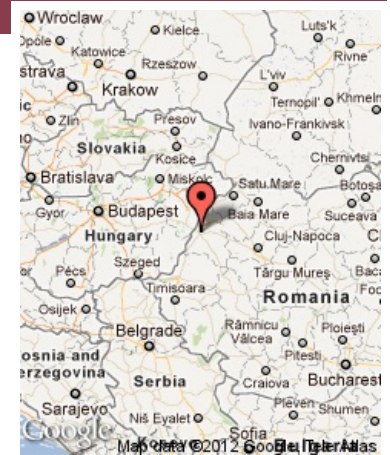


Culture and wild flowers in Romania



Highlights

The Apuseni Mountains are home to ice caves, meadows of wild flowers and a culture unchanged in centuries. These eight-day tours of Romania give you a chance to get to know all three, with cultural shows, short walks and some light subterranean exploration.

Located in Western Romania and surrounded by the mighty Romanian Carpathians arch, part of Europe's largest mountain chain, the Apuseni Mountains offer some of the most unspoiled natural beauty this side of Europe, as well as a culture unchanged in centuries. The Transylvanian region is arguably Europe's last wild frontier – the mountains harbour the continent's highest populations of lynx, wolves and brown bears, as well as over a third of its plant species – and rural life reflects this, with forestry, hay-making and livestock-rearing the major livelihood strategies. The landscape is almost unknown in Europe: meadows of wild flowers, soaring limestone cliffs, freshwater lakes and vast cave networks! More impressive still is the scale, with gently undulating hills as far as the horizon, punctuated occasionally by the odd hay wain or traditional wooden farmhouse.

These eight-day tours of Romania introduce you to the culture and nature of this awesome region. Starting from the pleasant town of Oradea, capital of Bihor Country, you'll head up into the highland Country of the Moti, the ancient inhabitants of the Apuseni. Here you'll explore the scattered villages and hamlets, watching and taking part in craft demonstrations and learning about local customs, including the use of giant wooden horns to communicate from one mountain to the next! You'll also visit some of the region's spectacular caves, such as the Scarisoara Ice Cave (containing the largest cave glacier in Europe) and the Coiba cave system, as well as the Tauz karstic spring. For floraphiles, meanwhile, there are meadow upon meadow of wild flowers, the perfect spot for a picnic lunch. On the subject of food, expect to eat lots, and well! From a simple shepherd's dinner to a traditional banquet, you'll be spoiled by the friendly guesthouse owners you meet during your trip.

Is it for me?

This tour is for people with a genuine interest in understanding and experiencing the culture and natural beauty of this remote corner of Europe. If you're not open-minded and curious by nature you probably won't get so much from this; there's loads to see and do but only if you're willing to immerse yourself in the local culture and to get out and about in the countryside. This means not being afraid to get your hands dirty at the wood-carving workshop or to try some of the local delicacies. Ultimately, this kind of involvement can be really rewarding for everyone. These unique tours of Romania are kept intentionally small – between four and twelve people – so there's no danger of things feeling voyeuristic. To the contrary, former guests have commented on the levels of intimacy and bonhomie between villagers and themselves, and on the reciprocal exchange of knowledge. We also hear only good things of the food and accommodation, not to mention the guides, who are always on hand to dispense local info and to accommodate any specialist interests that people might have.

Accommodation

Accommodation is in guest houses (ranked at 2 or 3 daisies – according to the Romanian system), mountain cabins or village families. The hosts are warm and generous, the food is mostly home-prepared from local and organic ingredients and very tasty. All the facilities have indoor bathrooms with running hot and cold water. In some occasions families share the same facility with guests (in this case it might happen that your bedroom may be accessible only through a bedroom being used by another person from the group) while in others you are

Prices from

583 GBP (8 days) per person

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accommodated in a separate facility which is exclusively for guests. All accommodation providers try to limit their negative impact on the environment and use as much as possible renewable or recyclable building materials.

Most of the meals are home-prepared, based on local recipes and using products (vegetables, eggs, meat, milk) from own garden. It is not a problem at all to have vegetarian foods, the host just has to be informed in time. However, the meals in this area are mostly based on meat (usually pork) and they tend to be sometimes fat, especially during the winter period and Christmas, Easter and New Year's eve celebrations. If you would like to have another type of food during your trip, please confirm in advance. Traditional home made drinks are wine and fruit (usually plum) brandy which is quite strong. In the mountain area jams and liqueurs made from wild berries are also usual and they are totally natural – no preservatives, artificial colours or flavors. If you would like to have herbal teas, just let them know.

Itinerary

Day 1: Arrival and transfer to Ghetar hamlet. From the airport, you'll be taken by car right to the heart of the "Country of the Moti (the name given to natives living in these mountains)" also known as "the highlands" of Apuseni Mountains, where you will enjoy your first meal in a local guesthouse. After dinner, a short multimedia presentation will give you the opportunity to learn about the Apuseni Nature Park, your home for the next days.

Day 2: Exploration day. This day is dedicated to the discovery of the local area of Ghetar-Hanasesti hamlets. A walk through these two traditional villages and a visit to a traditional household will provide you with a learning experience about the way these mountain people have lived their lives for centuries. At the Information Centre in Ghetar hamlet, you will attend a wood carving demonstration and have a briefing on other traditional customs and handicrafts. You will end your first full day in the area with a warm and delicious dinner in the guesthouse.

Day 3: Arnica Montana Conservation Project & Scarisoara Ice Cave
The day will begin with an introduction to the centuries-old traditional hay meadow management in Apuseni Mountains, including an easy 1-2 hour meadow walk. You will then find out more about the WWF Arnica Montana Project, which involves the education and support of a local community in sustainable Arnica harvesting practices. At the Arnica Centre you will watch a presentation about this conservation project, will have a picnic lunch and will visit the flower's drier. The impressive Scarisoara Ice Cave (containing the second largest cave glacier in Europe) will be your final stop of the day.

Day 4: Calineasa Glade
You will leave the Ghetar hamlet area and take a 4 hour walk (moderate level) to Calineasa Glade. Located in the centre of the mountains, Calineasa is used as a summer settlement by locals for raising animals and forestry. You will visit a small mountain cottage and see how local people cope with the harshest conditions up there in the mountains. A dinner cooked in a traditional shepherd meal and a sleep in a basic facility owned by locals will end another unique experience in the Apuseni.

Day 5: Casa de Piatra hamlet
From Calineasa you will walk to Casa de Piatra (The Rocky House), a small and iconic hamlet, located in one of Apuseni's scenic wilderness areas. Here, you will visit the impressive entrance of Coiba Cave system and later on, the Tauz karstic spring, where you will have your picnic lunch. From there, you'll continue to Ghetar hamlet, back to our guesthouse, on a horse cart provided by one of the locals.

Day 6: Ordancusa Valley
The day is dedicated to the discovery of another part of the Apuseni Highlands. You'll walk to Ordancusa Valley - one of the traditional places used by locals to access the Aries Valley and will continue your trip through beautiful meadows with many wild flowers. Finally, you'll reach a viewpoint from where you'll be able to get a fantastic view of the entire central part of the mountains, the Valley of Aries and the highest peak of the Apuseni. Back at the guesthouse, enjoy a free afternoon and prepare for a traditional dinner and a local music performance. If the weather co-operates, end the day exchanging stories around a campfire.

Day 7: Patrahaitesti local museum
On your last day you will travel by car to the Patrahaitesti hamlet, where you will learn about the role of the wood in local people's life, about carving and weaving and you'll visit a local museum with traditional hand made objects. Here you will have a chance to see how local people used to communicate in the past, from one mountain to another by using specific wooden made instruments and see a practical demonstration of this local custom.

Day 8: Time to say good-bye! You will be taken back to the airport and fly home

Details

Getting there

There is an airport at Oradea and you can fly there (indirectly) from London and other European airports

Price includes

Price includes all food, accommodation and transfers

Comfort level

Reasonably comfortable (Inns, B&Bs, luxury camping etc.)

Experience required

A reasonable level of fitness and interest is all that is needed

Travellers should bring

Below is a recommended list only - please adapt to suit your own needs/experience. Please be aware if you do not have certain vital items (e.g. walking boots, etc) the level of your hikes may be changed for your personal safety.

Recommended kit list

Short underwear top and bottoms - avoid cotton (2 sets); top (Polartec 100); bottom (Schoeller, Pile or fleece); waterproof trousers (Gore-Tex); rain parka/jacket with hood (Gore-Tex); socks (wool or synthetic - no cotton); boots (Gore-Tex or waterproof breathable material lining); low boots / sport sandals (for relaxing).

Additional items

Light torch (head torch/hand one); knife/ swiss army knife + cutlery (fork/spoon/plates); water bottle/hydration system (1 litre); small/day pack (15/20 litres); trekking rucksack (50/70 litres); trekking poles (adjustable - no ski poles); sun glasses - 100% UVA/UVB; sunscreen (factor 20); sun hat; lip protection; camera (classic or digital, plus extra film, batteries and charger); favourite snack foods (no more than 500g unless you have some special dietary needs, in which case, please consult the guide); personal toiletries; towels; personal medical kit; personal medication; repair kit - small sewing kit; mobile phone.