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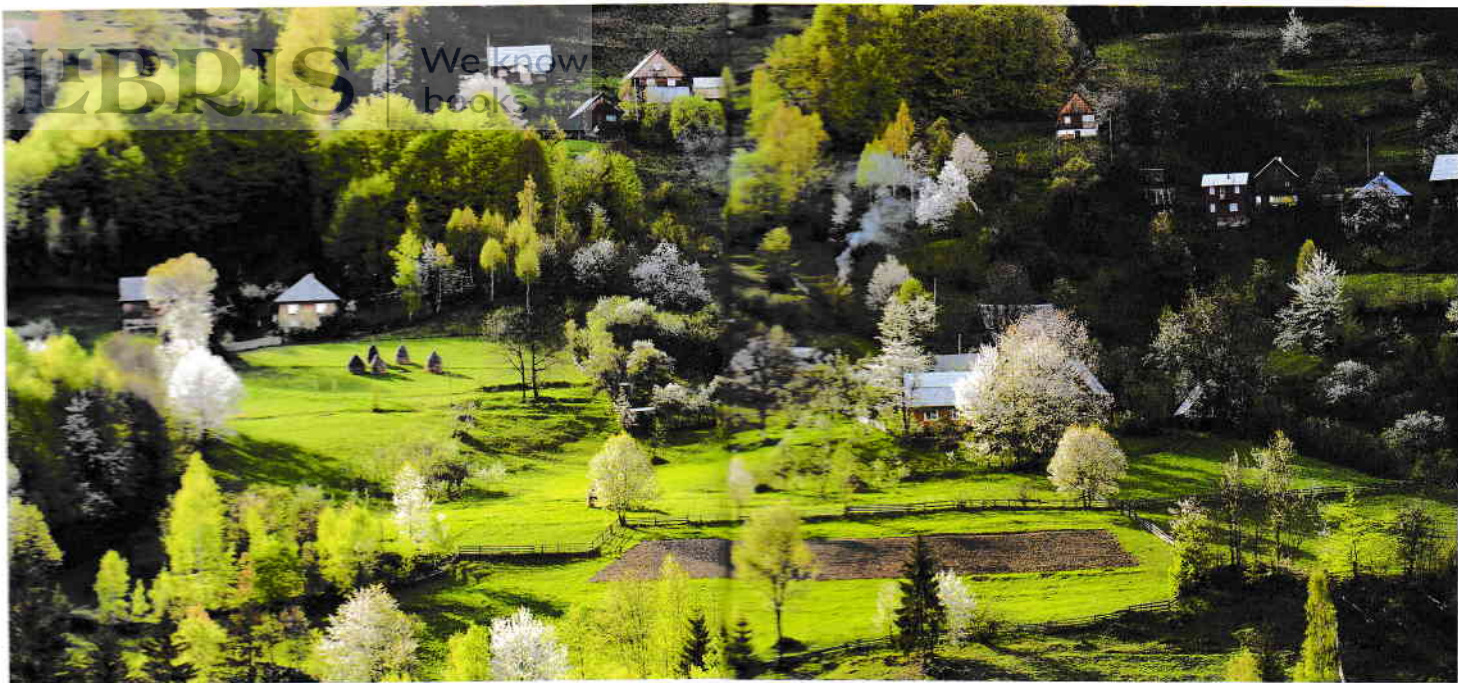
Romania

people, places and stories

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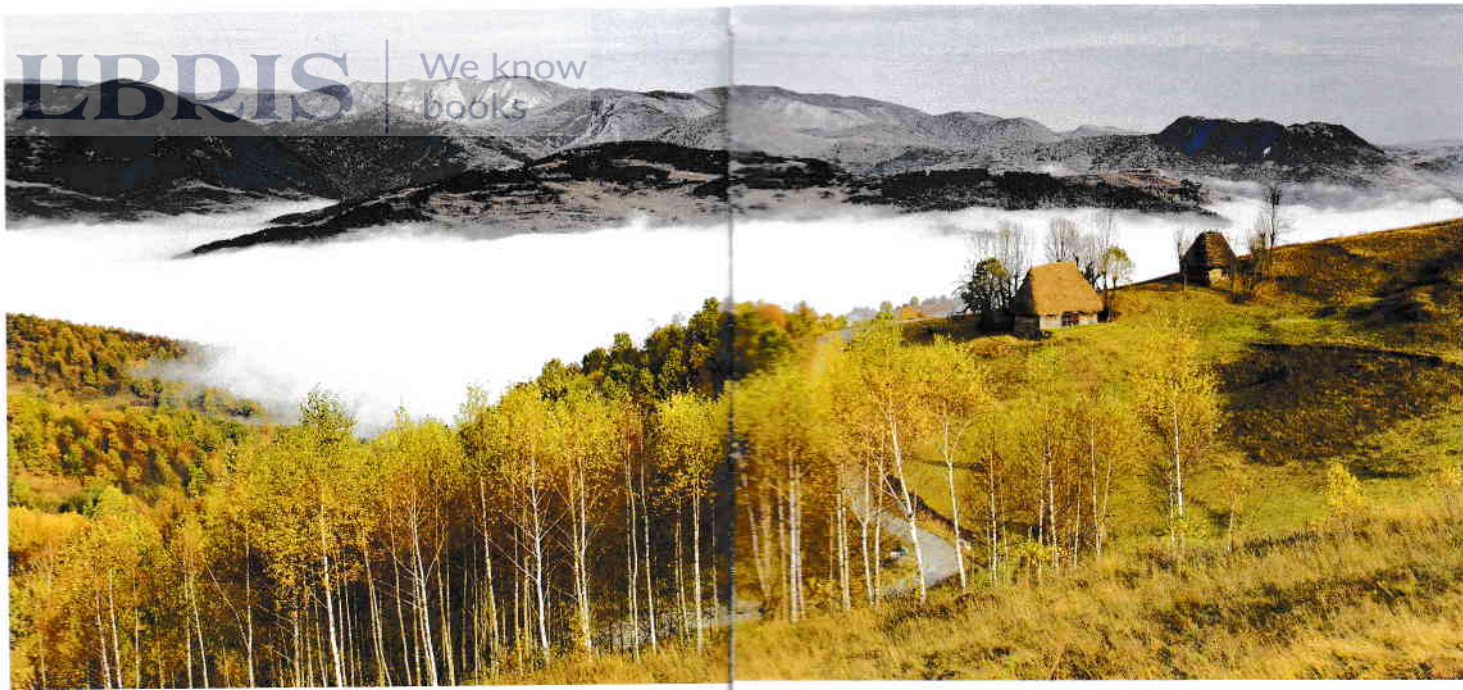
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Spring in Mătișești, Alba county

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The village of Sălciua in the Arieș Valley, with the Scărița Belioara in the background

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Winter evening in Fundata, Rucăr-Bran Corridor



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Romania

people, places and stories

Any attempt to define Romania has to do battle with the characterisations of the country that have been made over time.

Whether idealised as a paradisaal country of mountains, forests and the miraculous Delta the Danube where it empties into the Black Sea, and as a space still lacking the constrictive uniformity of western life, or criticised as a country that has not taken the straight path of reform and is complicit in its entanglement in the threads of corruption, Romania has in time moved on from such contradictions. Since integration into the European Union at the beginning of 2007, it has become an increasingly attractive destination for both investors and tourists.

With a surface area of more than 88,800 square miles, the territory of present-day Romania was formerly under the dominion of numerous empires, from the Ottomans to the Austro-Hungarians, which all left their specific mark on the Romanian regions. Transylvania is in the centre of the country, Moldavia in the North-East, Maramureş in the North-West, Banat in the West, Wallachia (comprising Muntenia and Oltenia) in the South, and Dobrudja in the South-East. Each region has its own special character.

The nucleus of the Kingdom of Dacia (Dacians were the Romanians' ancestors) lies in the Mountains of Orăştia, in the heart of **Transylvania**, where the vestiges of their fortresses, built between the first century B.C. and the first century A.D., can still be found. The Romanians are in fact the descendents of the legendary Dacians and the Romans, who conquered Dacia and ruled the land between 100 and 271 A.D. The Romanian language springs from the Vulgar Latin spoken in the imperial provinces. It resembles Italian, Spanish and Portuguese, but has preserved many archaic features of Latin, as a result of the fact that it evolved in an isolated space, separated from the other Romanic lands by a predominantly Slavic linguistic buffer zone. From the time of the Romans there have survived the ruins of forts, baths and roads, such as those in Alba Iulia (*Apulum*) and Sălaj County (*Porolissum*). Between the third and twelfth centuries, the region

was invaded by wave after wave of barbarians, and subsequently the territory that is now Transylvania came under the dominion of the Kingdom of Hungary, which sent Saxons and Szeklers to colonise the land. It was the Saxons who built the fortified churches and mediaeval burghs of Transylvania, according to the German model. As *hospites regis* (guests of the king), they founded here cities such as Sighişoara, Sibiu and Braşov, which today number among Romania's main tourist attractions. The fortified churches (thirteenth-sixteenth century), which resemble citadels, were built mainly after the great Tartar invasion of 1241, as a result of which the land was laid to waste. Today, such architectural ensembles are still preserved in 150 Transylvanian villages. Seven fortified churches, at Biertan, Călnic, Dârjiu, Prejmer, Saschiz, Valea Viilor and Viscri, have been listed as UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

Moldavia is par excellence the sacred land of Romania, as proven by the multitude of churches and monasteries to be found in Bukowina and the Neamtz region. Remarkable above all are the churches of the North, with their exterior frescoes in the Byzantine manner. Voroneţ, Humor, Moldoviţa and Probota are UNESCO monuments. Jassy, a city which, like Rome, lies on seven hills, is home to Romania's oldest university. In Romania, there is a tradition of painting eggs at Easter, which in Bukowina has become a veritable art.

Maramureş is the ancestral land of the culture of woodworking. It is also from wood that the region's churches, with their soaring spires, are constructed, such as those at Ieud, Budeşti, Poienile Izei, Rogoz, Deseşti, Bârsana, Plopiş and Şurdeşti, which are now UNESCO World Heritage sites. Likewise, the houses, massive gates and even the humblest household utensils are all made of wood. You will also be able to see highly original monuments of folk art at the unusual Merry Cemetery in Săpânţa, where death is viewed in the droll manner characteristic of peasants. On the wooden crosses, painted in gay colours, there are epitaphs in rhyming verse that capture the quirks of the deceased. An archaic steam train runs along the Vaser Valley on a narrow-gauge railway. Proceeding from Vişeu de Sus, the steam train is still used to transport logs from the mountains and now has special carriages for tourists who want to travel up the pass to places otherwise inaccessible.

The **Banat** is the forefront, as the locals are wont to boast, and they are right if we recall that Timişoara was first in many things: it was here that gas street lighting was first introduced in what is today Romania (1855), the first electric street lighting in Europe was used (1884), roads were first asphalted (1895), and the first electric trams ran (1899). It was also in Timişoara, the baroque city on the Bega, that the first public lending library in the Habsburg Empire was

opened (1815). Likewise, it was in Timişoara that the Revolution of 1989 began. Arad is an old city on the Mureş River, recorded since 1131. The citadel, dating from the sixteenth century and reconstructed between 1698 and 1701 by Prince Eugene of Savoy, houses a complex of eighteenth-century baroque buildings. The Nerei Gorges stretch for twenty kilometres between the villages of Şopotul Nou and Sasca Română (Caraş-Severin County), between the Aninei and Locvei Mountains. There are numerous attractions along their length.

Wallachia (made up of Muntenia and Oltenia) has throughout history had a number of capitals: Câmpulung, Curtea de Argeş, Târgovişte and Bucharest. In each of these cities in Muntenia can be found the ruins of the former princely courts. Within the precincts of the Negru Vodă Monastery in Câmpulung Muscel, one of the oldest monuments of Romanian feudal art, are preserved the ruins of such a princely court. The court complex at Târgovişte is the best preserved and will give you an idea of how a princely residence once looked. From the top of the Chindia Tower, built in the fifteenth century by Vlad the Impaler, you will get a panoramic view of the ruins.

Bucharest coalesced around the Old Court, built by Vlad the Impaler on the banks of the Dâmboviţa River. The Princely Court suffered severe damage at the

beginning of the eighteenth century, as a result of a fire, followed by an earthquake. The land was parcelled and sold off to merchants and craftsmen, who opened shops and workshops here, founding the old commercial centre of the city, known as Lipscani. Not much has remained of the princely residence, but in the capital and surrounding area you can find other palaces, built by princes and the leading boyar families. In the former Royal Palace, a sumptuous neo-classical edifice, which dominates Revolution Square, the Romanian National Museum of Art is now housed. Cotroceni Palace, a wonderful neo-Romanian style building, built in the grounds of an old monastery (which was demolished at the orders of Ceaușescu but has recently been rebuilt), is today home to the Romanian Presidency and a museum that recreates the elegant interiors of the residence of Prince Ferdinand and Princess Maria. Music lovers will adore the main concert venue for classical music in Bucharest: the Romanian Athenaeum, which is like an Ionic temple crowned with a baroque cupola. It houses a superb circular concert hall, decorated with frescoes depicting scenes from Romanian history. The Palace of Parliament – a colossal structure, second in size only to the Pentagon – has become one of the main tourist attractions of Bucharest. An entire quarter of Bucharest was razed to build the House of the People, as it was originally known, and has thus remained in the national consciousness as a symbol of the Ceaușescu dictatorship and a dark period for Romania.

In Northern Oltenia you will find pristine landscapes, such as the Olt Valley, mineral springs, in the spas of Călimănești – Căciulata, Băile Govora and Băile Olănești, relief of a wild beauty, such as the Bistritza Gorges and Olteț Gorges, and a mysterious subterranean world. The old monasteries, with their heavenly flower gardens, form a compact sacral space, whose nuclei are to be found at Horezu (a UNESCO World Heritage site), Cozia, Bistritza, Arnota, Polovragi, Surpatele, Govora, and Tismana. Horezu, where there is a community of potters, is a well-known centre for traditional ceramics. The lode of Oltenian tradition can be detected in the work of one of the most important sculptors of modern times, Constantin Brâncuși. He was able to combine the simplicity of Oltenian folk art with the refinement of the Parisian avant-garde, exerting a profound influence on the modern concept of form in sculpture. Travellers who reach Târgu Jiu will be able to admire there masterpieces by Brâncuși: the Table of Silence, the Lane of Chairs, the Gate of the Kiss, and the Column of the Infinite.

Dobrudja is probably the most unusual and mysterious of Romania's regions. Its Black Sea coast and marvellous delta alone would be enough to guarantee its popularity. But Dobrudja has many other hidden, unsuspected attractions, beyond its beaches. You will discover here the magical, boundless expanses of the Dobrudja steppe, fields of poppies and sunflowers, landscapes of primal

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beauty. If you turn off the main road that leads from Cernavodă to Constanța, along the more difficult, country roads, you will discover wild, hidden-away places, dotted with undisturbed ancient ruins, you will walk in the footsteps of the saints and martyrs of the primitive Church, the founders of Christianity in Romania, and you will see at close hand the picturesque villages of the Turks, Tartars, Lipovians, Aromanians, Greeks and Armenians who dwell here alongside the Romanians. The oldest settlements on the coast were the colonies founded in the seventh and sixth centuries B.C. by the Ionian Greeks (*Tomis*, now Constantia, and *Histria*, now Istria) and Dorians (*Callatis*, today Mangalia).

Geographically, Romania is defined by the Carpathian mountain chain, the Danube, which crosses Romania for a length of 1,075km, and the Black Sea coast, stretching for 150 miles. The relief is remarkable for its variety and harmony. From mountains to coastline, from caves to spectacular gorges, from glacial lakes to miniature muddy volcanoes, from waterfalls to living flames, Romania offers the spectacle of nature in all its exuberance.

Romania is well worth exploring, be it only for its breathtaking landscapes. But it also offers a different kind of attraction. Venture off the beaten track and savour its contrasts. On Romania's roads, among the latest models of car, you

will still be able to spot horse-drawn carts. Many guesthouses in rural areas organise visits to traditional sheepfolds, where you can taste specific shepherd dishes.

More and more foreign tourists coming to Romania are discovering more than they expected. Many leave taking with them as a souvenir icons painted on wood or glass, an *ie* (a traditional peasant blouse made from white cotton, linen or raw silk and decorated with beautiful stitching), hand-made pottery from Horezu, Vama or Marginea, a traditional mask used in Christmas and New Year rituals, ornaments fashioned from corn husks, wooden toys, or painted eggs, forgetting that they had come here in search of Dracula.

At the end of your journey, your preconceptions will all have crumbled and you will be left with the memory of a country that is full of colour and still "non-standardised". You will make discoveries as you explore the most diverse places – from isolated villages to big cities with dazzling examples of baroque architecture, from the channels of the Delta to the heights of the Carpathians, from hermitages excavated from rock to churches with exquisite exterior frescoes. You will meet friendly locals and you will have the opportunity to discover at close hand a unique European culture, situated at boundary between East and West.