

Moldavia



With thickly forested hills and tranquil valleys undulating off into the horizon, Moldavia mixes the rich folklore, beauty and turbulent history of Transylvania and the quietly appealing, bucolic paradise of Maramureş into its own fusion of the best of Romania. Cavort through the countryside on horse-drawn carts, stopping to gawk at the world-famous medieval painted monasteries. Hike or ski over eye-popping mountain terrain. Then urbanise in Iaşi and Suceava, where the first generation to have no vivid memories of Ceauşescu is rapidly developing a taste for fine food, shopping and late-night indulgence.

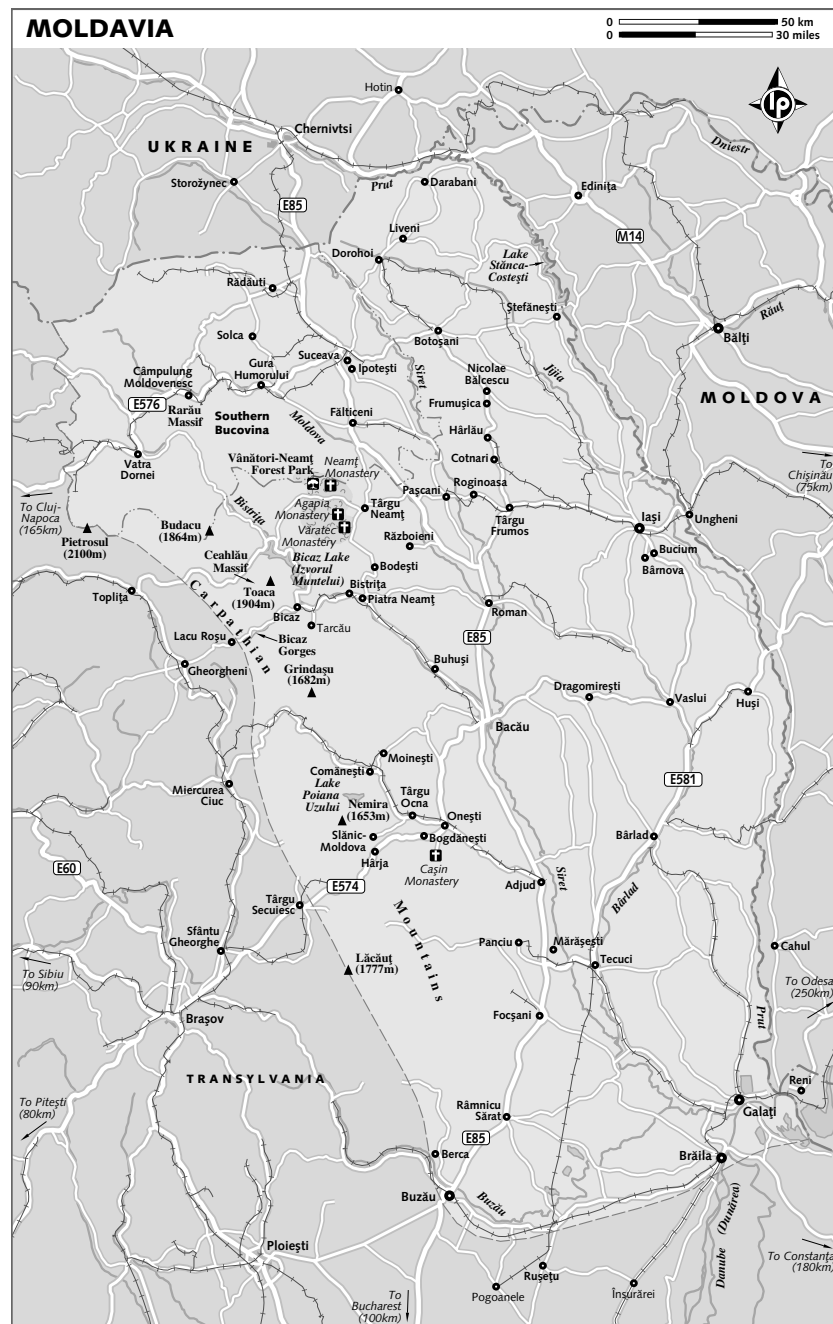
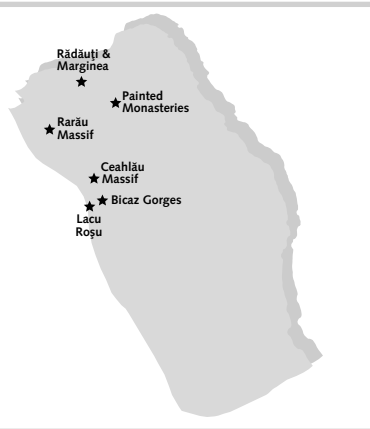
In 1359, under Prince Bogdan of Cuhea, Moldavia became the second Romanian principality to divorce itself from the Hungarians. During the 18th century the region served as a refuge for thousands fleeing persecution in Hungarian-ruled Transylvania. Ştefan cel Mare (Stephen the Great) and his son Petru Rareş erected fortified monasteries and churches throughout Bucovina, many of which have survived centuries of war and enjoy Unesco World Heritage status. Mired under Turkish rule after Petru Rareş' defeat in 1538, Moldavia was finally united with Wallachia by Alexandru Ioan Cuza in 1859. Almost immediate cultural and economic growth followed and the modern Romanian state was born, with Iaşi as its capital.

Moldavia used to be much larger. Bessarabia, the area east of the Prut River, was annexed by Russia in 1812. Despite being recovered from 1918 to 1940 and again from 1941 to 1944, Bessarabia is now split between Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova. Northern Bucovina is now in southwestern Ukraine.

Romanians refer to Moldavia as 'Moldova' (the Slavic form of Moldavia), a Stalinist legacy and point of confusion for visitors. Neighbouring Moldova is referred to as the 'Republic of Moldova'.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Hike (or ski) the dizzying **Ceahlău** (p268) and **Rarău** (p280) mountains
- Endeavour to keep the car on the road while driving into the mind-bending **Bicaz Gorges** (p269) and its 'neck of hell'
- See if the dead tree stumps outnumber wild ducks in mysterious **Lacu Roşu** (p269)
- Ponder the beauty and longevity of the **Painted monasteries** (p275) around Suceava
- Delve into small-town life and bond with endearing locals in **Rădăuţi & Marginea** (p278)



SOUTHERN MOLDAVIA

IAȘI

☎ 232 / pop 326,502

Iași (pronounced 'yash') has an energy and depth of character that would be instantly giddy if one had the power to see through concrete. Those without this endowment will need a few days to pinpoint the numerous joys of Romania's second-largest city. Iași's past as Moldavia's capital (since 1565) has resulted in a city dotted with fabulous buildings, important monasteries, parks and unpretentious cultural treasures. As one of Romania's largest university towns, its population seemingly doubles during the academic year, when students from

around the country flood the streets with a liveliness that defies their position in one of Romania's poorest provinces. The youthful, cosmopolitan atmosphere, fuelled partly by thousands of foreign students, is quickly extinguishing the lingering socialist ways and blasé attitude of the town's service industry. Moreover, it's the perfect staging area for travellers heading into Moldova, 20km away.

Founded in the second half of the 14th century, Iași has a great cultural tradition due to the stream of scholars that began clustering here in the early 17th century. Prominent names from the city's prolific literary past such as Vasile Pogor, Ion Creangă and the riotously popular poet Mihai Eminescu adorn dozens of streets, busts, memorial houses,

museums and an old linden tree. The first Romanian language newspaper was published here in 1829 and the country's first university was founded in 1860.

Iași's map-dot ballooned after being named the capital of modern-day Romania, when Moldavian ruler Alexandru Ioan Cuza united Wallachia with Moldavia in 1859 and christened the new university after himself. Bucharest usurped Iași in 1862, but it was relinquished briefly when the government, following the lead of King Ferdinand and Queen Marie, sought refuge here during WWI. During this period, Iași's notorious history of anti-Semitism took root with the birth of the League of National Christian Defence – the predecessor of the despicably fascist Iron Guard.

Modern Iași is among Romania's most vibrant cities, teeming with beautiful people, restaurants, bars and hot night spots. Each year the university honours its librarian-turned-celebrated-poet at the National Mihai Eminescu Symposium. For something less cerebral, try to catch Iași Days during the second week in October. Originally a week-long religious event devoted to Saint Parascheva, it has mushroomed into a street party, fuelled by a river of *must* (p53).

Orientation

To reach Piața Unirii from Iași's Gară Centrală train station, walk northeast along Str Gării two blocks, then turn right onto Str Arcu. From Piața Unirii, B-dul Ștefan cel Mare runs southwest past the Mitropolia Moldovei (Moldovan Metropolitan Cathedral) to the Palatul Culturii (Palace of Culture). The bus station (Autogara Vest) is one kilometre west down Str Ștrăpungerea Silvestru from the train station.

MAPS & PUBLICATIONS

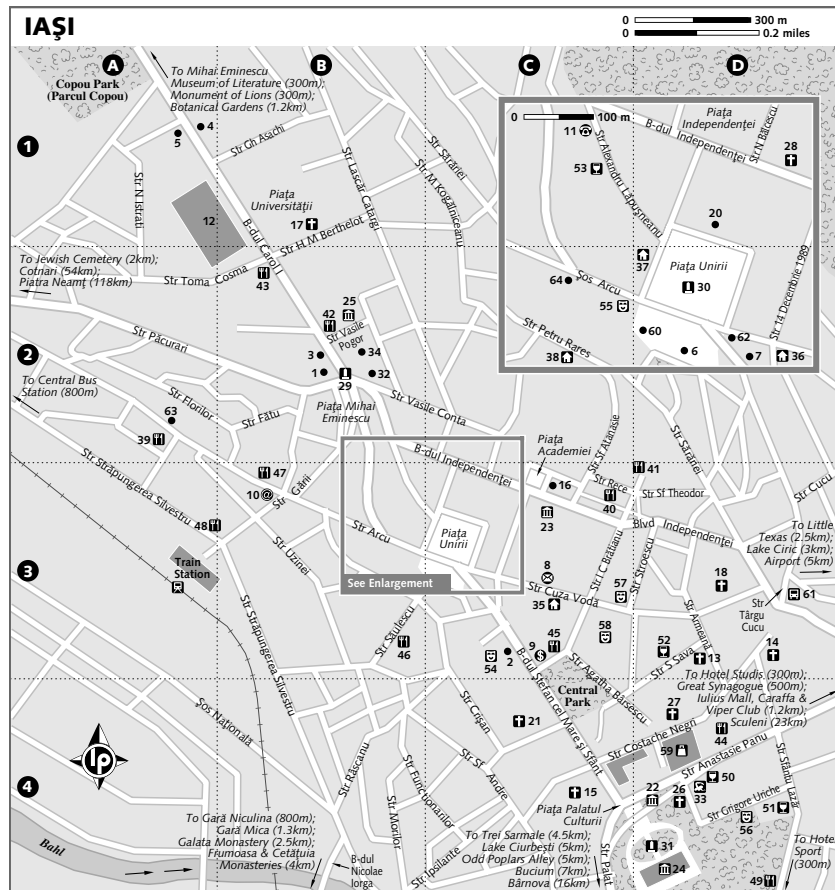
Amco Press' *Iași* city map (€3.35) is satisfactory but, for anal-retentive detail, indulge in Cartographia's *Iași* (€5.50). Free entertainment listings *24-Fun* and **Tot o Dată** (www.totodata.ro in Romanian) are found in shops, cafés and restaurants throughout the city.

Information

For general information and directory assistance, dial ☎ 951. Or better yet, get your host to dial: it's all in Romanian.

BOOKSHOPS

Eurolibris (☎ 210 858; B-dul Carol I, 3-4; ☎ 9am-5pm)
Junimea (☎ 412 712; Piața Unirii 4; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-4pm Sat)



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CULTURAL CENTRES

British Council (☎ 316 159; Str Păcurari 4; 📧 1-7pm Mon, Tue & Thu, 10am-4pm Wed & Fri) In the same attractive building as the Mihai Eminescu Library.

French Cultural Centre (☎ 267 637; www.ccf.tuiasi.ro in French; B-dul Carol I, 26; 🕒 9am-noon & 1-6pm Mon-Thu, 9am-4pm Fri) Holds film screenings, theatre workshops and concerts and has a *mediathèque*.

Goethe German Cultural Centre (☎ 214 051; info-goethezentrum@catv.embit.ro; B-dul Carol I, 21; 🕒 noon-6pm) Organises cultural events and has an extensive library.

EMERGENCY

For any emergency within the city, dial ☎ 112. **Sfântu Spiridon University Hospital** (☎ 240 822; B-dul Independenței 1) The city's largest hospital.

INTERNET ACCESS

Bar-Cafe Internet (B-dul Ștefan cel Mare 8; per hr €1.50; 🕒 24hr) Inside the mall; smoky, dark and full of glassy-eyed gamers.

Take Net (Șoseaua Arcu 1; per hr €0.60; 🕒 24hr)

MONEY

ATMs are abundant in the centre.

Raiffeisen Bank (B-dul Ștefan cel Mare 2; 🕒 8.30am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat)

POST

Post office (☎ 212 222; Str Cuza Vodă 10; 🕒 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1pm Sat) Iași's poste restante.

Telephone centre (Str Alexandru Lăpușneanu; 🕒 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, 8am-3pm Sat) Has fax services.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Iași has no official tourist office.

Civen Turism (☎ 258 326; www.reservation.ro; B-dul Ștefan cel Mare 8-12; 🕒 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat) The adept English-speakers here can arrange Antrec rural accommodation, wine tours, trips to the Bucovina monasteries and car hire.

Meridian Turism (☎ 211 060; meridian_turism@yahoo.com; B-dul Ștefan cel Mare 1C; 🕒 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat) Also agents for Antrec.

Sights

PIAȚA UNIRII TO PIAȚA PALATUL CULTURII

Standing in the ubiquitous Piața Unirii (Union Square), start your tour by sidling into the newly refurbished **Hotel Unirea** and taking the elevator to the lucky 13th-floor cafeteria where – weather permitting – you'll be able to identify many of the city's notable landmarks all the way to the hilltop monasteries on the

southern outskirts. In front of Hotel Unirea stands a bronze **statue of Prince Alexandru Ioan Cuza** (1820–73), unifier of Wallachia and Moldavia.

On the western side of the square is **Hotel Traian** (1882), a neoclassical building designed by Gustave Eiffel, who went on to build a somewhat popular tower in Paris a few years later. The **Natural History Museum** (B-dul Independenței 16; ☎ 201 339; admission adult/child €1.10/0.90; 🕒 9am-3pm Tue, Thu & Sat, 9am-4pm Wed, Fri & Sun) has a modest collection of stuffed beasts, in addition to hosting travelling exhibitions. Alexandru Ioan Cuza was elected prince here in 1859. Opposite is the baroque **Costache Ghica House**, where Romania's first university was founded in 1860 – now serving as office space.

One block west at B-dul Independenței 33 is **St Spiridon's Monastery** (1804). The body of Grigore Ghica III, killed in 1777 for opposing the Turks, lies inside the monastical complex, minus the head, which presumably came to rest in the sultan's sitting room.

The hectic, tree-lined B-dul Ștefan cel Mare leads directly southeast from Piața Unirii to the monumental Palace of Culture (opposite). Along this way is the prominent **Moldavian Metropolitan Cathedral** (built between 1833 and 1839). With a cavernous interior painted by Gheorghe Tattarescu, it's Romania's largest Orthodox cathedral and thus a busy place of worship. You can forget seeing its interior during Iași Days, when most of Moldavia's able-bodied pilgrims flock here to stand in line day and night for the chance to view the body of their beloved St Paraschiva, the patron saint of the cathedral and Moldavia. The saint's body is trundled out for this brief period each year. Additionally, the cathedral has a coffin said to contain the bones of St Friday.

Opposite is the **central park**, lined with bronze busts of eminent literary figures, where proud boyfriends pay artists to sketch portraits of their girlfriends and painters vend their work. Across the park is the **National Theatre** (1894–96). A majestic statue of its founder, poet Vasile Alecsandri (1821–90), monitors the front entrance for scalpers. The theatre was built according to the designs of Viennese architects Helmer and Fellner.

The boulevard's main attraction is the fabulous **Church of the Three Hierarchs** (Biserica Sfinților Trei Ierarhi; 🕒 9.30am-12pm & 1-5.30pm), which is currently suffering from acute scaffolding-itis both inside and out, due to years'-long painstaking

ȘTEFAN CEL MARE

It's a rare day when a Romanian doesn't speak the name 'Ștefan cel Mare' (Stephen the Great, 1457–1504), not only because he was the closest thing to a superhero that Moldavia has ever had, but his name adorns squares, boulevards, streets, statues and landmarks in virtually every city. During his reign as Prince of Moldavia, he repulsed forces from Poland and Hungary and his heroic resistance against the Ottoman Empire was admired throughout Europe. Pope Sixtus IV awarded Ștefan the Atheta Christi (*Champion of Christ*) award. Although it's said that he untiringly fathered over 20 illegitimate children, Ștefan was nevertheless considered holy enough for canonization by the Romanian Orthodox Church under the name 'The Right-believing Voivod Stephen the Great and the Saint'. When he wasn't building a battle record of 34 and two, he erected 44 churches and monasteries, several of which are now Unesco World Heritage sites. Strong, battle-savvy leadership ran in Ștefan's family; his cousin Vlad (Dracula) Țepeș, though distinctly less pious in temperament, also fought – or, more accurately, frightened off – the Turks during his reign as Prince of Wallachia.

restoration. Fortunately, the unique exterior, embroidered in a wealth of intricate patterns in stone, can be appreciated – if not satisfactorily photographed – through the obscurity. In its original form, the exterior was covered in gold, silver and lapis. Built in 1637–39 by Prince Vasile Lupu, ostensibly to buy his way into heaven, it was damaged by Tartar attacks in 1650, but its dizzying mix of western Gothic, Renaissance and eastern motifs has been carefully restored.

Inside the church are the marble tombs of Prince Vasile Lupu and his family (to the left), Prince Alexandru Ioan Cuza (to the right), and Prince Dimitrie Cantemir. The adjacent Gothic hall is a **museum of 17th-century frescoes** (admission €0.60; 🕒 10am-4pm Tue-Sun). In 1994 the church reopened as a monastery. The three saints are celebrated here on 30 January with an all-monk choir performance.

At the southern end of B-dul Ștefan cel Mare stands the giant neo-Gothic **Palace of Culture** (Palatul Culturii; ☎ 218 383; admission adult/child per museum €0.70/0.50, all four museums €2.25/1.50; 🕒 10am-4.30pm Tue-Sun). Although many of the 365 rooms are closed to visitors, a combined ticket allows entry to its four museums.

The **Gheorghe Asachi Library**, and the four admirably stocked museums it houses, provide a superb diversion. The **Ethnographic Museum**, one of the best in the country, has exhibits ranging from agriculture, fishing and hunting to wine-making, as well as traditional costumes and rugs. The **Art Museum** is split into two galleries: the Galeria de Artă Românească, with over 20 works by Romanian artist Nicolae Grigorescu and others including Moldavian Petre Achițemie; and the Galeria de Artă Universală,

exhibiting foreign works. Highlights of the **History Museum** include portraits of all of Romania's rulers since AD 81. Various mechanical creations and musical instruments are displayed in the less colourful **Science & Technical Museum**. Lastly, the furnishings and staircase in the entrance and main hall are something of an attraction in and of themselves, when they aren't being sullied by the kiosks and floor-to-ceiling display booths that sprout during frequent conventions and expositions.

The Palace of Culture was built between 1906 and 1925 and was formerly the administrative seat of the town. It was built on the ruins of the **old princely court**, founded by Prince Alexandru cel Bun (r 1400–32). Some remains of the court have been preserved beneath the concrete flooring of the neighbouring outdoor Summer Theatre.

In front of the palace on Piața Palatul Culturii is an equestrian **statue of Ștefan cel Mare**, unveiled in 1883. A **memorial** to Iași's heroes who died in 1989 stands by the entrance to the palace grounds. Opposite is the **Museum of Old Moldavian Literature** (☎ 0747-499 403; Str Anastasia Panum 54; admission €0.25; 🕒 10am-5pm Tue-Sun), housed inside the 17th-century Dosoftei House. Dosoftei was the metropolitan ruler of Moldavia between 1670 and 1686 and was responsible for printing the first church liturgy in the Romanian language (1679).

Behind Dosoftei House is **St Nicolas' Royal Church** (Biserica Sfântul Nicolae Domnesc), founded by Ștefan cel Mare in 1492. Little remains of the original church, which was restored and extended by Prince Antonie Roset in 1677, then rebuilt by French architect André Lecomte de Nouÿ in 1884.

JEWISH IAȘI

In the 19th century Iași was one of the great centres of Jewish learning in Europe. The world's first professional Jewish theatre opened here in 1876. A **statue** of its founder, Polish composer and playwright Avram Goldfaden (1840–1908), stands in the central park on B-dul Ștefan cel Mare. More than one third of the city's population at this time was Jewish, served by 127 synagogues. The most (in)famous Jewish scapegoat to come out of Iași was Magda Lupescu (1896–1977). During her time as the unlikely mistress-then-wife to King Carol II and head of the goon-squad arm of his National Renaissance Front, she was something of a scourge to the quickly growing anti-Semite group, the Iron Guard, enthusiastically using their own thuggish tactics against them, including murder. The press referred to her as 'the she-wolf'. Lupescu and Carol II fled Romania in 1940, just ahead of Hitler.

Today only two synagogues remain open in Iași. The **Great Synagogue** (1671) is barely visible amid the concrete apartment blocks surrounding it at Str Elena Doamna 15. There is a small museum inside the synagogue, but contact the **Iași Jewish community** (☎ 214 414) in advance to visit it. In front of the synagogue is a monument to the victims of the 1941 pogrom.

Many of the victims of the Iron Guard's pogroms were buried in four concrete bunkers in the **Jewish Cemetery** (Cimitirul Evreiesc; admission €2.85) on Mountain Hill (Dealul Muntenii), west of the centre off Str Păcurari. There's another pogrom monument there, as well as the second, very small synagogue. It's a €2 taxi ride from the centre.

MONASTERIES & CHURCHES

Iași has a motherload of religious architecture: there are 47 Orthodox churches, seven monasteries, three Catholic cathedrals, one Lippovan church and two synagogues, with several more churches standing half-built and forlorn, waiting for donations so that they can be completed. Entry to all churches and monasteries is free.

In addition to the churches and monastery mentioned in the previous section, the fortified **Golia Monastery** (Str Cuza Vodă), built in late-Renaissance style and surrounded by rose gardens, is definitely worth a visit. The monastery's walls and the 30m-high tower at the entrance shelter a weathered 17th-century church, noted for its vibrant Byzantine frescoes and intricately carved doorways. The bastions of the surrounding wall were added in 1667. The complex was damaged by fire several times and closed completely between 1900 and 1947. It regained monastery status in 1992 and is still undergoing major reconstruction.

Within the complex is a **memorial house** to writer Ion Creangă (1837–89), renowned for his short stories based on Moldavian folklore. He lived here between 1866 and 1871.

From Golia Monastery, head south along Str Armeană. On the right at No 22 you'll pass a small stone-and-brick **Armenian Church** (Biserica Armeană; 1395), considered the oldest church in Iași. Extensive renovations – which

have begun anew – have stripped off most of the original Armenian architecture. At the southern end of Str Armeană, turn right to **St Sava's Monastery** (Mănăstirea Sfântul Sava; Str Costache Negri 41), a small painted-brick church (1625). If instead you turn left along Str Costache Negri, you'll come to the 19th-century **Bărboi Monastery**. The church was built in 1841 on the site of a 17th-century church. Not only is the trompe l'oeil-painted interior worth a lingering gander, but the grounds are refreshingly free of construction activity!

UNIVERSITY & AROUND

B-dul Carol I is unsurprisingly a zoo of student activity, with people racing around campus, studying in parks and cafés and squashed into trams and maxitaxis, far beyond Geneva Convention directives. They hustle to and from student ghettos where up to six people share 16-sq-metre dorm rooms during the academic year (ponder *that* the next time you're complaining about a few nights in a full hostel!). An assortment of university buildings and literary museums hold worthwhile treasures, ranging from fascinating to kitschy.

Behind the **Student Cultural House** on Piața Mihai Eminescu is the Students' House park, the centrepiece of which is the **Voievodes Statuary**. These fantastic crumbling statues of Moldavia's princes were moved here from the university courtyard in the 1960s. In pairs stand Moldavia's first prince, Dragoș (r 1352–

53), and Alexandru cel Bun (r 1400–32); Moldavia's greatest prince, Ștefan cel Mare (r 1457–1504) with Mihai Viteazul (r 1600); Petru Rareș (r 1527–38) and Ion Vodă cel Viteaz (r 1572–74); and Vasile Lupu (r 1634–53) with Dimitrie Cantemir (r 1693). The boys, and everyone scurrying down Carol I, are supervised by a nearby massive **statue of Mihai Eminescu**, in a possible homage to the vigilant spirit of librarians everywhere.

One block north, along the serene Str Vasile Pogor, is the **Pogor House Literary Museum** (Casă Pogor; ☎ 410 340; Str Vasile Pogor 4; admission €0.30; ☎ 10am–5pm Tue–Sun), Vasile Pogor's 1850s mansion, where meetings of the literary society were held from 1871. On its lovely grounds stand **rows of busts** of some of the more eminent members of the society, including dramatist Ion Luca Caragiale (1852–1912) and poet Vasile Alecsandri (1821–90).

Another block further north is the heart of Iași's student life. On the east side of the boulevard is Piața Universității, backed by the **Forty Saints Church**, and on the west is the huge neoclassical **Alexandru Ioan Cuza University**, where the founder of the fascist Iron Guard, Corneliu Codreanu (1899–1938), once studied. The arcades of the main hall (aka The Hall of the Lost Footsteps) are decorated in frescoes by the painter Sabin Balasa.

Further north is **Copou Park** (Parcol Copou), laid out between 1834 and 1848 during the princely reign of Mihail Sturza. Poet Mihai Eminescu (1850–89) allegedly wrote some of his best works beneath his favourite linden tree in this park. The tree still stands, behind a 13m-high **monument of lions** opposite the main entrance to the park. A bronze bust of Eminescu sits in front of it.

Nearby is the **Mihai Eminescu Museum of Literature** (☎ 0747-499 405; admission €0.30; ☎ 10am–5pm Tue–Sun), housed in a distressingly modern white building. The museum recalls the life and loves of Eminescu, Romania's most cherished writer and poet. Though he was married, his great love was Veronica Micle, herself married to a vicar. They outlived their spouses but never married each other due to Eminescu's deteriorating health – he also considered himself too poor to offer Veronica what she deserved (sniff, sniff). A **bust** of Veronica faces another of her lover and his favourite linden tree at the end of Junimea Alley in the park.

Iași is home to Romania's first and largest **Botanical Gardens** (Grădina Botanică; admission €0.50;

☎ 10am–9pm), on the western side of Parcul Expoziției. Dating from 1856, they offer 21km of shady lanes, rose and orchid gardens, greenhouses, natural springs and a lake. Also on the grounds is Vasile Lupu's 'Church of the Living' (1638). While the landscaping isn't winning any awards, these are the city's premier strolling and picnicking grounds.

SOUTH OF THE CENTRE

Heading out of town along Șoseaua Bucium (DN 224), you pass the **Odd Poplars Alley**, lined with 25 poplar trees and marking another spot where poet Mihai Eminescu sought inspiration and brooded over late library books.

Southwest of the centre in the Nicolina district are three of Iași's most tranquil monasteries, which make for a pleasant hike (or take a short ride on Bus 9 downhill from the Palace of Culture). All of these monasteries are open for visitors (admission free), though there's a sporadically enforced photo fee at Cetățuia Monastery. Perched on top of Miroslovei Hill is the 16th-century fortified **Galata Monastery**, founded in 1582 by Prince Petru Șchiopul, who is buried in the church. The ruins of the monks' living quarters and a Turkish bath are all that remain today. Though the new church, built in 1847, lacks extravagant frescoes and overdone ornamentation, it's still an impressive brick and stone edifice, with a devilishly sensitive echo that will reduce visitors to tiptoes and lip-reading conversations.

East of Galata at the northern end of Str Cetățuia are the ruins of **Frumoasa Monastery** (1726–33). Built by Prince Grigore Ghica II, it served as a royal residence in the 18th century. From here, go south along Str Cetățuia and follow the steep, narrow, resolve-testing road to the top of Dealul Cetățuia to the impressive **Cetățuia Monastery**. Founded in 1669, it's one of the few structures from this time to survive wholly intact. Numerous Moldavian paintings and frescoes done in the neo-Byzantine tradition remain within the church, though some were damaged by Ottoman Turkish reprisals. The 17th-century royal palace is now a museum of religious art, while the Gothic Room features its original hexagonal brick pavement. The complex also has wine cellars and a Turkish bath.

Activities

There's a serviceable **swimming pool** (piscină; Str Anastasie Panu 29-31; admission €4.20; ☎ 1-5pm & 6-10pm

Mon, Wed & Thu, 8.30am-noon & 1-5pm & 6-10pm Fri-Sun) around the corner from Hotel Moldova. **Lake Gric**, at the city limits on the road to the airport, may look innocuous, but the water is generally too dirty for a proper swim. However, it's still a serene place for a stroll. A bus that passes the lake departs east of the centre, just off Str Sărăriei. **Lake Ciurbești**, 5km south of the city near the village of Ciurbești, is better for a dip and the surrounding area is a favourite weekend escape for city-weary locals.

Sleeping

Despite taking a few gratifying steps forward in recent years, Iași's accommodation options remain sub-par. Be prepared to fork out more money than you'd planned for reasonable comfort. Visit www.antrec.ro for rural accommodation at around €10 to €20 per person.

Hotel Sport (☎ 232 800; Str Sfântu Lazăr 76; d/tr €17/19.30) You'll need an athlete's fortitude to stomach this grotty, musty but cheap place directly behind the Palace of Culture. Call ahead as it is often booked with visiting athletes.

Casa Bucovineana Hostel (☎ 222 913; Str Cuza Voda 30; s/d/ste without bathroom €19.60/30/56) Recent renovations have made the rooms here more palatable. Some doubles have in-room showers. Breakfast not included.

Hotel Continental (☎ 211 846; Piața 14 Decembrie 1989; s/d with bathroom €30/40.50, without bathroom €25.50/30) Following the city-wide trend, the rooms here have been freshened up, but then so have the prices. Shared bathrooms are clean, private bathrooms are new and immaculate – worth the upgrade. Get a room away from the noisy street.

Hotel Studis (☎ 0332-107 152; www.hotelstudis.ro; Str Otilia Cazimir 10; d €31.50; ☎) Brand new, with the aroma to prove it, this hard-to-find place lurks at the end of a tiny alley behind the giant Universitatea Petre Andrei building. All rooms have internet. Breakfast not included.

Majestic Pension & Restaurant (☎ 255 557; www.pensiuneamajestic.ro; Str Petru Rares 7; s/d €47/57; ☎) Just completed, this modern, family-owned four-star *pensiune* is impeccably central. Moody, low-lit rooms have minibar, internet and large bathrooms. The on-site restaurant has a French-trained chef.

Little Texas (☎ 272 545; Str Moara de Vant 31; s/d €65/78; www.littletexas.org; ☎) Located halfway between the city and the airport (10 minutes' drive from the centre) and run by Lone Star state expats, this four-star hotel embraces all

things Texas, including a certain president. Plunder such amenities as internet, cable television, minibar, balcony with panoramic city views, room service, laundry service and an authentic Tex-Mex restaurant, serving the richest mud cake in Romania.

Hotel Traian (☎ 266 666; Piața Unirii 1; s/d/ste €63/79/97) The multilingual staff here will make you feel at home in this elegant hotel, designed by Gustave Eiffel. The high-ceiling rooms are awash in old-world comfort, with large, modern bathrooms.

Eating

The gruff, Soviet-style service that once prevailed in Iași eateries is fading fast. Restaurants are appearing at an eye-popping rate, staffed by fresh-faced university students who will invariably speak passable English.

CAFÉS & QUICK EATS

There are fast-food courts inside and across the street from the huge Western-style Iulius Mall, 3km southeast of the centre.

ourpick Family Pizza (☎ 262 400; Str IC Brătianu 31; mains €1-2.50; ☎ 8am-11pm) With the rest of Europe gaily butchering pizza – Italy notwithstanding, obviously – you might not expect Romania to be home to some of the best pizza in the world. Family Pizza stands out, offering 25 types of pizza and an adjoining pastry shop. The terrace is the perfect summertime hangout, while waitresses in dangerously short skirts serve up pizza heaven to a backdrop of Romanian pop music. Delivery service available.

Casa Universitatilor (☎ 340 029; B-dul Carol I, 9; mains €1-3) Meals are geared for destitute students, but the lime-tree-festooned terrace is great for a lazy beer.

La Cao (☎ 240 485; Str Arcu 8; mains €2-3; ☎ 11am-11pm) An excellent Chinese restaurant with a lengthy English menu and speedy service.

Metro Pizza (☎ 276 040; Str Străpungerea Silvestru 8; mains €2-3; ☎ 9am-1am) Resist that just-off-the-train McDonald's urge and dine at this joint opposite the station.

RESTAURANTS

Trei Sarmale (☎ 237 255; Str Bucium 52; mains €1.20-5; ☎ 9am-2am) Revel in your touristness! This traditional Romanian restaurant embraces kitsch with its folkier-than-thou décor and live music, but the food is mouthwatering. Set inside a 17th-century inn about 5km south of the town centre, this could be a fun place for

a small group if you get into the mood. The Bucium winery (p263) outlet shed is across the road. Call before you head out there as it is often booked by tour groups. Take a taxi (€3) or bus 30 or 46 from Piața Mihai Eminescu and ask the driver for Trei Sarmale.

Pub Baron (☎ 254 547; Str Sfântu Lazăr 52; mains €2-4; ☎ 24hr) It looks like a pub, with its cosy wooden interior impregnated with beer suds, but it's also a great eating option, particularly the summer terrace. The menu is heavy on fresh grills, cooked in cast ovens, but there are many salads and fish dishes too.

Casa Pogor (☎ 243 006; Str Vasile Pogor 4; mains €2-4; ☎ 11am-midnight) Where to sit? In the insanely cosy (if damp) basement that used to house the famed Junimea wine cellar; the elegant main dining hall furnished with antiques; or on the multi-tiered terrace overlooking a quiet square? Focus on the great atmosphere and ignore the dreadful service. While not extraordinary, the food is good and the menu (with some veggie meals) unexpectedly varied.

Ginger Ale (☎ 276 017; Str Săulescu 23; mains €2-5; ☎ 11am-1am) This place feels like an old-fashioned lunch café with antique furniture and a cosy dining room. Take advantage of 20% to 50% discounts daily from noon to 4pm. Dinner is classier, with reservations recommended on weekends.

Casa Bolta Rece (☎ 212 255; Str Rece 10; mains €2-6; ☎ 11am-11pm) Set in a 1786 house, Iași's formerly top dining experience has been overshadowed by spunky newcomers, but is still worth a novelty visit. The patchy service ranges from curt to slap-you-on-the-back friendly. Eat in the wine cellar or on the pleasant terrace and skip the starchy dining room. English, both written and spoken, is adventurously scant.

Caraffa (☎ 262 626; 2nd level, Iulius Mall, B-dul Tudor Vladimirescu; mains €3-7; ☎ 11am-11pm) The menu offers Italian and Mexican, but you should aim for the Romanian dishes and the salads, which are startlingly fresh. Try the *Tochitura Moldovenesca* – roughly 'Moldovan Heart Attack' – with pork, traditional cheese, polenta, eggs, bacon and sausage. Time of death...

Casa Lavric (☎ 229 960; Str Sf Atanasie 21; mains €4.60; ☎ 11am-11pm) Up the hill from Casa Bolta Rece is one of Iași's newest dining options, owned by singer-musician Laura Lavric and decorated in classic musical instruments. The menu – including a short vegetarian page – is devoid of English, but the staff's language

skills more than make up for this. Reservations required on weekends.

SELF-CATERING

The central **market** (☎ 8am-4pm) is your fresh fruit and vegetables source. Below street level, it has entrances on Str Costache Negri and Str Anastasie Panu (look for the glass dome). There's a small supermarket above in Hala Centrala. **Billa** (Str Arcu 29; ☎ 8am-10pm Mon-Sat, 9am-6pm Sun) is a fully stocked supermarket with takeaway food and communist-era long lines. Smaller, 24-hour markets line B-dul Ștefan cel Mare.

Drinking

Quinta Café (☎ 268 447; Str Sfântu Sava 10; admission Sat & Sun €3.50; ☎ noon-midnight Sun-Thu, noon-5am Fri & Sat) High ceilings, cushy sofas, antique furniture and wood panelling give this lounge bar a familiar feel; in fact, this is a restored grand house. The weekday subdued music and lighting gives way to pounding bass and darkness on weekends.

City Café (Str Sfântu Lazăr 34; ☎ 24hr) A distinctly more adult crowd frequents this high-tech, blue-lit, ultracool bar to imbibe its many cocktails.

Terasa Corso (☎ 276 143; www.corsoterasa.ro; Str Alexandru Lăpușneanu 11; ☎ 11am-midnight Mon, 9am-1am Tue-Sun) The concept of a bar is stretched in this huge, amphitheatre-shaped pub with a well-tended garden in the middle. Its spaciousness is great for large groups. Free wi-fi.

Blackout (☎ 0744-900 604; Str Grigore Ureche 1-3; ☎ 8am-2am) This basement bar-cum-discotheque has the ventilation of a bank vault, but it flouts cookie-cutter Euro-Pop for refreshingly varied music sets that bounce from Madonna and Katrina and the Waves to Ray Charles and Fat Boy Slim.

Entertainment

Vasile Alecsandri National Theatre (☎ 316 778; Str Agatha Bărescu 18) and the **Opera Română** (☎ 211 144) are in the same impressive neo-baroque building. Alternative performances are held in the smaller studio hall (*sală studio*) upstairs, which has its entrance on Str Cuza Vodă. For advance bookings go to the **Agenția de Opera** (☎ 255 999; B-dul Ștefan cel Mare 8; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat). Tickets cost from €1.50, with 50% student discounts.

Lucașăru Theatre (☎ 315 966; Str Grigore Ureche 5) Behind Hotel Moldova, this theatre puts on

very interesting pieces geared to children and young people.

Philharmonic (Filarmonica; ☎ 212 509; www.filarmonica.ro; Str Cuza Vodă 29; 📺 box office 10am-1pm & 5-7pm Mon-Fri) When the much-revered Iași State Philharmonic Orchestra is in town its concerts are massively popular; it performs 200 concerts per season, across Romania and abroad. Concerts of some kind are usually held on Friday nights. Tickets start at €2 with 50% student discounts.

Viper Club (Iulius Mall; 📺 24hr, disco 11pm-4am) This rainy-day entertainment emporium features bowling alleys, billiards and video games. Come night-time it turns into a house-music haven.

Cinema Victoria (☎ 268 012; Piața Unirii 5; tickets €1.50) See your favourite Hollywood schlock-buster, with Romanian subtitles, in this massive, stark theatre with a megaphone-quality sound system.

Shopping

Str Alexandru Lapusneanu, leading from the northwest corner of Piața Unirii, has interesting used book and antique stores.

Hala Centrala (Str Anastasie Panu) Has kiosks selling jewellery. Look for dirt-cheap pieces made from Romanian amber (*chihlimblar*) set in Turkish silver – glass and knick-knacks.

Iulius Mall (B-dul Tudor Vladimirescu) Fully westernised, it will alleviate the strongest case of culture shock.

Moldova Mall (Str Anastasie Panu) This flashy new place was nearing completion at the time of writing.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Tarom (☎ 267 768; www.tarom.ro; Str Arcu 3-5; 📺 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) has daily flights to Bucharest. **Carpatair** (☎ 215 295; www.carpatair.ro; Str Cuza Vodă 2; 📺 9am-6pm Mon-Fri) has flights to Timișoara and onwards from Monday to Saturday.

BUS

The **central bus station** (Autogara Iași Vest; ☎ 214 720), completely hidden behind the Auto Centre building, has become busier in recent years with all the private maxitaxi firms opening, so it has started to expand – in chaos. Buses, minibuses and maxitaxis leave from the main lot, but some companies have started using the Billa supermarket parking lot, a kilometre away. Innumerable daily buses or maxitaxis leave for Târgu Neamț (€2.85), Suceava (€5.15), Bucha-

rest (€11.40), Bacău (€4.60) and Piatra Neamț (€4.30). Occasional maxitaxis to Târgu Neamț depart from Billa and a mishmash fleet of regional maxitaxis leaves at whim from a parking lot directly across from the train station – ask any of the touts on hand for details.

Maxitaxis to Chișinău leave from outside the Billa supermarket five times daily, while up to six daily buses (*much* slower) to Chișinău (€5.70) depart from the bus station. If you don't acquire a Moldovan visa (p355) in advance, have a completed visa application (www.travisa.com/Moldova/moldova_visa.pdf) ready at the border or risk being left behind by an impatient bus driver.

Tickets for the daily bus to Istanbul (€80, 24 hours), which departs from Billa, are sold at **Ortadoğu Tur** (☎ 257 000; Str Arcu) across the street.

TRAIN

Characters from a Kafka novel must have devised Iași's train station system. Nearly all trains arrive and depart from the **Gară Centrală train station** (Str Garii), which is also called **Gară Mare** and **Gară du Nord**. Trains to Chișinău, however, depart from the **Gară Niculina** (also called **Gară International**) on B-dul Nicolae Iorga, even though tickets for the trip must be bought from the so-called **Gară Mică** (the one with the sign saying 'Niculina' on it), 500m south on Aleea Niculina. The **Agentie de Voiaj CFR** (☎ 242 620; Piața Unirii 10; 📺 7.30am-8.30pm Mon-Fri) sells advance tickets, while the train station only sells tickets one hour before departure.

There are six daily trains to Bucharest (€14.50, seven hours), one to Galați and Mangalia and three slow, crowded trains to Timișoara (16 hours), affectionately known as 'Horror Trains' by locals. Trains throughout the day go to Ungheni, a border town just 21km away. *Do not* take this train unless you already have a visa for Moldova, as there are no visa processing facilities at this crossing.

If you are planning to visit the monasteries in Southern Bucovina, take a train to Suceava (two hours) then change trains, or take a train bound for Oradea and get off at the Gura Humorului stop. To get to Târgu Neamț from Iași you have to change at Pașcani.

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Sadly a taxi – or possibly an entrepreneurial airline-crew van-driver – is your only option for getting into the city. A taxi to Piața

Unirii should cost about €4.50. Don't let a van driver charge you more than five lei (€1.50) per person. You'll probably be dropped at Hotel Traian on Piața Unirii.

Bus 35 and any number of maxitaxis run between Piața Eminescu and Copou Park, stopping outside the university en route. Tram 3 runs between the bus and train stations and the centre.

AROUND IAȘI

Rolling hills, lush vineyards and pretty villages surround Moldavia's 'town of seven hills'. At the **Bucium winery**, 7km south of Iași, though no organised tours are available you can taste a variety of sweet wines as well as Bucium champagne out of the tiny roadside outlet shop across from Trei Sarmale (p260). Bring an empty water bottle, the bigger the better, which can be filled with the wine of your choice for a pittance. At weekends, Iași residents picnic in **Bârnova Forest**, 16km south of the city, accessible by train.

Cotnari

Cotnari is 54km northwest of Iași. Its **vineyards**, dating from 1448, are among the most famed in Romania, producing four to six million bottles of sweet white wine a year and exporting to the US, Canada, England, Italy, Spain and Japan, among others. Legend says Ștefan cel Mare described it as 'wine given by God'.

There was a Geto-Dacian stronghold on Cătălina Hill (280m) in Cotnari from the 4th century BC. In 1491 Ștefan cel Mare built a small church in the village and in 1562 a Latin college was founded. During this period French monks arrived bringing grape stocks, which they planted in the village, and by the end of the 19th century Cotnari wine had scooped up prizes at international exhibitions. King Michael I started building a small **royal palace** here in 1947, abandoning it half-complete the same year. It was restored in 1966 and today houses Cotnari Winery's administration.

The **Cotnari Winery** (☎ 232-730 393; www.cotnari.ro; 📺 7am-3.30pm) hosts wine-tasting sessions and tours of its cellars and factory (by appointment only). Every year on 14 September, wine connoisseurs flock to Cotnari to get ripped in celebration of the harvest.

The winery's most popular wines include white table wines such as *frâncușa* (dry), *cătălina* (semisweet), and the sweet, golden *grasă* and *tămâioasă* dessert wines.

From the Cotnari shop in the village, continue on the road towards Botoșani and Hârlău. The factory is 200m further on the left.

Visit **Cliven Turism** (☎ 258 326; www.reservation.ro; B-dul Ștefan cel Mare 8-12; 📺 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat) or go to www.antrec.ro to arrange private rooms in Cotnari. There are *cazare* (room) signs in windows throughout the village.

Three local trains from Iași to Hârlău stop at Cotnari daily (1¼ hours). Maxitaxis leave hourly.

TÂRGU NEAMȚ

☎ 233 / pop 20,496

You know that notoriously dusty, god-awful town 40km from where you grew up that made everyone audibly gag at the mere utterance of its name? That's Târgu Neamț (literally, German Market Town). The only reasons to come here are to visit the impressive ruins of a 14th-century citadel and stock up before heading to the Neamț, Agapia and Văratec Monasteries.

Considered Moldavia's finest fortress, **Neamț Citadel** (Cetatea Neamțului; ☎ 0744-702 415; admission adult/child €0.80/0.40; 📺 10am-6pm Tue-Sun), perched just high enough above town to make you wish there was a chairlift, is admirably huge, sufficiently ancient and fun to poke around in. Built by Petru I Mușat in 1359, it was attacked by Hungarians in 1395 and by Turks in 1476, and then conquered by Polish forces in 1691, which explains its semi-ruined state. To get there, follow signs for 'Cetatea Neamțului' along B-dul Ștefan cel Mare. You must park your car at the foot of the citadel and take the calf-blasting but pleasant hike up the hill.

Casa Arcașului (☎ 790 699; Str Cetații 40; s/d/tr €19.80/22.70/25.50) is a bright hotel-restaurant with a quiet, exotic location at the foot of the citadel. Rooms are simple but decent, equipped with cable TV, comfortable beds and small shower-toilet hybrids. The adjoining restaurant (mains €1.50 to €3.50) serves Romanian fare and has live music nightly.

Doina (☎ 790 270; www.hotel-doina.ro; Str Mihail Kogalniceanu 6-8; d €28.30), closer to the bus station, is an unremarkable place. Each of the tired but comfortable rooms has a balcony, minibar and cable TV. Breakfast is not included. The attached restaurant has a nice summer terrace.

After exiting Târgu Neamț's **bus station** (☎ 790 474; Str Cuza Vodă 32), turn right for B-dul Mihai Eminescu and B-dul Ștefan cel Mare

and turn left for the train station (1.2km away). There are eight daily buses and maxitaxis to Piatra Neamț, six to Iași, two to both Brașov and Suceava, and five weekly to Bucharest. To reach the monasteries, there are five daily buses to Agapia, four to Văratec, three to Neamț, and one each to Sihăstrea and Gura Humorului. The train station is a lonely place, with only four daily trains to Pașcani, where changes to Iași and other destinations are possible.

MONASTERIES AROUND TÂRGU NEAMȚ

📍 233

Târgu Neamț is ringed by beautiful monasteries noted not for their outstanding artistic treasures but rather as Romania's most active religious centres. Agapia and Văratec are called monasteries even though they house nuns. Visitors to this area are still regarded as strange and even inauspicious by the locals. It's best to lock your car, as theft and vandalism are not uncommon. In the villages of Agapia and Văratec, dozens of attractive homes have *cazare* signs in their windows, and guesthouses abound. To access the Văratec, Agapia and Sihla monasteries comfortably on foot, aim for a guesthouse on the road to Agapia, which offers a shortcut back-road leading to Văratec.

Neamț Monastery

Neamț Monastery is the oldest and the largest male monastery in Romania. Founded in the 14th century by Petru I Mușat, it doubled as a protective citadel. Ștefan cel Mare built the large church we see today; it remains a classic example of the Moldavian style initiated in his time. The painting in the porch and narthex dates from Mușat's time, while in the altar, the nave and the room in which the tombs are located, the painting dates from 1497. In the fortified compound are a **medieval art museum** and a **memorial house** to novelist Mihail Sadoveanu (1880–1961). The library, with 18,000 rare books, is the largest of any Romanian monastery.

Three daily buses make the 15km journey from Târgu Neamț, yet you'll probably find it easier to hitchhike along the road (15B) toward Ceahlău.

Agapia Monastery

The turn-off for **Agapia Monastery** (📍 244 736; admission adult/child €0.80/0.50) is 4km south of Târgu Neamț towards Piatra Neamț. Within the confines of the monastery walls live 400-

plus nuns who toil in the fields, tend vegetable gardens, weave carpets and make embroideries for tourists.

Agapia consists of two monasteries. The larger and flashier **Agapia din Vale** (Monastery in the Valley) is at the end of the village of Agapia itself. Built by Gavril Coci (Vasile Lupu's brother) between 1642 and 1644, its current neoclassical façade dates from reconstructions between 1882 and 1903. Between 1858 and 1861, the young Nicolae Grigorescu (1838–1907) painted every reasonable square centimetre of the church's interior with stunning murals, featuring heebie-jeebie eyes that stare at you whichever way you turn. A small **museum** (🕒 10am–7pm) off to the right contains icons from the 16th and 17th centuries. The main buildings are modern and of little architectural interest, but wandering around the grounds, past the well-tended gardens of the nuns' houses, is a treat. Slow, funds-starved construction is ongoing at Agapia din Vale, disrupting their usual capacity to house visitors.

Agapia din Deal (Agapia on the Hill; admission free), also called Agapia Veche (Old Agapia), is the second monastery, 2.2km from the main monastery complex (follow the road to the right, go through the charming old section of Agapia, full of wooden homes, to the sign-posted dirt road veering off to the right). It's absolutely worth the trip uphill to see this quiet, humble monastery – but only in a powerful car and not after rain, as some sections of the gravel road are extremely steep. Less ornate than Agapia din Vale, and with only modern frescoes, it nonetheless charms with its peaceful ambience and wooden buildings. It was built by Lady Elena, wife of Petru Rareș, from 1642 to 1647.

A dirt road in front of the lower monastery veers to the left towards the small and highly worthwhile **Sihla Monastery** (Schitu Sihlei; admission free). Some 30 monks live here, on a small plateau in the hills. The central church is small, wooden and sombre, almost touching in appearance. Mother Nature's assistance has made this one of the area's more visually pleasing religious sites, mainly due to the nearby cave of Pious Saint Teodora. Teodora supposedly lived in a small cave for 60 years; it's possible to visit her 'home', eerily lit by candles, among the rocks and boulders above the hermitage. Seeing the slab of rock she called a 'bed' certainly gives one pause. Her relics are now in Pecherska Monastery in Kyiv.

Sihla can house a limited number of visitors but, with no phone, reservations have to be made through divine channels.

Take care not to disturb, or be disturbed by, the clutch of *pustnici* (extreme hermit monks) in the area, who regularly drop to their knees in prayer when the urge strikes – and remain in that position for hours, day and night.

All buses between Târgu Neamț and Piatra Neamț stop in Săcălușești village, from where it is a 6km hike along a narrow road to the lower monastery; the upper monastery is a further 30-minute walk uphill.

Three daily buses also go from Târgu Neamț to the lower monastery, listed on bus timetables as 'Complex Turistic Agapia'. From Piatra Neamț, there are two buses daily.

Văratec Monastery

Six hundred nuns live at **Văratec Monastery** (admission free), 7km south of the Agapia turn-off along 15C. Founded in 1785, the complex houses an **icon museum** and a small embroidery school. The **grave of poet Veronica Micle**, Mihai Eminescu's great love, lies within the monastery walls. She committed suicide on 4 August 1889, two months after Eminescu's death. Whitewashed in 1841, the main church incorporates neoclassical elements in its design. Compared to other nearby monasteries, Văratec looks like a modern villa crossed with a small botanic garden. The interior is lavishly decorated in paintings, frescoes, silver and bronze impressions and an opulent chandelier.

You can hike to Văratec from Agapia (two hours) and to **Secu, Sihăstria and Schitu Sihlei Monasteries** along clearly marked trails. There are four daily buses to Văratec from Târgu Neamț.

Vânători-Neamț Forest Park

The forest and woods surrounding these monasteries and stretching north to the village of Groși are protected as the **Vânători-Neamț Forest Park** (📍 206 001; www.vanatoriipark.ro). Its headquarters and information centre are in Văratec, on the main road to the monastery. A visit to the **information centre** (🕒 8am–4pm Mon–Fri) is highly recommended before any drive or hike through the region; it has detailed maps of hiking trails and can alert you as to whether any side roads have been closed or blocked. Within the park is the small Dragoș

Vodă Bison Reserve, where six bison live in semicaptivity in an enclave open to visitors. There are also small reserves protecting old patches of oak and birch forest.

PIATRA NEAMȚ

📍 233 / pop 107,875

Piatra Neamț (German Rock), 43km south of Târgu Neamț, is a pleasant, picturesque town, sunk in a valley and embraced by velvety round hills. Perched above the town to the east is the rocky Pietricica Mountain. To the southwest stands Cernegura Mountain, flanked by an artificial lake, Lake Bâta Doamnei, at its westernmost foot. Cozla Mountain, which towers over Piatra Neamț to the north, is now a huge park. It has enough going for it to offer a happy day's wandering, and makes a nice base for exploring the surrounding landscape.

The area around Piatra Neamț has been settled since Neolithic times. In the 15th century Ștefan cel Mare founded a princely court here.

Orientation & Information

B-dul Republicii leads north from Piața Mareșal Ion Antonescu towards Piața Ștefan cel Mare, where most facilities are located. The old town is located immediately northwest of this square, at the foot of Cozla Mountain.

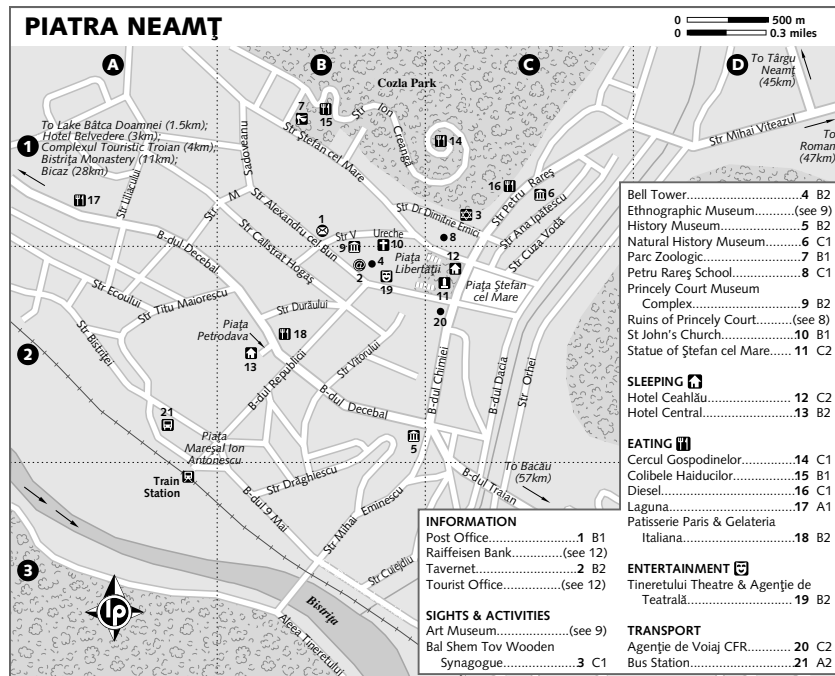
ATMs can be found, among other places, in hotels and along Piața Ștefan cel Mare; change travellers cheques at **Raiffeisen** (Piața Ștefan cel Mare 3; 🕒 8.30am–6.30pm Mon–Fri, 9am–2pm Sat).

Even if you don't need to post any letters, it's worth popping into the **post office** (📍 232 222; Str Alexandru cel Bun 21; 🕒 7am–8pm Mon–Fri, 10am–1pm Sat) for its old-fashioned wooden interiors. There are several internet cafés in town – try super-cool **Tavernet** (Piața Ștefan cel Mare 1; per hr €0.60; 🕒 9am–midnight).

There's a tourist office in the lobby of **Hotel Ceahlău** (📍 219 990; Piața Ștefan cel Mare 3; 🕒 7am–8pm) that is staffed by ladies short on English but long on the desire to help. If you become lost in translation, summon the infallibly helpful Gaby from the hotel's front desk.

Sights

Piața Ștefan cel Mare is the city's heart and one of Romania's more picturesque central squares. A **statue** of the beloved Ștefan cel Mare stands proudly among landscaped flowerbeds. Just west of here is a small pedestrianised square where the remains of Piatra Neamț's historic



heart lie in a series of museums and historical buildings that are grouped into the **Princely Court Museum complex** (Curtea Domnească; ☎ 216 808; www.neamt.ro/cmj in Romanian; admission adult per museum €0.40; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun), founded in 1497 by Ștefan cel Mare.

Towering over the square is the lovely, sombre 1498 **St John's Church** (Biserica Sfântu Ioan) with its 10m-high bell tower. Just opposite are the small **Art Museum** and **Ethnographic Museum**. The art museum has mostly landscapes and still lifes, but the abstract art on the upper floor and modern, fanciful cityscapes in the 1st-floor section are interesting. Ask inside the museums for entrance to the archaeological digs across the street under the **Petru Rareș School** (Liceul Petru Rareș), where ruins of the princely court were found. Directly behind the school is **Bal Shem Tov Wooden Synagogue** (☎ 223 815; Str Dr Dimitrie Emeric; donations requested; ☎ 8am-noon Mon, Thu & Sat or by appointment). A visit here is very nearly a day trip, as arranging entrance can take half the day and the kindly old man who finally appears will jabber at you (in Romanian) for the other half. The original synagogue on this site was built in 1450 (only the foundation remains). The current

wooden structure dates from 1760. The tiny, cluttered interior, decorated with Jewish artefacts and paintings, will be beautified with funding from the World Monuments Fund Jewish Heritage Grant Programme. If you have trouble rousing anyone at the synagogue, try sticking your head in the wooden gate 20 metres down the hill and knocking on the office door.

The local **History Museum** (☎ 218 108; Str Mihai Eminescu 10; admission €0.40; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) runs through the area's history from the Stone Age onwards. There is also a small **Natural History Museum** (Muzeul de Științe Naturale; ☎ 224 211; Str Petru Rareș 26; admission €0.40; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat).

Cozla Park is a sprawling, forested park north of the centre, popular with strollers and city-type hikers. On the way along Str Ștefan cel Mare is the tiny **Parc Zoologic** (admission €0.30; ☎ 9am-7pm), a seasonal, outdoor, surprisingly pleasant mini-zoo, with wolves and baboons.

Festivals & Events

Every year at the end of May, Piatra Neamț hosts a week-long **International Theatre Festival**, attracting theatre companies from all over Europe.

Sleeping

Search **Antrec** (www.antrec.ro) for lovely *pensiunes* (guesthouses) outside the city; in general, they are more pleasant than the accommodation you'll find in town.

Hotel Ceahlău (☎ 219 990; Piața Ștefan cel Mare 3; s/d/ste €23/45.50/71; ☎ ☎ ☎) Marring the town's skyline is this 12-storey three-star hotel. The upshot is that the bluer-than-blue rooms have balconies with excellent views. The 12th-floor bar is a family-friendly scenic outlook by day and a bachelor-only lapdance bar by night.

Hotel Belvedere (☎ 261 470; Str Petru Movilă 325; d/tr €25/30) Another three-star, overwhelmingly blue hotel option is the Belvedere, 3km northwest of the city, with an attached restaurant-bar (mains €1.50 to €3). The bright rooms have soft beds, refrigerator and cable TV.

Complexul Turistic Troian (☎ 241 444; eurotipo@ambra.ro; Str Petru Movilă 270; d/tr/ste €30/38/48) Just 4km west of the city, this large 17-room complex has quiet, spacious, rustic-themed rooms and a fun two-floor dining hall with live music courtesy of a geezer with a Casio keyboard. All maxitaxis and buses from Piatra Neamț to Bicaz will stop here upon request. Lake Bâta Doamnei, a good swimming spot, is nearby. Breakfast is not included, but the restaurant does a fair-priced spread.

Hotel Central (☎ 216 230; www.hotelcentral.ro; Piața Petrodava 1-3; s/d/ste 38/54/70; ☎ ☎) This huge concrete tower looks less dreary when lit up at night. Rooms are comfortably furnished, though due for renovation. Skip the exorbitantly priced post-communist dining room.

Eating & Drinking

There are several small cafés and pizzerias along Piața Ștefan cel Mare.

Patisserie Paris & Gelateria Italiana (☎ 234 330; B-dul Decebal 14; ☎ 9am-9pm) Choose between superb *gelato* on one side and sumptuous pastries on the other.

Cercul Gospodinelor (☎ 223 845; Str Ion Creangă; mains €2-5; ☎ noon-10pm) Located at the top of the road up to Cozla Park, this is a more modern Romanian option favoured for its panoramic views and tasty food.

Diesel (☎ 222 424; Str Petru Rareș 21; mains €3; ☎ 9am-2am) A slick, pseudo high-tech place adorned in chrome and black leather, it has a wide and varied menu of inexpensive meals and slaps them out to the tune of thumping pop tunes;

the thumping turns to pounding late at night when it doubles as a bar/disco.

Laguna (☎ 232 121; B-dul Decebal 67; mains €4.50; ☎ 10am-midnight) A recommended pizza joint, this modern place decorated in neon red and blues also has a few billiard tables. In the second level, above the kids store.

Colibele Haiducilor (☎ 213 909; Str Ion Creangă 1; mains €4.50; ☎ 8am-12am) An outdoor pub-restaurant with oddly folk-costumed waitresses, set among an otherwise pleasant lush forest. The menu is limited to standard Romanian fare.

Entertainment

Performances at **Tineretului Theatre** (☎ 211 036; Piața Ștefan cel Mare 1) are usually held on weekend evenings; get your tickets at the Agenție Teatrală adjoining the theatre.

Getting There & Away

The **Agenție de Voiaj CFR** (☎ 211 034; Piața Ștefan cel Mare 10; ☎ 7am-7.30pm Mon-Fri) sells tickets for the nine daily trains to Bacău, of which only the red-eye ends at Bucharest. There are also five daily trains to Bicaz. The **bus station** (☎ 211 210; Str Bistriței 1) is near the train station. There are 11 daily maxitaxis to Bacău (€2.20) and Bucharest (€9.40), and 11 buses and maxitaxis to Târgu Neamț (€1.40). Two daily buses also go to Agapia and one to Gura Humorului. Other buses head to Suceava, Iași, Brașov, Miercurea Ciuc, Vatra Dornei and Gheorgheni.

BICAZ & THE CEHLĂU MASSIF

☎ 233
This dizzyingly beautiful corner of western Moldavia is a relatively unexplored region offering great hiking opportunities and picturesque mountains and valleys. Together with the Bicaz Gorges and Lacu Roșu (p269), this area offers a varied tableau of Romanian landscapes.

Heading 24km west from Piața Neamț, there's an unassuming turn-off to the relatively well-off village of **Tarcău**, which spreads out for 4km along a beautiful valley nestled between the Măgura Tarcău and Câmpilor mountain peaks. It feels cut off from time as it stretches lazily along the little Tarcău River. There's a pretty church and not much more here than peace, quiet and bucolic scenery.

Bicaz (population 9000), 4km further west on the confluence of the Bicaz and Bistrița Rivers, is a sorry-looking town with little to

decent restaurant and bar, and hiking trails start directly outside the front door.

Getting There & Away

In addition to a daily bus from Gheorgheni, the daily Miercurea Ciuc–Piatra Neamţ and the twice daily Braşov–Piatra Neamţ buses all stop at Lacu Roşu.

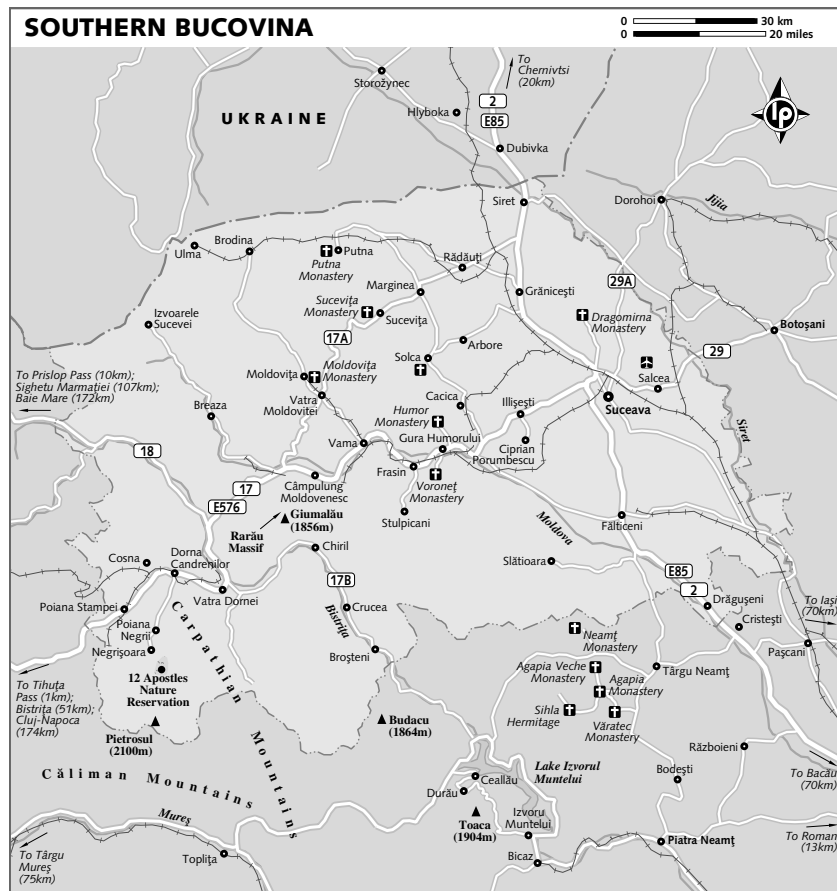
SOUTHERN BUCOVINA

Southern Bucovina rivals Maramureş as a rural paradise, with the added perk of its plentiful Unesco-recognised painted churches, considered among the greatest artistic monuments of Europe. Wondrous religious art and

fantastic churches notwithstanding, Southern Bucovina is bursting with folklore, picturesque villages and endless bucolic scenery.

Southern Bucovina embraces the north-western region of present-day Moldavia; Northern Bucovina is in Ukraine. In 1775 the region was annexed by the Austro-Hungarian Empire and remained in Habsburg hands until 1918, when Bucovina was returned to Romania. Northern Bucovina was annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940 and incorporated into Ukraine, splitting families apart.

While coordinating transport between the remote villages can be challenging, there are plenty of alternatives to allow you to get the most out of your visit, including hitchhiking, biking, car hire or arranging a private tour.



SUCEAVA

☎ 230 / pop 111,200

Barring the inevitable *țuică* binge, Suceava won't exactly make your ears smoke with excitement. At first glance, it appears to be one concrete block connected to another by crumbling concrete promenades. Yet there's a palpable charm to the city that, combined with its worthwhile attractions, should leave visitors fulfilled. Furthermore, its stout and exceptional tourism infrastructure, unmatched outside of Transylvania, caters to every possible tourism desire in Bucovina and beyond.

The capital of Moldavia from 1388 to 1565, Suceava was a thriving commercial centre on the Lviv–Istanbul trading route. By the end of Ștefan cel Mare's reign in 1504, Suceava had approximately 40 churches. It fell into decline after the Turks bulldozed through in 1675.

During the Ceaușescu regime in the 1980s, Suceava became notorious for its toxic pulp and paper works (still in operation), which churned out 20 tonnes of cellulose and fibre waste a day, causing respiratory and nervous disorders known as Suceava Syndrome. Recognising that having the word 'syndrome' affixed to the city name was bad for PR and morale, civic leaders eventually installed new filters and pollution has greatly decreased. The local economy is still dependent on forestry, wood-processing, chemical production and mining for its survival.

The colourful Moldavian Furrier Fair is held here every year in mid-August. Alternatively there's Suceava Days (late June), yet another religious-holiday-turned-street-party, with biblical amounts of beer, street food and music.

Orientation

Piața 22 Decembrie is the centre of town. Suceava has two train stations, Suceava and Suceava Nord, both north of the centre and easily reached by trolleybus or maxitaxi.

From Suceava station, cross the street and buy a ticket at a kiosk for buess 2 and 4 or maxitaxis 6 and 9 to the centre of town. From Suceava Nord take bus 5 or maxitaxi 1 and 12 (pay the driver).

MAPS & PUBLICATIONS

Amco's *Suceava* includes a county map showing the location of the monasteries. There are several booklets and guides to the monasteries, some of which have rudimentary maps. A nicely illustrated and helpful book-

let is *Bucovina...The Monastic Archipelago* (€3) published by Tipo and available at local bookshops.

Information BOOKSHOPS

Alexandria (☎ 530 337; Str Mihai Viteazu 23; ☎ 8am-7.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat)

Casa Cărții (☎ 530 337; Str Nicolae Bălcescu 8; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat)

INTERNET ACCESS

Assist (☎ 523 044; Piața 22 Decembrie; per hr €0.50; ☎ 9am-11pm) Also provides a range of printing and digital services.

MONEY

There are several ATMs on Piața 22 Decembrie and along Str Ștefan cel Mare.

Raiffeisen Bank (Str Nicolai Bălcescu 2; ☎ 8.30am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat) Provides the usual services.

POST & TELEPHONE

Post office (☎ 512 222; Str Dimitrie Onciuc; ☎ 7am-7pm Mon-Fri, 8am-4pm Sat)

Telephone office (nr Str Nicolae Bălcescu & Str Onciuc; ☎ 7am-9pm Mon-Fri, 8am-4pm Sat)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Suceava is bursting with tourist resources. Start while you're still at home by visiting www.lasuceava.ro.

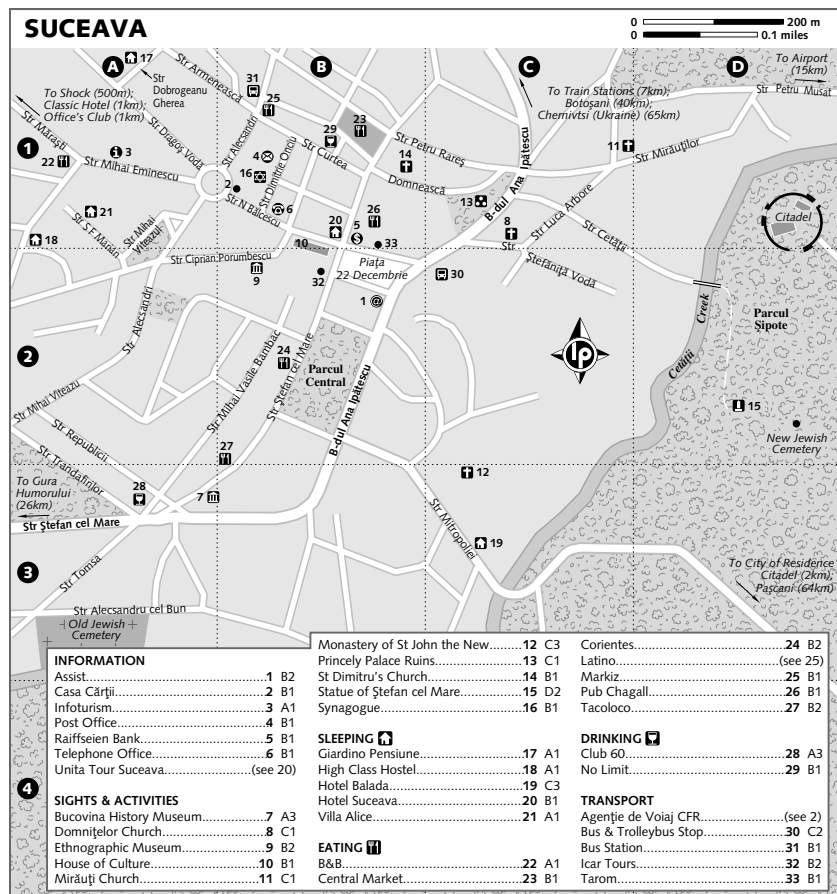
Ciprian Slemcho (☎ 0744-292 588; www.mtour.go.ro) Leading tours around Suceava and Maramureş for eight years, Ciprian is a specialist in both religion and history. He's a can-do kind of guy; if it's humanly possible he'll make it happen, including booking a room at no charge.

Infoturism (☎ 551 241; infoturism@suceava.rdsnet.ro; Str Mihai Eminescu 8; ☎ 8am-8pm) This is the official tourism office of Suceava county, headed by multilingual dynamo Mircea Țănescu. It's the source on all things Romanian.

Unita Tour Suceava (☎ 523 024; unitatour.sv@unita-turism.ro; Str Nicolae Bălcescu 2; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, 8am-5pm Sat) Inside Hotel Suceava, this small office can arrange day-long monastery tours with multilingual guides with just a few hours' notice for about €80 to €90 (€20 to €25 extra for guide) per group.

Sights

The bulky **House of Culture** (Casa de Cultură) is at the western end of the city's main square, Piața 22 Decembrie. North of the bus stop along B-dul Ana Ipătescu lie the foundations of the 15th-century **Princely Palace**. To the west



is the impressive **St Dimitru's Church** (1535), built by Petru Rareș in an exciting, clubbed Byzantine style typical of 16th-century Moldavian churches. Traces of the original exterior frescoes can still be seen and the interior has been recently restored.

Approximately 250m northeast is the lovely **Mirăuți Church** (1375–91), the original Moldavian coronation church, which was rebuilt in the 19th century. This was the original seat of the Moldavian bishop, and it was here that Ștefan cel Mare became Moldavia's ruler. Of particular note is the *Prayer on the Mount of Olives* fresco in the nave. Another outstanding church is on the corner of B-dul Ana Ipătescu and Str Ștefanița Vodă. Built by Vasile Lupu in 1643, **Domnițelor Church** (Princesses' Church)

is one of the city's loveliest monuments, despite its unfortunate location on a busy street. There is an old well in the small graveyard surrounding it.

West of Piața 22 Decembrie is Hanul Domnesc, a 16th-century guesthouse that now houses an **Ethnographic Museum** (☎ 216 439; Str Ciprian Porumbescu 5; admission adult/child €0.60/0.30; ☎ 9am–5pm Tue–Sun), with a good collection of folk costumes. Next to the post office on Str Dimitrie Onciul is the town's only surviving **synagogue** (1870). Prior to WWII, 18 synagogues served the local Jewish community.

Following Str Ștefan cel Mare south past **Parcul Central** (Central Park) is the worthwhile **Bucovina History Museum** (Muzeul Național al Bucovinei; ☎ 216 439; Str Ștefan cel Mare 33; admission adult/child

€0.90/0.30; ☎ 9am–5pm Tue–Sun). The exhibits trace life here from prehistoric times but come to an abrupt end at 1945. Old paintings hang in rooms that formerly glorified the communist era.

The **Monastery of St John the New** (Mănăstirea Sfântu Ioan cel Nou; 1522) off Str Mitropoliei, was the ultimate destination for pilgrims during Suceava Days. The paintings on the outside of the church are badly faded but give you an idea of the church frescoes for which Bucovina is famous.

CITY OF RESIDENCE CITADEL

At the end of the winding Str Mitropoliei, 3km from the centre, is the 1388 **City of Residence Citadel** (Cetatea de Scaun; admission adult/child €0.45/0.30; ☎ 9am–6pm), a citadel fortress that in 1476 held off Mehmed II, conqueror of Constantinople (now Istanbul). It's a vast complex and the highlight of many visitors' trips to Suceava. Massive stretches of the rectangular structure remain. A tacky disco and outdoor terrace have been set up nearby.

The original fortress, known as Mușat's Fortress, was built by Petru I Mușat when Suceava was Moldavia's capital. It had eight square towers and was surrounded by defensive trenches. Ștefan cel Mare developed it further, building 4m-thick, 33m-high walls around it so it was impossible to shoot an arrow over. In fact it was never taken, despite many attempts. In 1675 the fortress was finally blown up by the Turks. A century later it was partially dismantled and the stones used to build houses. Restoration work started on the fortress in 1944 and continues to this day, in tandem with archaeological exploration. Today the fortress, which looks as if it has been sliced in half, is slowly sinking into the soft ground below.

The citadel is accessible by car by following Str Mitropoliei to the end or by foot via Str Cetății, crossing the bridge and following the footpath that leads to the huge **equestrian statue** (1977) of Ștefan cel Mare. The lavish New Jewish Cemetery is behind the statue.

Sleeping

Our pick High Class Hostel (☎ 525 213, 0723-782 328; www.classhostel.ro; Str Mihai Eminescu 19 & Str Aurel Vlaicu 195; per person €14.50; ☎) Moldavia's only true hostel. Monica, your interminably good-natured, problem-solving host, can arrange monastery tours. The rural Str Aurel Vlaicu

location will close in November 2007 in favor of a city centre location: a flowery villa on Str Mihai Eminescu, five minutes walk from the bus station.

Villa Alice (☎ 522 254; www.villaalice.ro; Str Simon Florea Marian 1; s/d €14.50/23; ☎) The welcome is curt, but the small bright rooms have comfortable beds, refrigerators and very clean bathrooms. Some rooms have balconies.

Hotel Suceava (☎ 521 079; www.unita-turism.ro; Str Nicolae Bălcescu 2; s/d unrenovated €25/34, s/d/tr renovated €32/43/52) Smack in the city centre, it has old-fashioned but perfectly comfortable rooms, with new bathrooms. Refrigerators available upon request. Reservations strongly recommended in summer.

Giardino Pensiuine (☎ 531 778; www.giardino.ro; Str Dobrogeanu Gherea 2; s/d €28/35; ☎) Opened in 2005, when we visited this three-star *pensiuine* still reeked of brand new everything: bathrooms, communal kitchen, mattresses, towels, terrace with grill, you name it. The breakfast (included) is overwhelming. Just 200m from the bus station. Psst! 'Prices are negotiable for backpackers'!

Classic Hotel (☎ 510 000; www.classic.ro; Str Universității 32; d 2-star €38, s/d 3-star €61/65; ☎) Rooms here are simple, modern and very clean. Cheap student bars are nearby, while the centre is about a kilometre away, easily accessible by maxitaxi. Show this book and get 10% off your room.

Hotel Balada (☎ 520 408; www.balada.ro; Str Mitropoliei 3; s/d/ste €59/70/111.50; ☎) One of the top hotels in the region, this three-storey hotel offers elegance and comfort over pure luxury; rooms have everything you need but are simply furnished.

Eating

There are several fast-food joints on the eastern side of Piața 22 Decembrie. The **central market** (cnr Str Petru Rareș & Str Ștefan cel Mare) is close to the bus station.

Corientes (Str Ștefan cel Mare 56) Pastries, snacks, tiramisu and much loved cookies. The selection is refreshed twice a day. On the ground floor of Bucovina Mall.

Markiz (☎ 520 219; Str Vasile Alecsandri 10; mains €2–4; ☎ 8am–11pm) Its once grand reputation diminished, the prices at this Middle Eastern joint remain budget-friendly and the terrace is a favoured place to have a few drinks.

Latino (☎ 523 627; Str Curtea Domnească 9; mains €2–8; ☎ 11am–midnight) Hailed by locals as the best

pizza in town. The classy, subdued décor is accented by impeccable service and a daz- zlingly varied menu that runs the gamut from 25 different kinds of pizza (€5; with real mozzarella!), first-rate pasta (€4) and steaming fresh fish dishes (€5 to €8). Yes, they deliver.

Pub Chagall (☎ 0723-961 127; Str Ștefan cel Mare; mains €3-7; ☎ 11am-1am) At complete odds with the cold, massive concrete blocks surrounding it is this cosy cellar pub and diner. Though it has a full menu of tasty meals, it's mostly used as a drinking hole. Behind Leonardo shoe store.

B+B (☎ 523 554; Str Mihai Eminescu 18B; mains €4; ☎ 10am-10pm) This cosy restaurant, using fresh ingredients, is a top choice for backpackers. A massive prix fixe lunch is just €4.50 or order from the à la carte menu.

Tacoloco (☎ 220 032; Str Ștefan cel Mare 47; mains €4; ☎ 9am-11pm). Mexican, Turkish and the ubiquitous pizza are served up in this popular eatery near Central Park. Warning: 'salsa' means ketchup.

Drinking

Office's Club (www.officesclub.ro; Str Viitorului 11; 6pm-3am) Hard to get to and even harder to find – the club is hidden from street view, sandwiched between two huge buildings – this mature, but funky environment is nurtured by weekend DJs and good drinks. There are tiny couch alcoves for initiating, or escaping from, saucy trysts and the metal chairs are works of art. Take maxitaxi 1, 2, 3 or 4 and tell the driver 'Office's Club'.

our pick Club 60 (☎ 209 440; Str Ștefan cel Mare; ☎ 1pm-1am) Emanating some of the smoothest vibes around, this loft-style lounge-bar has wooden floors, antique furnishings, comfy sofas and billiard tables. Soul and hip-hop reign, with the occasional appearance by live jazz and blues bands. Enter from the back of the Universal Department Store and climb the stairs to the 2nd floor.

No Limit (Str Curtea Domnească 3; mains €4; ☎ 8am-11pm) More restaurant than bar, this new establishment serves decent German food, yet keeps an admirable bar crowd with its good music and pleasant staff.

Shock (Al Saturn; admission €0.75, ladies free; ☎ 8pm-4am) The undisputed best club in Suceava for the young crowd. The music and party atmosphere here is becoming legendary. Near Piața Mica.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Suceava's **Ștefan cel Mare Airport** (www.aeroport suceava.ro) is about 15km northeast of the centre.

Tarom (☎ 214 686; www.tarom.ro; Str Nicolae Bălcescu 2; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat) has four weekly flights to Bucharest. **Carpatair** (☎ airport 529 559; www.carpatair.com) doesn't have an office in Suceava, but flies to Timișoara and points beyond three times a week.

BUS

The **bus station** (☎ 216 089) is in the town centre at Str Armenească. Bus and maxitaxi services include 13 daily to Gura Humorului (€1.40), eight to Botoșani (€1.40), six to Rădăuți (€1.40), five to Iași (€4.50) and Vatra Dornei (€3), four to Bucharest (€9.20) and three to Târgu Neamț (€2.30). Tickets for international destinations are sold at window 4. Several daily buses go to Chernivtsi in Ukraine (€5.70) and three a week to Chișinău in Moldova (€8.60).

TRAIN

The stop for buses to the train station is east of Piața 22 Decembrie, across B-dul Ana Ipătescu, next to McDonald's.

Suceava's two train stations Gară Burdujeni (aka Gară Sud or Gară Principala) and Gară Nord, are north of the city centre. The **Agenție de Voiaj CFR** (☎ 214 335; Str Nicolae Bălcescu 8; ☎ 7am-8pm Mon-Fri) sells advance tickets. The majority of trains will originate or terminate at the newly spruced Gară Burdujeni.

Train service includes ten to Gură Humorului (€2.10, 70 minutes) – get off at the Gură Humorului Oraș stop, six to Vatra Dornei (€7, 3¼ hours), eight to Iași (€4.20, two hours), five to Timișoara (€18, 14 hours) and five daily to Bucharest (€15.50, seven hours). To get to Moldovița, change at Vama.

Getting Around

The central bus and trolleybus stop is at the eastern end of Piața 22 Decembrie; all buses and trolleybuses to and from the two train stations arrive at/depart from here. Buses 2 and 4, and maxitaxis 6 and 9 run between the centre and Gară Sud (Burdujeni). To reach Gară Nord, take bus 5 or maxitaxis 1 and 12. Beware, these maxitaxi routes are notorious for lurking pickpockets.

Icar Tours (☎ 524 894; www.icar.ro; Str Ștefan cel Mare 24; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) has the largest fleet of hire cars in town and the best prices.

BUCOVINA MONASTERIES

☎ 230

Pilgrims and the wicked unite in their appreciation of the arresting beauty of Southern Bucovina's monasteries, many of which have the unusual distinction of being painted on the outside as well as the inside. While some can be accessed by public transport, and all can be visited on a private tour (see p271), your thumb plus a wad of 1 leu notes, cigarette donations and a little patience will get you within walking distance of the monastery of your choice. Smoking and wearing shorts and hats (for men) are forbidden and women are required to cover their shoulders. All monasteries have an extra charge during high-season for cameras and video cameras (about €2).

In addition to the accommodation options listed here, just about any tour agent in Suceava can book rural *pensiunes*. Alternatively, point-and-click your way to your bed at www.ruraltourism.ro or www.antrec.ro.

Dragomirna Monastery

In the village of Mitocul Dragomirna, 12km north of Suceava, is this lovely, small **monastery** (admission/camera €1.20/1.70; ☎ 8am-8pm) founded in 1608-09 by the scholar, calligrapher, artist and bishop Anastasie Crimca. The intricate rope lacing around the side of the main church (1627) represents the unity of the Holy Trinity and the short-lived unification of the principalities of Moldavia, Wallachia and Transylvania in 1600. The church tower is 42m high.

Dragomirna's treasure, displayed in the **Museum of Medieval Art** in the monastery grounds, includes a beautifully carved candle made by Bishop Crimca, ornamental carved cedar crosses mounted in silver-gilt filigree, and a large number of missals and religious scripts.

Dragomirna remained inhabited during the Habsburg and later the communist purges on the Orthodox church. Crimca's

THE PAINTED BEAUTIES

The painted churches of Southern Bucovina were erected at a time when northern Moldavia was threatened by Turkish invaders. Great popular armies would gather inside the monasteries' strong defensive walls, waiting to do battle. To educate, entertain and arouse the interest of the illiterate soldiers and peasants, who were unable to enter the church or understand the Slavic liturgy, well-known biblical stories were portrayed on the church walls in cartoon-style frescoes.

Most amazing in these vast compositions are the realistic portrayals of human figures against a backdrop not unlike the local landscape (the forested Carpathian foothills). Some frescoes have been damaged by centuries of rain and wind, but more often than not the intense colours have been duly preserved, from the greens of Sucevița to the blues of Voroneț and the reds of Humor. Natural dyes are used – sulphur for yellow, madder for red, and cobalt or lapis for blue.

All Orthodox monasteries face the east, in keeping with the traditional belief that the light of God shines in the image of the rising sun. An outside porch, likewise tattooed with frescoes, is typical of the Bucovina monasteries. Within, they are divided into three rooms: the first chamber (*pronaos*), the tomb room, and the altar room (*naos*). Women are not allowed to enter the altar, shielded from public view by an iconostasis – a beautifully sculpted, gilded partition in the *naos*. The church domes are a peculiar combination of Byzantine pendentives and Moorish crossed arches with larger-than-life paintings of Christ or the Virgin peering down.

Each monastery is dedicated to a saint, whose patron day is among the most important feast days for the monastery's inhabitants. The nuns or monks are required to fast – no meat, eggs or dairy products – for several days leading up to any religious feast. Wednesday, Friday, Lent, the six weeks after Easter and the days preceding Christmas are likewise fast days.

Novices are required to serve three to seven years in a monastery before being ordained. Numerous penances have to be observed during this training period; many novices have to stand motionless in the street for several consecutive days, bearing a plaque indicating that they are waiting for cash donations towards the 'spiritual furthering' of their monastery.

Following the Habsburg occupation of Bucovina in 1785, most monasteries were closed and their inhabitants forced to relinquish their spiritual lives for a civilian one. They were equally persecuted under communism, and it is only since 1990 that the inner activity of these holy sanctuaries has matched the dynamism of their outer façades.

dying wish was that a day should not pass without prayers being said in his monastery. Thus seven elderly nuns defied communist orders and remained alone at the monastery throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Today about 60 nuns live here.

It's possible for travellers to stay at the monastery. It's best to hitch or take a taxi from Suceava; there are no buses.

Voroneț Monastery

The wondrous size, scope and detail of the *Last Judgment* fresco, which fills the entire exterior western wall of the **Voroneț Monastery** (admission adult/child €1.20/0.60; ☎ 8am–8pm) has earned near-universal accolades as being the most marvellous Bucovine fresco. It's also something of a miracle. At the top, angels roll up the signs of the zodiac to indicate the end of time. The middle fresco shows humanity being brought to judgment. On the left, St Paul escorts the believers, while on the right Moses brings forward the nonbelievers. Below is the *Resurrection*.

On the northern wall is *Genesis*, from Adam and Eve to Cain and Abel. The southern wall features another tree of Jesse with the genealogy of biblical personalities. In the vertical fresco to the left is the story of the martyrdom of St John of Suceava (buried in the Monastery of St John the New in Suceava, p273). The vibrant, almost satiny blue pigment used throughout the frescoes is known worldwide as 'Voroneț blue'. As with the aforementioned miracle, with the exception of the northern wall, which has absorbed the brunt of centuries of Romania's punishing elements, the exterior frescoes remain implausibly vibrant. As the pigment is only 2mm thick, their robustness has thus far defied logical explanation.

In the narthex lies the tomb of Daniel the Hermit, the first abbot of Voroneț Monastery (see p279 for more on Daniel). It was upon the worldly advice of Daniel, who told Ștefan cel Mare not to give up his battle against the Turks, that the Moldavian prince went on to win further victories against the Turks and then to build Voroneț Monastery out of gratitude to God.

In 1785 occupying Austrians forced Voroneț's monks to abandon the monastery. Since 1991 it has been inhabited by a small community of nuns.

The monastery is a 4km walk from the turnoff or 6km from Gura Humorului.

SLEEPING & EATING

The town of Gura Humorului is a perfect base to visit Voroneț. More and more enterprising locals are taking in tourists and each year rates soar higher. The usual rate per person per night in an unlicensed 'vila' is about €15 or €20. Roughly 500m south of the bus station (follow the only path), there's wild camping on the south bank of the River Moldova, as well as a few cafés and a small tourist complex.

Pensuinea Lions (☎ 235 226; www.motel-lions.ro in Romanian, Str Ștefan cel Mare 39; s/d €23/29) Opened in early 2006, this three-star *pensiune*-restaurant minicomplex is warm, homely and clean. Beds are decent and all rooms have a balcony. Discounts offered for multnight stays. Traffic noise and music from the restaurant (open until 11pm) is audible from the rooms.

Hotel Simeria (☎ 230 227; Mihail Kogalniceanu 2; s/d per person €27/30) This is a modern, impeccably clean and pleasant three-storey hotel. Some rooms have balconies, all have refrigerator and TV.

Casa Elena (☎ 230 651; www.casaelena.ro; s/d €44/59) A quick 3.5km trip from Gura Humorului on the northern edge of Voroneț Monastery, this four-star option has 31 rooms in five different villas, all in a large, luxurious complex. The hotel also has a billiard room, sauna and 24-hour restaurant.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

There are buses on weekdays from Gura Humorului to Voroneț, departing at 7am, 12.30pm and 2.45pm. A lovely option is to walk the 6km to Voroneț, much of it along a narrow village road. The route is clearly marked and it is impossible to get lost.

Humor Monastery

Humor (admission adult/child €1.20/0.60; ☎ 8am–8pm) counters the memorable exterior frescoes at Voroneț with its own fantastic interior frescoes. It was founded by Chancellor Theodor Bubuioag in 1530 under the guidance of Moldavian prince Petru Rareș. Unlike the other monasteries, Humor is surrounded by ramparts, partly made from wood, with a three-level brick and wood lookout tower; its traditional Moldavian open porch was the first of its kind to be built in Bucovina. Slip into the tower for the memorable climb to the viewing deck. Squeezing up the final lean flight of stairs will feel like a literal rebirth

for some, but the photo opportunity is well worth the effort.

Its exterior frescoes, dating from 1535, are predominantly red. Paintings on the church's southern exterior wall are devoted to the Holy Virgin, the patron saint of the monastery. There's a badly faded depiction of the 1453 siege of Constantinople, with the parable of the return of the prodigal son to the right. St George is depicted on the northern wall. On the porch is a painting of the Last Judgment: the long bench on which the 12 apostles sit, the patterned towel on the chair of judgment, and the long, horn-like *bucium* (pipe) used to announce the coming of Christ are all typical Moldavian elements.

Humor shelters five chambers. The middle one (the tomb room) has a lower ceiling than the others. This hides a treasure room (*tainița*) where monastery riches were traditionally kept safe. On the right wall as you enter the tomb room is a votive painting depicting the founder, Toader Bubuioag, offering, with the help of the Virgin Mary, a miniature replica of the monastery to Christ. The tombs of Bubuioag, who died in 1539, and of his wife, lie on the left side of the room; a painting of his wife praying to the Virgin Mary is above her grave.

The paintings in the first chamber (*pro-naos*) depict various scenes of martyrs. Above the decorative border, which runs around the base of the four walls, is a pictorial representation of the first three months of the Orthodox calendar (*synaxary*).

SLEEPING

Dozens of homes here have rooms for rent. See also p275 for nearby options.

Maison de Bucovine (☎ 0744-373 931; 172 Mănăstirea Humor; d€23) Only a rosary bead's swing away from the monastery (30m), this unassuming-looking home is a comfortable place to spend the night. The bathrooms are clean and modern and the hosts a delight. Breakfast not included.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Aside from hitching a ride for the 6km from Gura Humorului, you can take one of the maxitaxis that depart from next to the towering Best Western Hotel, at the start of the road towards the monastery.

Moldovița Monastery

In the middle of a quaint village, **Moldovița Monastery** (admission adult/child €1.20/0.60; ☎ 10am–6pm)

consists of a fortified quadrangular enclosure with towers, brawny gates and a magnificent painted church at its centre. The monastery has undergone careful restoration in recent years. Its frescoes are predominantly yellow.

The fortifications and surrounding buildings are as impressive as the exterior frescoes. A haunting atmosphere of tranquillity reigns here, partly thanks to the lovely tended grounds and beautiful stone buildings. On the church's southern exterior wall is a depiction of the defence of Constantinople in AD 626 against Persians dressed as Turks, while on the porch is a representation of the Last Judgment. Inside the sanctuary, on a wall facing the original carved iconostasis, is a portrait of Prince Petru Rareș, the monastery's founder, offering the church to Christ. All of these works date from 1537.

In the monastery's small museum is Petru Rareș' original throne.

SLEEPING

See www.ruraltourism.ro for some great places to stay in Vama, a small village 14km south of Moldovița on the main Suceava–Vatra Dornei road. Many homes have rooms to rent.

Mărul de Aur Camping Ground (☎ 336 180; camping free, cabins €3.50) The pitiable rooms at Mărul de Aur, located in Moldovița between the train station and the monastery, are not recommended, but this place also operates the camping ground, 3km out of town on the road to Sucevița.

our pick **Letitia Orsvichi Pension** (☎ 0745-869 529; orsvichiletita@yahoo.fr; Str Gării 20, Vama; r per person €25; ☎) Follow the signs with painted eggs to this large two-house property, 250m off the main road in Vama. Letitia only speaks Romanian and French, but her house does most of the talking. Among its attractions are a massive painted-egg display, with samples from around the world, and a private ethnographic museum. Rooms are rustic and simple, but clean, with shared bathroom. Breakfast, dinner and internet included! The grounds are filled with flowers and a new covered terrace with grill is available for cookouts.

Casa Alba (☎ 340 404; www.casa-alba.suceava.ro; s/d/ste €46/54.50/77) You certainly won't feel a monastic asceticism in this lush, ultramodern and very comfortable villa. Prices are about €10 cheaper from September to June. Follow the one road heading south, 5km west of Frasin, which is about 3km east of Vama.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Moldovița Monastery is right above Vatra Moldoviței's train station (be sure to get off at Vatra Moldoviței, not Moldovița). From Suceava nine daily trains go to Vama (1¼ hours), and from Vama three trains leave daily for Vatra Moldoviței (35 minutes).

Sucevița Monastery

The winding, remote mountain road from Moldovița to Sucevița (27km) offers breathtaking views across the surrounding fields and is reason enough to make the trip. It climbs 1100m and passes small Alpine villages. Yet the prize at the end of it is golden too: **Sucevița** (admission adult/child €1.20/0.60; ☎ 8am-8pm) is the largest and perhaps all-round finest of the Bucovina monasteries.

The church inside the fortified monastic enclosure, built between 1582 and 1601, is almost completely covered with frescoes. Mysteriously, the western wall of the monastery remains bare. Legend has it that the artist fell off the scaffolding while attempting to paint the wall and was killed, leaving his contemporaries too scared to follow in his footsteps. The exterior frescoes – predominantly red and green – date from around 1590.

As you enter you first see the *Virtuous Ladder* fresco covering most of the northern exterior wall, depicting the 30 steps from Hell to Paradise. The frescoes inside the arches above the open porch depict the apocalypse and the vision of St John.

On the southern exterior wall is the Jesse tree symbolising the continuity of the Old and New Testaments. The tree grows from the reclining figure of Jesse, who is flanked by a row of ancient philosophers. To the left is the Virgin as a Byzantine princess, with angels holding a red veil over her head.

Inside the church, in the second chamber, the Orthodox calendar is depicted. The tombs of the founders, Moldavian nobles Simion and Ieremia Movilă, lie in the tomb room. The last of the painted monasteries to have been built, this is the only one that wasn't built by Ștefan cel Mare or his family. Ieremia Movilă, who died in 1606, appears with his seven children on the western wall inside the *naos*. Apart from the church, there's a small museum at Sucevița Monastery in which various treasures and art pieces from the monastery are displayed.

Sucevița Monastery was first inhabited by monks in 1582. During the communist era,

only nuns aged over 50 were allowed to stay at Sucevița. Today, it is a relatively flourishing place.

SLEEPING

It's worth spending a night here and doing a little hiking in the surrounding hills. Wild camping is possible in the field across the stream from the monastery, as well as along the road from Moldovița. Homes with *cazare* signs abound.

Pensiunea Emilia (☎ 0740-117 277; Str Bercheza 173; d €14.50) Of the handful of *pensiune*s in the immediate area, this one is the most appealing. It only has five rooms, but all feel like home. Walk 700m up the road opposite the monastery.

Pensiunea Silva (☎ 417 019; www.pensiuneasilva.ro; Sucevița 391; r ind full board per person €24; ☎) The hunting lodge motif here is punctuated by the gaggle of taxidermy critters that meet you at the door. Located on the western edge of nearby Sucevița village, it's an easy 3km walk to the monastery.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Sucevița is the most difficult monastery to reach on public transport. There are only two daily buses from Rădăuți. Hitching or biking are your best bets. There's a beautiful hiking trail to the Putna Monastery from here (opposite).

Rădăuți & Marginea

Rădăuți (rah-dah-oots) is a lovely market town with a smattering of quaint attractions, the star of which being **Bogdana Monastery**, aka Saint Nicolas Church, built by Bogdan I in the mid-14th century, making it the oldest church in Moldavia. The interior frescoes look as if they haven't been touched up since Bogdan flung open the doors, but therein lies some of its charm. The church holds the decorative tombs of Moldavian rulers Bogdan I, Latcu, Roman Musat and Ștefan I.

Piața Unirii is dominated by an ambitious multidomed cathedral. Opposite is the extensive **Museum of Bucovina Folk Techniques** (☎ 562 565; Str Piața Unirii 63; admission adult/student €1.50/0.30; ☎ 8am-7pm), Moldavia's oldest ethnographic museum, with over 1000 items in 11 exhibition halls, highlighting pottery, for which the region is famous. The adjoining workshop of **ceramic artist Florin Colibaba** will likely spasm your impulse-buy muscles.

The tiny village of **Marginea**, 9km west of Rădăuți, is renowned for its black earthenware and pottery, a custom dating back to the Neolithic Age. **AF Magopat Gheorghe** (☎ 560 845; www.ceramicamarginea.ro; house 1265; ☎ 7am-6pm) is a darling shop, with an adjacent exhibition of locally produced pottery, black and otherwise. Visitors are invited to view the pottery workshop next door that shows how the stuff is made. This entire area is a pleasure to explore by bike, as each village has its own charm.

SLEEPING

Pensiune Turistica Fast (☎ 560 060; Str Ștefan cel Mare 80; s/d €17/28.50) This basic *pensiune* and restaurant has an inexpressible scrubbed-down charm. Follow the 'Fast' signs from Piața Unirii in Rădăuți, about 1km west.

Luxor (☎ 406 022; www.luxor-marginea.ro; Marginea 1435; s/d/apt €26/34/46) Across the road from the ceramic workshop in Marginea is this lovely oasis of comfort, with startlingly nice rooms and an excellent on-site restaurant (mains €3 to €5).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

From Rădăuți you can catch a train to Putna or a bus to Sucevița monastery. The bus station is on B-dul Ștefan cel Mare, a block north of Rădăuți's train station on Str Gării. From the bus station, head east along B-dul Ștefan cel Mare until you reach Piața Unirii.

Five daily trains go from Rădăuți to Putna (1½ hours) – two of which require a change at Gura Putnei – and six to Dornești (11 minutes) from where there are three trains to Suceava (1¼ hours).

Buses from Rădăuți include six a day to Suceava, and two to Sucevița and Guru Humorului. Oddly, there are none to Putna. Double-check posted times with a ticket clerk. Maxitaxis heading to all points south leave continuously, usually when full.

Southbound maxitaxis from Rădăuți pass Luxor every 30 minutes.

Putna

Legend has it that, to celebrate his conquest of the fortress of nearby Chilia against the Turks, Ștefan cel Mare climbed to the top of a hill overlooking Putna village, 28km northwest of Rădăuți, and fired three arrows. Where the first arrow landed in the valley below became the site of Putna Monastery's holy well; the second arrow decided the site of the altar; and the third the site of the bell tower. As

you approach **Putna Monastery**, you can see the spot where Ștefan cel Mare stood, marked by a large white cross. The monastery, built between 1466 and 1481, is still home to a very active religious community, with groups of monks chanting Mass just before sunset.

In the large building behind the monastery is **Putna Museum**, where a wealth of treasures from the monastery and surrounding regions are displayed, including medieval manuscripts and the Holy Book that Ștefan cel Mare carried when he went to battle. Outside the church are three bells inscribed in Slavic. The largest of the three, dating from 1484, was strictly reserved for heralding royal deaths.

Compared to other Bucovina monasteries Putna is aesthetically lacklustre, but it's deep to the heart of Romanians as Ștefan cel Mare himself is buried in the tomb room of the church. Below is the grave of his third wife, Maria Voichița. On the left is the grave of their two children, Bogdan and Petru. Above the children's grave is that of Ștefan cel Mare's second wife, Maria of Mangop from Greece.

Some 60 monks live at Putna today, practising icon-painting, shepherding, agriculture and wood-sculpting.

Daniel the Hermit's Cave (Chilia lui Daniil Sihastrul), 2km from the monastery, is also worth visiting. Inside is a humble wooden table and memorial plaque to the hermit and seer Daniel Dimitru, born in a village near Rădăuți in the 15th century. He became a monk at the age of 16 and later moved to Chilia where he dug himself a cave in the rock. To get to Chilia from the monastery, turn right off the main road following the sign for Cabana Putna. Bear left at the fork and continue until the second fork in the road. Turn right here, cross the railway tracks, and continue over a small bridge, following the dirt road until you see the rock, marked by a stone cross, on your left.

SLEEPING

Some people camp in the field opposite Daniel the Hermit's Cave at Chilia near the train station.

Ionas Pensiune (☎ 414 123; 272 Putna; d with/without breakfast €29/23) About 700m from the train station (sign posted) are a few nice homes owned by the Ionas family. All rooms share bathrooms.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Local trains go to Putna from Suceava five times daily (1¼ hours). The large monastic

enclosure is at the end of the road, nearly 2km from the station. From Putna there is also one direct train a day to Iași (six hours).

You can do as Prince Charles did in May 2003 and hike the 20km from Putna to Sucevița Monastery in about five hours (though he went the other way). Follow the trail marked with blue crosses in white squares that starts near the hermit's cave. About 4km down the road you turn off to the left.

CĂMPULUNG MOLDOVENESC

☎ 230 / pop 20,076

This small 14th-century logging and fair town is tucked in the Moldavia Valley at an altitude of 621m. Cămpulung Moldovenesc is a good access point for hiking in the Rarău Mountains, 15km to the south. In winter, Cămpulung attracts cross-country skiers. There is also a short 800m ski slope served by a chairlift at the foot of the resort. Between 1786 and 1809 many German miners settled in the region at the invitation of the Habsburg authorities.

A winter sports festival takes place in Cămpulung Moldovenesc every year on the last Sunday in January.

Orientation & Information

The main street, Calea Transilvaniei, which runs into Calea Bucovinei, cuts across the town from west to east. The train station is a five-minute walk west of the centre at Str Gării 8. To get to the centre from the main Cămpulung Moldovenesc train station (do not get off at Cămpulung Moldovenesc Est stop), turn left along Str Gării and then right along Str Dimitrie Cantimir until you reach the post office on the corner of Calea Bucovinei. The bus station is at Str Alexander Bogza. From here cut through the market to the left of the station. As you exit, you'll see the sign for Hotel Zimbru. Follow that to reach the centre.

George Turism travel agency (☎ 312 801; www.georgeturism.ro in German; Str Caprioarei 27; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri) can help you with any of your questions.

Hotel Zimbru (☎ 314 356; www.rarau-turism.ro; Calea Bucovinei 1-3; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri off-season, 24hr in summer) has a tourism office that can assist with guided tours to monasteries.

HIKING THE RĂRĂU MOUNTAINS

The Rarău Mountains, part of the Eastern Carpathians, offer fantastic hiking opportunities. From May to October you can access these mountains and the region's main base for hikers, **Cabana Rarău** (1400m; ☎ 0744-320 496; d €15), from Cămpulung Moldovenesc by car. There's a small restaurant and provisions shop there too. As you enter Cămpulung Moldovenesc from the east, a road on the left is signposted 'Cabana Rarău 14km'. Do not attempt to drive in bad weather unless you have a 4WD, as the road is narrow and extremely pot-holed and rocky in places. Hiking takes three to four hours (follow the red circles).

A second mountain road – slightly less pot-holed – leads up to the cabana from the village of **Pojorâta**, 3km west of Cămpulung Moldovenesc. Hiking takes four to five hours (follow the yellow crosses). This road is not marked on maps. Turn left at the fork after the village post office, cross the railway tracks, then turn immediately left along the dirt road. Note the large stones of Adam and Eve as you enter the village.

Cabana Rarău can also be accessed from the south in the village of **Chiril**, 24km east of Vatra Dornei on the main Vatra Dornei–Durău road. This is the best of the three road options for those determined to drive. Hiking takes three to four hours (blue circles). **Cabana Zugreni** (☎ 373 581; d with/without private toilet €15/8), 4km from Chiril on the Vatra Dornei road, is a good option. The adjoining restaurant serves traditional Moldavian meals.

From Cabana Rarău a trail (30 minutes) leads to the foot of Rarău's most prized rocks, the Lady's Stones or Princess' Rocks (Pietrele Doamnei). A cluster of crosses crowns the highest (1678m) in memory of the climbers it has claimed. The view from the top is superb.

A trail marked by red stripes and red triangles (five hours) leads from the cabana to the **Slătioara Forest Reservation**. From here another trail (red triangles) leads to the **Todirescu Flower Reservation**.

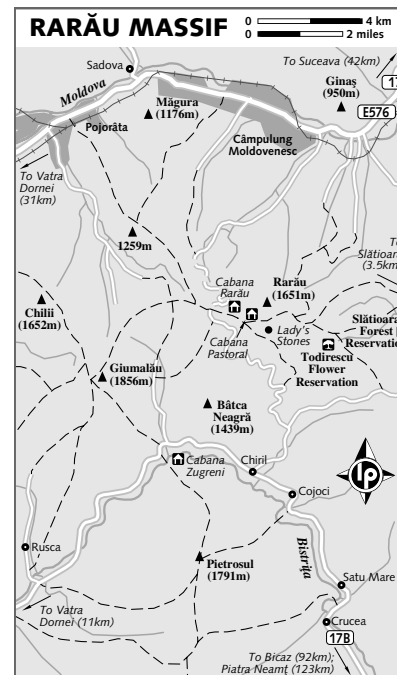
Sights

The unlikely highlight of Cămpulung Moldovenesc is its mirthful, but bizarrely intriguing wooden spoon collection, which is displayed in a small house. Love spoons, jewellery constructed from spoons and other cutlery delights collected by Ioan Țugui are exhibited in the **museum** (Str Gheorghe Popovici 3; admission €0.30; ☎ 9am-4pm Tue-Sun). Other fun wooden objects are displayed at the **Wood Carving Museum** (Calea Transilvaniei 10; admission €0.30; ☎ 9am-4pm Tue-Sun).

Sleeping

Pensiunea Gețiana (☎ 313 165; Str Valea Seacă 198; www.pensiunea-gețiana.ro in Romanian; d summer/winter €20/23; ☎) Basic rooms, with TV and shared bathroom. Rates for single rooms are negotiable. Heading east from the main square, take the first right and follow the signs for 700m.

Hotel Zimbru (☎ 314 356; rezervari@rarau-turism.ro; Calea Bucovinei 1-3; s/d €29/34; ☎) This is your typical state-run 10-storey concrete block that has characterless rooms but friendly service. Internet extra charge.



Eden Hotel (☎ 314 733; www.hotel-eden.ro; Str Bucovinei 148; s/d/stc €34/46/80; ☎) This lovely house has an oasis feel to it and its 17 simple but well-furnished rooms. Service is first-rate and the restaurant excellent. The hotel can also organise folk dance shows and car hire.

Getting There & Away

There are eight buses/maxitaxis daily to Vatra Domei and four to Suceava. Four local (slow) trains go to Suceava Nord and two to Vatra Domei. Four fast trains pause here while en route to both Timisoara and Iasi and one each to Cluj and Bucharest.

VATRA DORNEI

☎ 230 / pop 17,650

Nestled at the confluence of the Dorna and Bistrița Rivers in the Dornel depression, Vatra Dornei was a fashionable spa resort during Habsburg times. Today it looks and feels as if it's seen better days, but a mini construction and renovation boom signals that the town has not thrown in the mud wrap yet. Vatra Dornei is home to Romania's largest sparkling mineral water bottling plants.

Information

Internet (Str Lucefărilor 27; ☎ 9am-11pm; per hr €0.30)

Pharmacie (Str Mihai Eminescu 90; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, 9am-7pm Sat, 9am-3pm Sun)

Post office (Str Mihai Eminescu 8; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat)

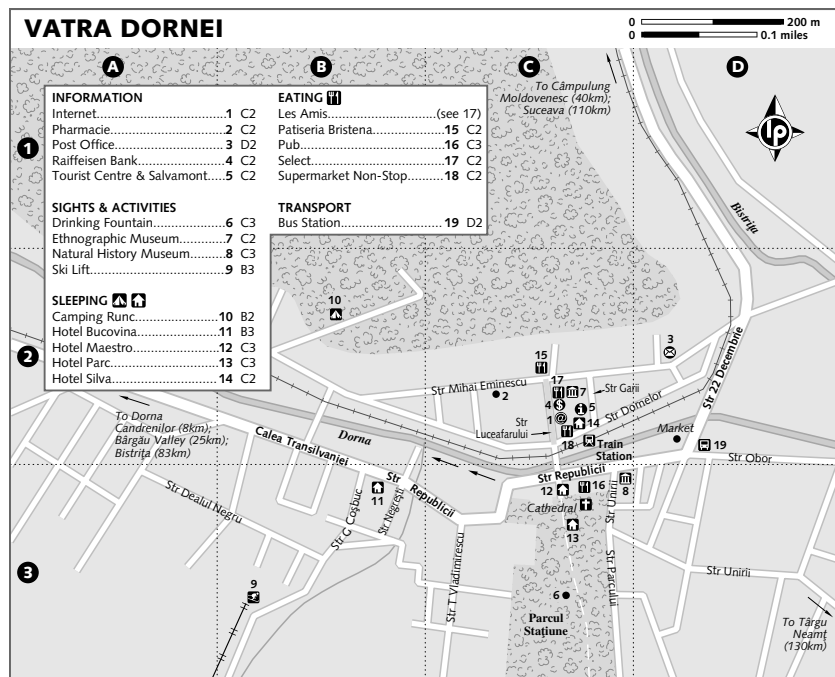
Raiffeisen Bank (Str Lucefărilor 23; ☎ 8.30am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat)

Tourist Centre & Salvamont (☎ 372 767; salvamont.dorna@yahoo.com; Str Gării; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri) This is a good first stop; you can pick up free local maps, including one highlighting the 30-odd local hiking trails, and check weather conditions in the mountains. You can also book accommodation in hotels or private homes here.

Sights

Vatra Dornei's **park** (Parcul Stațiune) is beautifully laid out with sprawling avenues, well-groomed lawns and neatly arranged flower beds. Bronze busts of national poet Mihai Eminescu and composers George Enescu and Ciprian Porumbescu gaze out from beneath the trees.

You can taste Vatra Dornei's natural spring waters at the **drinking fountain** in the fairytale single-turreted castle in the park. The bicarbonated water is good for curing stomach ills but not recommended for those with high



blood pressure or an aversion to sulphurous water. Adjoining the park on Str Republicii is a grandiose baroque mansion, once home to a bustling casino in Habsburg times but now undergoing renovations.

The **Natural History Museum** (Muzeul de Științe Naturale și Genegetică; Str Unirii 3; admission adult/child €0.45/0.30; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) displays flora and fauna from the surrounding Căliman and Rarău Mountains. North of the river is a small **Ethnographic Museum** (Str Mihai Eminescu; admission adult/child €0.45/0.30; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun).

The **ski lift** (telescaun; one way/return €2/3; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) is open year round (but only runs with a minimum of 10 passengers) for those who want to enjoy a summer day's view or the valley's autumn colours.

Activities

It's not only people with aching whatsits who find reason to visit; the **hiking trails** directly north of town are lovely, and the downhill **skiing** scene on Dealul Negrii (1300m) is on the rise. The Black Hill and Parc slopes are accessed from the edge of town by the ski lift. Equipment hire shacks are nearby. Contact the Tourist

Centre & Salvamont for up-to-the-minute details on skiing and accommodation.

Sleeping

Camping Runc (☎ 371 892; campsite/cabin €4/7) This very nice campground is on a forest-covered hill overlooking the town. It has 43 wooden double cabins, with communal showers and toilets, and a restaurant-bar on site. Go west along Str Mihai Eminescu until you see a sign on the right.

Hotel Bucovina (☎ 375 005; Str Republicii 35; s/d €15/29) For the price, this is probably the best deal in town. Though the impressive Swiss-chalet exterior is not matched by the interior décor, it's a comfortable place with full services.

Hotel Parc (☎ 0744-964 307; Str Parcului; d €16; ☎) Renovations will include a new hot tub at this bare-bones, light-blue lodge inside the main park. The café-cum-disco can get a little noisy with spontaneous all-night parties.

Hotel Silva (☎ 371 033; Str Dornelor 12; s/d €27/37) On the 2nd floor of a commercial complex, this modern hotel has a fitness centre and a nightclub.

Hotel Maestro (☎ 375 288; http://eis.go.ro; Str Republicii; s/d/tr €34.50/46/63) A great eight-room, modern place in the centre of town. It runs a popular terrace café out the front and hires out skis and snowmobiles. The same people run the lovely Cabana Schiorilor up in the mountains.

Eating & Drinking

There are many eating options along the pedestrianised Str Lucafărilor.

Patiseria Bristena (☎ 372 338; Str Mihai Eminescu 28; mains €1-2; ☎ 8am-8pm) Does the word 'yum' mean anything to you? Great cakes, meat-filled pastries, pizza slices and cheap eats maintain an irresistible aroma and wide smiles in here.

Les Amis (☎ 375 280; Str Lucafărilor 19; mains €1-3; ☎ 9am-11pm) The lengthy menu and central location on the city's pedestrian mall makes up for the impertinent, cigarette-centric staff.

Pub (Str Republicii 1; mains €1-3; ☎ 10am-2am Mon-Fri, 10am-5am Sat) The no-frills name doesn't do justice to the best drinking hole in town. This relaxed hang-out, furnished top to bottom in wood, is the remedy to a day's skiing or hiking. There is live music on weekends and a basic sandwich and salad menu.

Select (Str Lucafărilor 19; ☎ 9am-1am) Upstairs from Les Amis, this trendy bar has an outdoor

terrace, a couple of pool tables and limited cocktails.

For self-catering, **Supermarket Non-Stop** (Str Dornelor 10; ☎ 24hr) is a well-stocked store with some takeaway meals.

Getting There & Away

The **bus station** (☎ 371 252) is located at the eastern end of town on Str 22 Decembrie. There are eight buses or maxitaxis per day to Câmpulung Moldovenesc, seven to Gura Humorului, four to Suceava, three to Bistrița, two to both Piatra Neamț and Târgu Neamț and one to both Cluj-Napoca and Radauti.

Tickets are sold in advance at the **Agenție de Voiaj CFR** (☎ 371 039) inside the **train station** (☎ 371 197; Str Republicii 1). There are six daily trains to Suceava (3¼ hours) – four of which end up in Iași (5½ hours), three to Timișoara (10½ hours), and one to both Bistrița (five hours) and Oradea (7½ hours).

AROUND VATRA DORNEI

Vatra Dornei stands in the middle of Romania's most dramatic mountain passes, steeped in legend and famed for their wild beauty and savage landscapes. If you head southwest into Transylvania you cross the **Bărgău Valley** and the Tihuța Pass (p210), or, if you've read Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, the Borgo Pass!

THE MUDDY VOLCANOES OF THE EASTERN CARPATHIAN MOUNTAINS

The tiny village of Berca, about 30km northwest of Buzău, is the staging area for the Muddy Volcanoes (Vulcanii Noroișii) – or 'the gates of hell' as the locals call them – one of Romania's best known geological reserves. Mud replaces lava here through a less powerful geological reaction, but with similar effect. Volcano cones up to 6m high drizzle mud with surprising colours – greys, browns, ochre or simply shining black – while the chocolate borders of the craters are adorned with the white crust of crystallised salt and belts of yellow sulphur mud. Mud bubbles release small amounts of methane into the air which one can independently (and judiciously) confirm by lighting a match and watching the blue flame dance. The mild stench of oil and the bloop-bloop noise of the gas bubbles coming up to the surface, creating eruptions ranging in size from marbles to sandpits, have stewed many local superstitions regarding the origin of the geological phenomenon.

As advertised, the Muddy Volcanoes are quite muddy. Wear sturdy shoes or sport sandals, tightly fastened, lest the mud snatch one off in mid-stride. There's a post-visit footwear scrub-down station at the entrance, with a visitor centre, restaurant and mini-motel.

Reaching the site without private transport is impossible. From Berca, follow the sparse but timely signs 14km to the Muddy Volcanoes.

While in the area, be sure to visit the Sculpture Camp in the village of Măgura. A large clearing is filled with 256 stone sculptures, a true in-nature museum, courtesy of the artists who used to meet here in the '70s and '80s. Yet further northwest are the Active Fires of Lopatari, blue flames that burn deep in the cracks of the soil at 700m above sea level.

In Dorna Candrenilor, 8km west of Vatra Dornei, you can access the **Căliman Mountains**. The highlight of these volcanic mountains is the anthropomorphic rocks, which form the **12 Apostles Nature Reservation** (Stâncile Doisp-rezece Apostoli). A trail (marked with blue triangles then red circles) leads from Vatra Dornei to its peak at 1760m. Only tackle this tough climb if you are experienced and have a map and the right gear.

A less challenging route if you have a car is to drive to Dorna Candrenilor, turn left along the road to Poiana Negrii and continue for 14km along road and dirt track until you reach Negrișoara. From here it is a three-hour walk (4km) along a path to the foot of the geological reservation.

Heading north you cross from Moldavia into the Maramureș region via the **Prislop Pass**, which peaks at 1416m (p248).