who was sitting beside me, proved to be very friendly and chatty, and she was able to answer many of my questions.

When we were all aboard, we were welcomed in English and Romanian, and set off at about 12.30. The three-hour flight passed pleasantly and comfortably, and was enlivened by interesting conversation with my companions. When the young man's prepaid lunch arrived, he immediately presented me with a small bun. I opened my lunch box and gave the couple two sweets that I had brought with me. I ate a couple of sandwiches and then the bun.

Towards the end of the journey I advanced my watch by two hours and, as we began to descend, plunging through the clouds, I looked down over a vista of fields, hills, houses and villages. Because of the lack of sunshine, the Transylvanian landscape looked a little dull. Nevertheless, the scenery was quite pleasant. I noticed that there was very little traffic on the few roads visible beneath us.

At last we began to see the outskirts of the large and not particularly elegant city of Cluj-Napoca, and finally touched down in an almost deserted airport. We piled into a couple of buses and were driven to the terminal building, where we collected our luggage and met our lively guide, Carmen Muraşan, in the arrivals hall. Carmen, a stocky young lady with short black hair, was a very likeable person, and she greeted me warmly. As all the money exchange counters were closed, it being a Sunday, she advised me to get money from one of the machines. I did this and regretted it, for I was obliged to purchase 300 lei at a lower rate than normal: 4.09 to the euro instead of the usual rate of about 4.5. I therefore paid €73.25 for 300 lei.

When everyone had gathered in the hall (there were thirty-nine of us), Carmen struggled to read out all our names and, once she was happy that everyone was present, we set off in the coach to our hotel. On the way, we passed many ghastly-looking concrete apartment blocks that had been built during the Ceauşescu period. There were some more elegant buildings near the city centre, though most of them looked rather depressing in the dull evening light. It was now about 6.30 p.m.

During the journey Carmen told us a little about herself and mentioned that her name was rather unusual, for most Romanian women's names end in -a. Her father, who had been determined to give her a unique name, had decided to give her one that conjured up a picture of Spain. As well as speaking English quite fluently, she also spoke Spanish, French and a little Italian. (Later she told me that she had studied some Japanese.)

At last we arrived at our hotel: the Grand Hotel Napoca. It looked very plush; there was a large gathering of well-dressed fashionable young people in the lobby, and more were standing outside in the spitting rain, smoking. I had been given a very comfortable room complete with all mod cons. We were told to be down in the reception area later, for we were to be taken to a restaurant where we could sample some of the local cuisine.

After I had sorted out my belongings, freshened myself up and relaxed, I rejoined my colleagues and we set off in the coach for the restaurant, which turned out to be in the suburbs. As both Carmen and the driver were not entirely sure where they were supposed to be going, a phone call had to be made. We eventually stopped in a dark street. We quickly crossed the road and made our way to the nearby Hanul Dacilor restaurant in Strada Constantin Brancusi. We followed Carmen upstairs, noting that there were locals dining downstairs (a good sign), and found ourselves in a large room with two long rows of tables set at right angles. Plates of starters were produced by members of the staff and placed on the tables, so that we could help ourselves. On the plates were various different cold dishes: meats, salamis, cheeses, sausages, olives and the like. Also served were bread rolls, red and white wine, and small bottles of water. Although the food was rustic, it was quite tasty.

Sitting next to me, on my right, was a lady whom I identified (by her accent and mannerisms) as being Anglo-Irish. We got talking and I learned that her name was Diana; her husband Robert sat next to her and was busy chatting to some men at the opposite side of the table. There was much joking and laughing. Diana was interested to learn something about my father and his connections with the Guinness family. She had started life in England and, like the Guinnesses, was interested in horses. She and Robert lived on a farm on the border of County Limerick.

After the remains of the starters had been cleared away, the main course was served: platters of cooked meats, vegetables, polenta and potatoes: real peasant winter food. Once again we helped ourselves. As time went on, the general level of noise, chatter and laughter rose as the food was eaten and the wine was drunk. The meal ended with a very simple dessert that tasted of caramel. We finally rose, left tips and walked outside to the bus. Soon we were back at our comfortable hotel, ready for bed.

Monday, 9 October

Up at seven this morning; having breakfasted very well in the dining room on the ground floor, we assembled in the reception area at nine with our luggage, checked out, and boarded our bus. Like the previous day, I sat on the front seat on the driver's side, opposite Carmen.

Before leaving this university town of Cluj-Napoca, which had been founded by the Romans, we drove around the city centre, where we now saw some elegant buildings. However, thanks to the dull and cloudy weather, everything looked rather grim. I was not sorry to leave the place for our drive to Sighișoara, one of the Saxon towns, which I was looking forward to seeing.

The presence of Saxon towns in this country (which had been part of the Roman Empire and was independent) was certainly a curiosity. We learned that there were

seven of these towns in all, three of which we would be visiting. For a thousand years until World War II, Transylvania (meaning ‘beyond the forest’) had been associated with Hungary. During the twelfth century, Saxon merchants arrived to defend the eastern frontiers of Hungary, and it was they who had founded the seven towns. The Saxons had given Transylvania a German name: Siebenbürgen (‘seven towns’).

During the medieval period, Transylvania had been autonomously ruled by a prince accountable to the Hungarian crown; the indigenous Romanians were serfs. After the 1526 defeat of Hungary by the Turks, the region became semi-independent and recognized Turkish suzerainty. Then, in 1683, the Turkish power was broken and Transylvania came under Habsburg rule, but in 1867 Transylvania was fully absorbed into Hungary. In 1918 Romanians demanded Transylvania’s union with Romania.

Our journey was a long one, passing some pleasing scenery as we travelled along good modern roads. We drove through various villages and towns (including one named Turda) and, when driving through one area, noticed that place names had been translated into Hungarian. At one point we crossed the border into Mureş county. During the journey, Carmen supplied an interesting commentary on the region, the towns and villages, the many churches that we passed, and more general facts and figures about the history and people of the country. At one point she sang us a song and encouraged us clap to the rhythm, which altered from one section to another. Each verse began slowly and gradually became quicker.

At one town we pulled up at a petrol station for a ‘technical stop’ and I took the opportunity to buy a two-litre bottle of water for about 3 or 4 lei (€0.66 or €0.88).

We finally arrived at the old citadel of Sighișoara by 1.30 p.m. As a taxi was required for a very large lady in our group who was unable to walk very far, Carmen waved us in the general direction of the town, which was at the top of a hill, and went off to organize the transport. We sheltered from the rain under some trees for a few minutes and then one or two people began walking up the hill using some rough wooden steps that they had noticed nearby. I joined them, and soon I was leading everyone upwards. We reached the top fairly quickly then stopped, unsure of which way we should go. Carmen eventually appeared, quite out of breath, and scolded us for going ahead without her. She had planned to escort us up a winding road that we had concluded was only for vehicles.



Sighișoara

Despite the gloomy and wet conditions, the old town centre looked very picturesque and full of character. As it was lunchtime by now, Carmen just gave us a

brief introduction to the place, standing in the main square, and pointed out some nearby restaurants. I joined one of the couples in our group and we went into the nearest one, the Casa cu Cerb (The House of the Deer), which was in fact part of a hotel. Here I sampled what Carmen had recommended: Hungarian goulash soup with bread, washed down with a glass of draft Ursus beer. Both were quite good and adequate for me, for I had eaten such a large breakfast. We chatted until it was time to rejoin the group, then paid up and left.



The town square, Sighișoara

We now behaved like real tourists, listening to our guide's descriptions and taking photos. I did not pay too much attention to what Carmen was saying and concentrated instead on photographing the wonderful old buildings and houses. The roofs were unusual in that they were quite high and steep; here and there could be seen small glassless windows (referred to as 'eyes'), which provided ventilation for stored grain in the attics. Unfortunately we were not brought into any of the towers or churches. However, I did pop into a nearby church, where I bought a small book containing colour photographs of Romania, which Diana thought was excellent value for just 20 lei.

We then wandered out of the square and walked along a street, where somebody noticed an advertisement for a plum brandy manufacturer whose produce could be sampled. Having been alerted to this and, no doubt, encouraged by the damp weather and our low spirits, Carmen excused herself for a few minutes, ran into the nearby building to make enquiries, and reappeared moments later to say that we were very welcome to step inside. We entered and found ourselves in a central courtyard that was bright with flowers. The owner ushered us into a large, dark room where we found long wooden benches, and fetched some chairs. He then welcomed us in reasonably good English and told us that we would be tasting three different types of brandy. Tiny glasses were handed to all of us, and a bottle was produced. A mouthful or two of plum brandy was served first; I could feel the effects of it immediately. Next came a sample of pear brandy, which was clear in colour and very strong indeed. The final sample was a concoction of seven different fruits and tasted delicious. Afterwards, needless to say, we were invited to buy bottles of whatever we liked. I could not buy any as I had only brought hand luggage with me.

In a slightly better humour we left the establishment and continued our tour of the town centre by ambling down streets, looking up to the Lutheran Biserica din Deal (Church on the Hill) and walking around the ramparts, from where we enjoyed a fine view looking down towards the modern city. Here and there were various towers that had been built for guarding the citadel and its massive walls.



A view from the ramparts, Sighișoara

At last we made our way back down to the bus, using the winding road that we should have used earlier. I removed the wet plastic raincoat that I had been using and sat down in the front seat once again. I was glad to be in the warm and dry bus after the cold and damp outside.

We now headed roughly southwards to the next Saxon town: Sibiu. Again we passed through pleasant though rather unremarkable scenery, and drove through villages where we saw old painted Saxon houses. None of them had a front door opening towards the road; the entrance was via a gateway on one side of the house, which led to a back yard.

It was early evening when we finally arrived at the rather modern, though slightly ramshackle, city of Sibiu. The walls of the old town were pointed out to us as we drove past them, and soon we were at the Hotel Ibis. Although this looked like a tall and unremarkable building constructed during the Communist era, it was much more modern and agreeable inside. My room was small and simple, and looked out over the city. The shower doors did not look very watertight and the loo paper holder was loose, which meant that the roll of paper was in danger of falling off. As it was cold in the room, I had to turn on the air conditioning to increase the temperature.

This evening's dinner was pleasantly light and consisted of fish, potatoes and vegetables. This proved to be a pleasant contrast to the previous evening's heavy meal.

Afterwards, I went out and took a brisk walk towards the old town centre, which was absolutely charming and now dramatically floodlit. Although the Piața Mare ('big square' or *piazza*) was much larger than the one in Sighișoara, it still looked like something out of a fairy tale. Once again I noticed the 'eyes' in the roofs. I walked under the Council Tower and found myself in a smaller square, the Piața Mică ('Small Square'). Here there were various restaurants and more fine buildings, and also the famous Bridge of Lies (originally Lying-Down Bridge). From here I wandered around

to the great Gothic Biserica Evanghelică, a Protestant church, the spire of which could be seen from everywhere. From here I managed to find my way back to the main square, where I once again paused to admire the fine buildings.

I now retraced my steps and returned to the hotel along the Strada Nicolae Bălcescu. I thought that this elegant street had been spoiled by so many of its fine buildings having been converted into shops and restaurants; it was my opinion that the signage could have been more discreet. On my way back, I bumped into one of the men in our group, who was in a rather agitated state; he told me that he had been 'accosted' by a couple of prostitutes who were trying to persuade him to sleep with them. He had managed to get away and was relieved to see some policemen nearby. I too had seen police and police cars in the area. When I later asked the man if he had returned safely to the hotel, he told me that he had, for the two girls had disappeared from the area.

Feeling better after my brisk walk, I was glad to return to my room and retire to bed. I read a little of Dervla Murphy's book before sleeping.

Tuesday, 10 October

Like the previous day, I woke at seven o'clock, before my wake-up call at half past seven. As a fairly good breakfast was available in the dining room this morning, I ate well.



The Piața Mare, Sibiu, with the Banca Agricola (left) and Roman Catholic Cathedral

Afterwards we all met in the foyer and set off for the old town centre on foot, with Carmen leading the way. It was a bright, crisp morning with a clear blue sky, and everything looked beautiful in the early morning sun. We stopped in the centre of the Piața Mare, where Carmen told us about the history of the city and the beautiful buildings. Impatient once again to take photographs, I wandered around on my own and snapped away, experimenting with different angles and viewpoints. The most outstanding buildings in the square were the Roman Catholic cathedral, the Banca Agricola (now the town hall and tourist information centre), the Brukenthal Museum (originally the baroque palace of Baron Samuel Brukenthal) and the Council Tower. There were few people about at this hour of the morning and pigeons strutted along the cobblestones. A fountain with an elaborate wrought-iron cover (originally a large

birdcage) adorned the centre of the square, and small birds splashed about in the water.



The Piața Mare (above) and an arcaded building in the Piața Mică, Sibiu

Following the route that I had taken the previous evening, we then walked under the Council Tower and into the smaller but delightful Piața Mică, where I took photos in the arcaded section of what seemed to be the Old Town Hotel. I took more shots near the Iron or Bridge of Lies while the group listened to Carmen's commentary. I was more interested in the local architecture and a fine view looking down steps to a street below.

We eventually crossed the bridge and made our way around the back of the Biserica Evanghelică, where we stopped to admire the view from the city wall and examine a display of metal objects made by a locksmith. We then went around to the entrance of the great Gothic Protestant church, stood near a statue and listened to what Carmen had to say about it. Unfortunately we were not brought inside. Instead, Carmen marched us down a nearby street and brought us into a large Romanian Orthodox church, where a service was in progress. It had a fine interior, and the priests were dressed in magnificent robes. We then retraced our steps, turned down a narrow alleyway, and emerged back in the street that led to our hotel. Here Carmen

pointed out several restaurants, then brought us back to the main square, where tickets were purchased for the Burkenthal Museum. This turned out to be well worth seeing, for it contained some fine rooms, antique furniture, musical instruments (including a harpsichord) and a collection of paintings.



An old building (left) and the Gothic Protestant church, Sibiu

When we emerged, we were free for a couple of hours and were told to be at the central fountain by half past three. I now set about seeing inside some of the buildings on my own. First of all I went into the Roman Catholic cathedral, which was magnificent inside. Afterwards I made my way round to the Gothic Protestant church, where I had to pay a small entrance fee. The interior here was much plainer, though it was very impressive. The fine organ, built in 1772, had 6,002 pipes.

I then returned to the Strada N. Bălcescu (the main street leading back to the hotel) and went into a fast-food restaurant that Carmen had recommended: Super Momma. Here I ordered a bowl of Romania's best-known soup, *ciorbă de burtă* (a sour soup containing tripe) and a baguette stuffed with tasty chicken and salad. I felt quite stuffed after I had finished eating! I was delighted to be surrounded by ordinary Romanian people – the place was quite packed – and to eat at such an economic price.

When finished, I walked around to the History Museum, which Carmen had highly recommended. I was rather shocked at the price of admission: 20 lei. However, I went inside and found myself approaching a large courtyard. I didn't know where to go, but a man pointed to a door. Inside was an office where I paid my 20 lei and received a postcard with 'VIZITA' stamped on the back by way of a ticket. I emerged and looked around for some indication of where I should start my visit. The man appeared again and, in broken English, indicated where I should go. Because of the complete lack of signs, it was very difficult to know where everything was. I ascended a staircase, went in through a doorway and found myself at the beginning of a long display of objects and utensils of the Palaeolithic age. I spent a short while examining these reconstructions and moved on to the Roman period (Sibiu had been founded on the site of the former Roman village of Cibinium). This interesting section came to an abrupt end, for I then found myself examining paintings, ceramics, glassware, jewellery, furniture, and then costumes of the classical period. The upstairs section ended with gilded exhibits.

When I emerged, I was directed to another door, this time at ground level, and went in to look at an arms and armour exhibition, which also contained a treasury.

When I thought that I had seen everything and was ready to leave, I was pointed to another door. I now descended to the basement, which was full of Roman statues and gravestones.

I eventually staggered out, thanked the man, and walked back to the main square to meet my companions. Carmen was anxious to get going, but we were delayed by the late arrival of one lady. As 'punishment', Carmen made her stand in the middle of the group and sing a song. Although this was all done in a spirit of fun, I felt sorry for the poor lady. She sang a verse or two of a simple song and was cheered by us all. We then walked to the bus, which was parked by the city walls.

From here we left Sibiu and headed south-eastwards to Braşov: our third and last Saxon town, where we would stay for three nights. We now skirted the spectacular snow-capped Carpathian Mountains and passed through Făgăraş. Once again we drove through villages that contained Saxon houses. Carmen told us more about the history of her country, today concentrating on the dreadful Ceauşescu era and the corruption after he and his wife had been killed. She sang us another song and we sang an Irish song for her. This was no trouble for us, for seated at the back of the bus was a group of ladies from Cork, all of whom were members of a church choir.



The old town square, Braşov

We soon reached Braşov which, at first sight, looked like a featureless city, though it contains a spectacular old-world main square at its centre. We stopped here to use the public toilets and to be told about the place. As the late afternoon light was superb, illuminating all the wonderful old buildings, I immediately got to work with my camera. However, I did decide to use the public toilet. I went down a staircase, paid one lei, and received a paper ticket, on which was printed:

Consiliul local al Municipiului Braşov
Serviciul Public Administraţie Pieţe Braşov
TAXA WC PUBLIC
Serie: 661742
LEI: 1,00

As I had never received such a formal acknowledgement of the use of a public toilet before, I decided to keep this ticket and so put it away carefully!

When we were all ready, Carmen asked us to gather around her while she told us a little about the city, pointed out some of the interesting buildings and the best restaurants, then gave us some time to wander around. I was amused to observe Diana, despite the coldness of the weather, walking about eating an ice cream! I had decided to eat this evening at La Ceaun ('At the Cauldron'), which offered genuine Romanian food at affordable prices.



The old city hall in the main square, Braşov

We then assembled at the old city hall and were driven a short distance to our hotel, the Coroana Braşovului, close to Piaţa Unirii. Although this turned out to be a rather basic hotel, I rather liked it because of its quiet location and the fact that it did not have air conditioning. There was a central heating radiator in my room, which I turned up on arrival, and I discovered that I could open a window if it got too hot or stuffy. Despite the rather grim expressions on some of the staff members' faces, there was a nice homely feel about the place. The only disadvantages were the rather silly soap dispensers mounted too close to the bathroom walls, the rather primitive shower (the floor of which did not slope down to the drain), and the sound of the shower in the adjoining room, which could be heard plainly in mine.

I rested, refreshed myself, put all my things in order (I had brought a pair of complimentary bedroom slippers from the hotel in Cluj), and later in the evening set off for the restaurant in the main square. This involved a ten-minute amble along the Strada Prundului, during which I walked under a small triumphal arch and passed the large and impressive Black Church (Biserica Neagră).

At the La Ceaun restaurant I was invited to sit at a table near the window. I was given a menu in English and from it I chose one of Romania's traditional dishes: *sarmale cu mămăliguţa* (pork rolled in cabbage leaves with polenta), with a glass of draft Ursus beer. The food was quite tasty. I finished with a helping of the establishment's delicious and rather sinful *strudel cu mere* (strudel with apples). I was very satisfied with the meal and the price: 49 lei (about €10).

I finally left, wandered around some of the nearby streets, then eventually made my way back to the hotel, where I prepared for bed. A very interesting day indeed.