

IMMERSED IN ROMANIAN CULTURE AND TRADITION

Romania lost its Communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescue in 1989. Since then this prettiest of Eastern European countries has barely had time to recover from a regime that brought its people to the edge of starvation. Romania is to join the Common market in 2007 and keen to establish itself as economically and culturally viable. So given her history of invasion, her fascinating folktales and mythologies, when I was invited early this year to participate in 'A Writers' Cultural Exchange Program' I was delighted to visit a country that has yet to become a well trodden tourist destination. Besides, of the eighteen international writers that were invited, only two were awarded scholarships. Given that I received one, the other went to the Poet Laureate of New Hampshire, this was not to be missed.

The program's notes promised: " Every September, we host an international Exchange Program. While most writers dream of exotic places and unusual characters, we rarely get beyond the typewriter and actually live their adventures. This is a chance to immerse yourself in the traditions....while sharing ideas with local writers and other participants...."

Perhaps I should have foreseen difficulties when it quickly became apparent that any money or mail sent to Romania disappeared into a black hole. Nevertheless my future hosts sent warm and welcoming emails and I was promised a busy week that would include visits to the remote and the unusual. These activities were, in the final count, to be shared

between two Aussies, eight Americans, two Canadians, two Brits and a Russian - poets, novelists, short-story writers, editors, children's writers, food and science essayists, many working in more than one genre. This was a well-published group with splendid credentials.

We met in Bucharest in the Hotel Carpati, an establishment that didn't quite merit its one star rating. The beds and bathrooms were not for the faint hearted. More cultural diversity became apparent at breakfast where we asked to choose one of four set meals. My request for a Number 2 breakfast but coffee instead of tea sent the staff into a flurry, a reaction typical of the rest of the week. That morning there was just enough time to stroll around Bucharest. We quickly found the central gardens where we watched women stroll by in frocks that were to our First World eyes both startling in colour and design. These lovely gardens were surrounded by pre WW2 buildings that reminded us of the baroque elegance of Budapest and Vienna, though many were in need of plaster and paint. We also lamented the grey concrete post war 'stalinist blocks' and the newer metal and glass highrise that jostled uncomfortably alongside with little regard for Western concepts of streetscape. The traffic was wild. Pedestrian crossings were suicidal. Cars ignored them. Window-shopping was dull when viewed by affluent First World eyes. Restaurant food not as exciting as we had hoped.

Romanian infra-structure is in the process of being rebuilt. Our host had arranged for our group to be bused over roads in a permanent state of construction and as we bumped along the ride seemed to take forever. Our major destination was a villa in Bushten. Two hours and many bruises later we arrived at a charming village nestling into the Transylvanian Alps where milk cows wearing bells around their necks

grazed in the town-square thus eradicating any need for mowers. The mountains seemed to rise perpendicularly into the sky to provide some of the most spectacular scenery I have ever come across; this only marred by the rubbish filling every crevice and valley. Appalled I soon learnt that every trashcan was stolen so it could be recycled. In Romania nothing is wasted.

Four males including Florin our host and eleven females meant that rooms were quickly established and we could set about the real business of getting to know each other. I found this the most rewarding part of the program as the promised wealth of Romanian culture, history and artists never did eventuate. As a children's writer I was particularly keen to meet any local counterpart. Because I knew about the 'unwanted children', I also asked to visit an orphanage. Our host claimed to know nothing about these, and though names were bandied about, I never did meet any local children's writers. We were finally visited by a young novelist who, with much flicking of collar length hair and chain-smoking, proceeded to tell his far more experienced audience how and what to write while his young wife sat silently by. Our Canadian poet quickly dubbed this as 'the dark valley of Romanian Arts Administration.'

Romanian cuisine seemed to mostly consist of fried potatoes, bread, polenta, pastries (very popular) sausages both cooked and uncooked, and the best tomatoes I have ever tasted. Most of the fruit – melon, peaches, nectarines, grapes - came from Turkey, though the local prunes were delicious. The freshest produce was bought in the street markets where it was essential to pretend to haggle. But what with the Romanian currency in the process of being changed (L10,000 had just become L10 and would shortly be turned into euro) it was all very confusing. We were probably

cheated left right and centre, but everything was so cheap, it hardly raised a sweat. Small corner shops sold processed meat and small quantities of pork and chicken. No chicken farms, just lots of roosters that served as alarm clocks as did the dogs who barked out their territory around 2 a.m. Pastry and bread shops were everywhere. Good local beer was sold in two litre bottles and there was also plenty of demi dolci wine.

By the second day it was obvious that whatever we'd had in mind re Romanian History and Culture, that our host wasn't up to it. So on our own initiative we visited several Christian Orthodox cathedrals, many on the wrong days so they were closed. We did come across devout congregations - mostly women, bearded priests dressed in sumptuously embroidered robes, wooden crosses and candles. In the town of Brasov we visited 'Castelul Bran' where the infamous Count Dracula once resided, entering rooms filled with wooden beams, stolid black furniture and secret staircases. Unlike the vampiric Dracula portrayed in the Bram Stoker novel and Hollywood movies, the Romanians regard Dracula as a national hero who protected them from the Turks by thrusting a wooden stick onto the butt of any invading soldier unfortunate enough to fall into his hands.

Much favoured by local holiday-makers was Sinaeia where the weather was warm and the town centre dotted with outdoor cafes where we sipped coffee, admired the locals and felt sorry for the gypsies whom everyone seemed to despise. My favourite place was Sighisoara, a medieval fortified town set high on a hill crowned by a Lutheran church and cemetery where whole families were buried in one grave; these acting as a memorial to the large numbers of Germans who had invaded this country. The young Romanians we met were passionate about their

history, viewing their country as ‘open house’ to any foreigner who infiltrated their rich land. Our Russian colleague was constantly embarrassed by having to listen to derogatory comments. Taking it on the chin, she made a point of offering Russian cigarettes to her denouncers.

Though we did see a lot of the countryside, much of it flat meadows planted with corn, haystacks wrapped around poles, horse and carts, centuries old wooden farmhouses, travelling was fraught. No one in our group spoke Romanian and we met few locals who knew any English. Train timetables were hard to decipher and the times they ran unpredictable. No place for stragglers. Catching trains forced us to run. We would have liked to venture further north into the Carpathian Mountains, but both roads and railways had been washed away in recent floods. However all that rain gave us soft green grass, wonderful white, yellow and pink wild flowers, and the quietest beech and pine forests I have ever entered. Few birds. Only crows. Had the others been captured? Eaten? I never did find out.

The highlight of the week was sharing experiences with the group, though these were all off the cuff. Participants had brought their own books and left them lying about. If you were interested, you picked them up and browsed. Though many – mostly the poets - would have liked a more disciplined arrangement, much like everything else in this program, it somehow didn’t happen. Yet it was this very inadequacy that unified the group. Though I *mostly* managed to stay calm as others grew angry, I nearly had my own meltdown when it was time to return to Bucharest and we discovered that no hotel had been booked and what’s more, nothing was available. Saved by our other Aussie who found us lodgings for two

nights via the internet, thankfully we didn't have to sleep alongside the gypsies in the streets.

As the week continued with more mistakes and confusions by our leader, he finally gave up. Tired of trying to explain his own and the program's inadequacies to angry foreigners, he took the only way out and quietly disappeared. The final outcome was a sad little email sent to some of the participants. It read: "I won't do any program at all. My apologies won't be enough but now there's nothing I can do. I can't do any program and I will not do it again. I quit from Alviogut Foundation. Sorry for everything. Florin."

But if there should happen to be any writer out there still interested in travelling to lesser known parts permit me to issue a few hints:

1. Don't ask for any grant money if travelling to unknown territory as the money must be first sent to the organisation in that country before you receive it in return. Long before that happens, it will surely disappear.
2. Make sure the organisation has information for any emergency. We filled out no forms and there was nothing ever in writing that might be used by a hospital or the police if this became necessary. We were lucky. Others might be less fortunate.
3. Take a cell phone that 'roams'. Don't depend on the local telephone system. And remember that old adage: "Pack less clothes. Take more money."

4. Make sure you have a real itinerary. Before we left we knew names and that was about it. Nothing really about the program except a few vague promises and nothing about the organisation that ran it. My personal rationalisation was that another Aussie writer had attended the Foundation two years earlier and strongly recommended that I do the same.

5. Though you may be asked to pay a set fee, check whether this includes entries to museums, galleries, food and drink. Be specific. The group had already paid a handsome up front fee, then were constantly asked to dip into their own pockets to pay for meals and drinks.

6. Make sure you know what is expected of you: readings, lectures, workshops etc. Don't let this be ad hoc, as it will surely never happen.

7. Don't depend on previous participants for information. Things change. Whereas the three previous programs had contained no more than five participants and the Alviogot Foundation had coped, once the numbers went up, all organisation flew out the window.

8. Worth a visit alone are the art galleries, museums and Ceausescue's palace. So is the exquisite hand embroidery and lace you can still buy very cheaply in street markets. I suspect that antique dealers would find a visit profitable, particularly if they have a taste for ornate carving and lots of gold paint.

9. Any plumber worth his salt would make a fortune. If you have a horror of cisterns that don't flush, squatting over holes, showers that run out of hot water and blocked drains, don't go!

10. Astonishingly, we had no problem finding internet cafes. Because of the vagaries of Romanian telephony – contacting Australia went into the 'too hard' basket - I was able to email home every day.

Would I do it again? Of course. Though there is always a price to pay as I spent the next three days staring at hotel walls in Germany on my way home with a massive attack of 'Romanian Revenge'. However I made some wonderful friends, had unusual experiences, took masses of notes which gave me material for a future novel and was shaken out of my personal comfort zone. All positives for this great-grandmother who celebrated her sixty-ninth birthday with an al fresco lunch in Sighisoara, Romania.