

2 – BRAȘOV

Wednesday, 11 October

I woke at seven this morning after an excellent night's sleep; I had slept far better than I had done in the previous two hotels, despite my rather creaky small bed. Breakfast was a relatively simple meal in the small restaurant downstairs, but good nonetheless. The stony-faced members of staff here looked as though they had been trained as Securitate officers.



The Saint Nicolae Orthodox church and the First Romanian School, Brașov

After breakfast we assembled in the lobby at about nine o'clock, then set off on a walking tour of the town centre with Carmen. First of all she brought us to the fine Saint Nicolae Orthodox church just off the nearby square, but instead of going into the church straight away, she led us to a small building to one side of it. This was the First Romanian School, originally established and built in 1495, then rebuilt in 1760. At the door of this elegant cream-and-white building we were greeted by a small, rotund and smiling elderly man; he was a professor, a curator and, as we learned later, an Orthodox priest.

We were then brought inside to the Anton Pann classroom, where we sat on hard benches. Using Carmen as an interpreter, the priest welcomed us and told us about this cultural institution, where many important old books and manuscripts were kept. Having worked with these precious documents for most of his adult life, he was now responsible for their safe keeping and cataloguing. He asked Carmen where we came from and, holding up an old geography book, read to us what it had to say about Ireland. He had a great sense of humour. In the room was an old printing press that had once been used to print the first books in the Romanian language.

The priest then led us to another room, where we were shown various old books, such as bibles, in glass cases. He ended this fascinating tour by singing a couple of

Romanian songs, including the country's national anthem. We followed this by a lusty rendition of our own national anthem, which we sang (of course) in Irish.

We then said goodbye to this delightful old man and crossed the square towards the Saint Nicolae church, which had been built in 1495. We tiptoed inside, for a service was in full swing. We were enchanted by the beauty of the interior, the sacred images on the walls, the iconostasis, the incense, the singing, and the piety of the worshippers. We stayed here for a short time, then crept back outside, where Carmen told us something about the church and the Orthodox religion. We learned, for example, that there is no first holy communion ceremony, for children are allowed to take communion (chunks of ordinary bread) from babyhood. She then told us how confessions are heard. As there are no confession boxes, the penitent requests the services of a priest and kneels before him, on the floor, in the main body of the church. The priest sits and places one end of his long stole (the epitachelion) and a crucifix on the bowed head of the penitent, who then confesses his or her sins to the priest.



The Schei Gate, Braşov

While half listening to her, I wandered around, snapping some photographs, and then we left. We headed up the same street that I had walked along during the previous evening and stopped at a window of a house, in which a picture of the last king, Michael, could be seen. We then walked on, halted briefly at the old Schei Gate to the city, then stopped again at the gates of the Jewish synagogue, which was not open to the public. Carmen told us that the place was rarely open to visitors, despite visiting hours being clearly marked on a notice attached to the gates.

We then crossed the road to the Biserica Neagra (Black Church), which we entered. It was very tall and beautiful inside, with a fine altar. Carmen invited us to sit down and told us about this magnificent church, which was still used by the German Lutheran community here. The church, which had been built between 1383 and 1480, had been damaged by a fire in 1689, and hence the description 'Black'. It was reckoned to be the largest church between Vienna and Istanbul. Pointing to the wooden grating in the floor, Carmen told us that people were in the habit of dropping

coins into the gaps for good luck. She also demonstrated how the backs of the pews could be adjusted so that people could face in the opposite direction for organ recitals. The church's 4,000-pipe organ, which had been built in 1839 by Buchholz of Berlin, is believed to be the only one of its type to be preserved in its original form.

Carmen now encouraged the ladies of the choir to sing something. They were prepared for such a request; when music had been produced and distributed, they arranged themselves in the aisle and sang a beautiful hymn in praise of the Blessed Virgin. They sang very well indeed, and everyone in the church stopped to listen to them. As befitting a place of worship, there was no applause when they finished.

Before leaving, we walked along one of the aisles, admiring a row of oriental rugs that were permanently on display. Having read about them, I was interested to see them. They had been purchased from the Turks in former times and served as reminders of the wealth of some of the richer members of the congregation.

We then went outside to examine the exterior of the church, which had been restored in recent times. A small detail was pointed out to us: a carving in stone of a small boy who had hurtled to his death from the roof, having been lured there by a worker who was jealous of the boy's skills.



The old town square, Braşov

Afterwards we made our way to the main square, where Carmen pointed out some more of the important buildings, such as the Hirscher or Merchant's House, which had been built in the mid sixteenth century. Opposite was the Braşov Historical Museum, which Carmen recommended we visit.

As it was now time for lunch, we split up and agreed to meet again in the square later. As Carmen had decided to eat in La Ceaun, I asked her if I could join her. She said yes and in we went. We sat near the window and she encouraged me to try the potato soup, which was quite good. We had an interesting conversation about travel and languages.

Rested and refreshed, I left, wandered around (I discovered a poster advertising a concert in the Sala Patria on the following evening), and joined the group again in the square, ready to set off to a place that I really had little desire to see: Bran Castle.

A relatively short journey in the bus brought us to this famous castle, which nestled in the nearby mountains. We were dropped off in a car park in what looked like a very touristy area. Walking through a mall of shops and restaurants, we emerged on to a road that was lined with souvenir and food stalls. We crossed the road and walked

along a steep path, where there were yet more souvenir stalls. Carmen had advised us to be very careful about buying anything here; she had told us to look for labels bearing the words 'Made in China', and to bargain hard. Although I more or less ignored the stalls, I was relieved to discover the relative lack of Dracula costumes, plastic fangs and people dressed as Dracula.



Bran Castle, near Braşov

Before Carmen left us at the entrance gate of the tall castle, which looked rather forbidding from the outside, she gave us admission tickets and begged us to keep them safely as we would have to return them to her afterwards. We now climbed a steep staircase and entered the castle proper. It was a most unusual place: there were lots of narrow staircases and passages, small sparsely-furnished rooms with low ceilings, very thick walls, lots of whitewash and, at the centre, a narrow courtyard. The place was absolutely packed with tourists – so many that it was difficult to linger in any of the rooms. In one room was a busty young lady wearing lots of makeup, who was being photographed many times by a man – presumably she was a model.



Rooms in Bran Castle, near Braşov

Once again, I was delighted that there were no references to Dracula, and that the castle was remembered as the residence of Queen Victoria's granddaughter Marie, who had married a Romanian prince and had become Queen Marie of Romania. Most of the furniture in the restored rooms had been hers. One of the rooms had been turned into a small cinema, where we watched some old black-and-white footage of the royal couple watching a parade in their honour. I found this very interesting.

When I eventually finished my visit to the castle, I wandered outside and made my way down to a tea house, which had been built in a pleasantly quiet and beautiful park, and took some photographs. I heard some people speaking with Irish accents: it turned out to be another Travel Department group that had been trekking up in the mountains. I wandered into an open-air village museum, but as my ticket did not give me access to the place, I stayed just long enough to admire two of the buildings and the snowy Carpathian mountains behind.

I then made my way back to the car park and the bus for the return journey to Braşov, which was uneventful. Back in the hotel I relaxed for a while, then joined Diana and Robert for a meal in a nearby restaurant, the Casa Romaneasca. Diana had pleaded with me to join them as Robert was bad on his feet and was unable to walk long distances. By now I had met and spoken to him; he was a genial Welshman who spoke his native tongue with a broad accent, and English with a cultivated Oxford accent. He had a devilish sense of humour, a twinkle in his eye, and was an avid reader of books. Whenever there was too much activity for him, he was content to sit in a café with a cup of tea and a book, either reading or just watching the world go by.

I now met him and Diana in the lobby at the appointed time, and together we walked the short distance to the restaurant, which was almost empty. While we studied the menu, Diana told me that they had dined here on the previous evening and that the waiter had tried to persuade them to drink some brandy before their meal. When I explained that Romanians were in the habit of knocking back a tiny glass of plum brandy (*țuică*) before eating, Robert was all for it, but Diana was not keen on the idea. We summoned the waiter and I ordered two *țuică*s. As expected, it was powerful stuff; I was shocked when I later discovered that each glass had cost 16 lei – about €3!

We finally decided what we wanted to eat: I started with vegetable soup, followed by pork schnitzel and potatoes, all of which I washed down with a glass of cider. Despite Carmen's poor opinion of this restaurant, the food was quite good and the bill came to 59 lei (about €12).

During the meal, Robert told me about a wonderful exhibition of Dürer prints that he had seen during the morning in the Casa Mureșenilor Museum in the town centre. What astonished him most of all was the price of admission: just 3 lei (about €0.60). Although the lady in the museum could speak only a little English, Robert had been given to understand that a visiting German aristocrat had decided to loan his private collection of prints to the gallery for two months. Robert strongly advised me to visit the exhibition on the following day, for he had realized that it was very special.

We had a lively conversation about all sorts of things during our meal; Robert in particular seemed to enjoy my company. He had a terrific store of interesting information to impart; we spoke about music, literature, architecture and the arts. The only distraction was some loud music when a band, complete with amplification, struck up later in the evening. At least the music was not too bad: jazz, well played, and later, a medley of songs, mostly jazzy in style. As there were so few people in the restaurant, the musicians only received ragged applause.

The meal and conversation over, we then ambled back to our hotel, where we said goodnight and repaired to our bedrooms. It had been an interesting day; just as expected, I was enjoying Brașov. I was looking forward to the following day, during which there would be no organized activities, which meant that I was free to do whatever I wanted to do. I decided that I would try to visit the nearby synagogue, to take a look at the Dürer exhibition, to go to the top of nearby Mount Tâmpa by cable car, and to attend the concert in the evening.

Thursday, 12 October

Up at seven o'clock. During breakfast this morning I made a ham and cheese sandwich and smuggled it out of the little dining room. It was a fine bright morning with a clear blue sky – ideal for my plan to be out and about. I left just before nine o'clock and walked briskly towards the main square. I arrived at the gates of the synagogue shortly after nine to discover that the place was closed, but I took heart as there was a man waiting to be let in. I stayed put and eventually a young fellow appeared at the other side of the gate with a bunch of keys. Having greeted the man beside me, he opened the gates and we both went inside. While the two men chatted, I wandered around and stopped to examine a large stone monument with inscriptions in Hebrew, German and English, which was dedicated to the Jews who had been killed during the Holocaust. There was no sign of the door of the synagogue being opened. Eventually the young man spoke to me in English. He told me that the place was closed to the public today because of a special event, but if I wanted to look inside, nobody would stop me. I asked him when the synagogue would be open; his answer was that he did not know, but it would be soon.

By and by, more people arrived in the forecourt, all greeting each other and talking animatedly. I was approached by a smiling young lady who, realizing that I was not a local, greeted me in English. We fell easily into conversation, during which she asked me if I was Jewish. I said no and mentioned that I was from Dublin, where Chaim Herzog (the sixth President of Israel) had once lived. She had heard of him, and immediately looked for some information about him on her rather battered-looking smart phone.



The Beth Israel Synagogue, Braşov (credit: Rotaru Florin, Wikipedia)

While we were chatting, a group of tourists arrived and the guide asked a man (who may have been the rabbi) if they could visit the synagogue, but the answer was a firm ‘no’. The guide then returned to her group, who had to make do with a verbal description of the place in the forecourt. I stayed chatting to the young lady and, when the door was at last opened, casually walked inside with her, stopping briefly to put on a paper skullcap. It had been worth the wait, for the interior, which was painted white, was very elegant and refined. In fact, it probably was the nicest synagogue that I had ever seen. The young lady kindly explained everything to me and I made sure to express my appreciation. The man who may have been the rabbi asked us not to stand in the aisle, looking around, but to sit down. Shortly afterwards I thanked the young lady for her kindness and left. I was delighted to have seen inside this beautiful building against all the odds.

I now passed the Black Church, made my way to the main square and crossed the road to the Casa Mureşenilor Museum. After a little confusion caused by unclear signage, I found my way to the ticket office and bought my entrance ticket for just 3 lei. The lady pointed me in the direction of the Dürer exhibition and, shortly afterwards, ran after me with a magnifying glass. This proved to be very useful, for many of the prints were tiny or else very large with lots of minute detail. A lot of the prints depicted landscapes or old-world German cities and towns. Just as Robert had told me, the exhibition was quite stunning and the quality was first class. Many of the prints depicted religious scenes, and I gazed, enraptured, at a great quantity of images depicting the Blessed Virgin. One of these had caught Robert’s attention: *The Virgin Mary with a Butterfly*. Robert had been unable to find the butterfly but, by carefully

examining the entire print with the help of the magnifying glass, I eventually found the elusive butterfly near the bottom right hand corner of the picture.

After looking at about three or four rooms full of these wonderful prints, and thinking that I had seen everything, I was then brought to the back of the building, where there were more prints, but by other artists, to be seen. Two of the prints were rather curious: they depicted a man with a small horse, though in one of them the horse looked bigger than the man. One of the museum attendants pointed this out to me and tried to explain what I was looking at, but his English was not up to it. I gathered that it was supposed to be an optical illusion based on perspective.

The attendant kept his eye on me, and later asked me to sign the visitors' book and leave a comment. This I did; having thanked him and turning to leave, he now brought me out of a door and led me to the private living quarters of the family that had once owned this large rambling mansion. The rooms were interesting, though not especially remarkable. From here I went down a staircase to a narrow courtyard and left the museum.



A view of Mount Tâmpa from the old town square, Braşov

As it was 10.30 a.m. by now, I thought it a good time to go up to the top of Mount Tâmpa, where the name of the city, Braşov, could be seen displayed in big letters, like the famous Hollywood sign in America. Using my map, I left the square and took some previously unexplored streets to get to the cable car. On the way, one of the couples in our group followed me, and we met the group of ladies from Cork, who had just come down from the mountain.

I eventually found the cable car station and paid just 10 lei to go up. Some local people and I clambered aboard a car that had just arrived, and off we went. We arrived at the top of the mountain within a few minutes and looked down at the spectacular view of the old town far below. Following the advice of the ladies from Cork, I left the little station and its café and turned right, heading off along a rough park towards the large letters spelling the name BRAŞOV. On the way I met a couple of Spanish girls who were studying a map, and continued walking with them. At first I spoke to them in Spanish, then quickly switched to English, which they understood. We soon found the huge letters and a small viewing platform in front of them. It was well worth coming here, for the view looking down at the town and the surrounding scenery was quite breathtaking. We took photos and I photographed the two girls with

my camera as the flash on their smart phone was not powerful enough against the bright sunshine. One of the girls wrote her email address on a scrap of paper, and I promised to send her the photo.



A view of Braşov from Mount Tâmpa, and a resting spot overlooking the Carpathians

After we had finished admiring the view, I bid the girls *adiós* and found my way back to the main path. I now continued walking away from the cable car station along an uneven and meandering path. It was lovely to be on my own up here, surrounded by nature and just a few people. I soon arrived at another viewpoint, which was far more dramatic and beautiful than the previous one. Here I was able to sit on a wooden seat and gaze over the southern end of Braşov, the rolling green hills and, in the distance, the snowy Carpathian mountains. I sat here for some considerable time, along with some young people, taking in the fine view. A couple of German lads, whom Carmen and I had met in the town centre on the previous day, recognized me and waved to me. Later, one of the young men offered me some chocolate from a huge bar that he had taken out of his bag.

At about 12.30 I ate my simple lunch: the sandwich that I had made this morning, an apple from the hotel, and some water. Afterwards I relaxed, then got up in order to leave. I had contemplated taking a path that doubled back and descended to the town centre, but as I was a little apprehensive about the possible roughness of this pathway, I turned back and took the more popular zigzag (or ‘serpentine’) route through the forest that covered the mountain. This too was quite rough here and there and, because there were so many twists and turns, it took me well over an hour to get to the bottom. At one point I found myself climbing upwards and realized that I must have gone wrong. Fortunately a young lady, who was on her way up, came to my rescue and pointed me in the right direction.

I eventually emerged from the forest just outside the old city walls and, although I was quite tired by now, I decided to go off in search of the Sala Patria, the hall where this evening’s concert would be taking place. As I stood at a crossroads in the modern part of the city, trying to work out which way I should go, a lady approached me. Speaking in English, she asked me if I was lost. When I told her that I needed to go to the concert hall, she said that she would bring me there as she lived nearby. As we walked briskly along the straight road, we chatted amicably, and she pointed out various buildings, one of which had been riddled with bullets. One large house had been built in the Hungarian style, and another had a chapel in the top storey.

At last we reached the Sala Patria; it was quite a distance away. Fortunately it was open. Inside I succeeded in buying a ticket in the back row for just 20 lei (about €4.50). As I was quite exhausted by now, I sat outside on a bench beside an ornamental fountain in the shape of a lyre, watching the world go by. Although it was still sunny, it was becoming a little chilly in the shade.



A park in Braşov, and a nearby Orthodox church: the Biserica Buna Vestire

After I had rested for a while, I tramped back to the northern part of the town, where I sat in a lovely park, shaded by trees. Here I was able to close my eyes and snooze for a while. It was lovely to be able to relax here with no timetable to worry about. Eventually I came to my senses and moved to another part of the park, where I found a group of people playing chess near a fountain. I sat here for a few minutes, then crossed the road to look at an Orthodox church: the Biserica Buna Vestire. An elderly woman who had a scarf tied around her head was sweeping up the leaves. She smiled at me by way of a greeting, and I went inside. Although the church was

modern, it was quite pleasant. I left, thanked the lady in Romanian (*'multumesc frumos'*) and, at the junction ahead, turned left down the street that led to the main square. I wanted to look inside the Roman Catholic church here, but I found it closed and could only glimpse at the interior by peeping through a small window set into an inner door. The architecture was baroque and it looked quite fine.

Back in the familiar old town square, I bought myself an ice cream and sat down on a bench to eat it. As usual, the place was full of people. I certainly felt more relaxed here than in the main square in Sibiu.

As I would now have to mind the time and my dwindling supply of money, I began to look for something cheap to eat. Heading down a street that led towards the concert hall, I investigated a small supermarket, where I found nothing suitable, and ended up in a fancy coffee and cake shop, where I dined on a square of pizza (5 lei) and a pot of tea (8 lei).

When I had finished my meal, I walked back to the concert hall, arriving there about twenty minutes before the performance. Everyone was obliged to hang around in the foyer until the doors were opened. Inside was a smart modern hall, with walls painted cream. I found my seat easily enough and sat beside a chatty American couple. On my other side sat a Romanian lady, who spoke English fairly well, but did not speak very enthusiastically about the hall or the orchestra, the Filharmonic Braşov.

The orchestra and its conductor eventually appeared to enthusiastic applause, but got off to a shaky start with Beethoven's *Leonora* overture (I think, for no printed programme had been supplied). Once past the tricky opening passage, they improved. The next item, a fantasia on a Romanian theme by a Portuguese composer whom I had never heard of before, was performed by a brilliant pianist who was applauded loudly. He also featured in a concerto by Carl Maria von Weber, which was well played by him and the orchestra. After an encore demanded by the audience there was an interval, during which we all stood about in the foyer, for no drinks or refreshments were available. The second half of the concert was devoted solely to a performance of Beethoven's first symphony, which went quite well.

When the concert was over, I collected my bag and jacket at the cloakroom, said goodbye to the Americans (who were now with members of their tourist group), and set off for my hotel on foot. By now I only had 3 lei left in my pocket. When I arrived there some twenty minutes later, I was certainly ready for bed! However, before hitting the sack, I had a well-deserved shower, then half-packed my bag for the following day's departure. I had really enjoyed Braşov and was sorry to be leaving so soon.