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Visiting Romania

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Introduction

Romania, a vibrant country in southeastern Europe, offers a compelling mix of stunning natural landscapes, rich history, unique cultural traditions, and bustling cities. From the medieval towns of Transylvania nestled in the Carpathian Mountains to the biodiverse Danube Delta and the sandy beaches of the Black Sea coast, Romania provides diverse experiences for every traveler. This guide aims to provide comprehensive information to help you plan your visit to this fascinating destination.

Stepping into Romania is like unfolding the pages of a globally enriched tapestry, where every corner of the country tells a distinct story. Its landscapes range from the dramatic Carpathian Mountains with their looming peaks and verdant valleys to the gentle, rolling vineyards and orchards that shape part of the country's agricultural charm. Here, one can explore the isolated villages where time seems to stand still, contrasting with urban centers like Bucharest that buzz with the vigor of modernity, offering a dynamic blend of the old and the new.

The cultural richness of Romania is one of its most profound attractions. This is a land where folklore and contemporary culture coexist happily, informing every element of daily life. Romania is home to many UNESCO World Heritage Sites, from the stunning painted monasteries of Bucovina to the fortified Saxon villages of Transylvania. These sites are not just historical landmarks; they are living testaments to the country's multicultural heritage and the relentless perseverance of its people in preserving their customs and traditions.

Traveling through Romania offers a palette of experiences – skiing in the snow-capped ski resorts of Poiana Braşov, birdwatching in Europe's largest wetland at the Danube Delta, exploring the mysterious and legendary castle of Dracula at Bran, or simply relishing the delicious local cuisines laden with influences from the many cultures that have crossed paths within the country. Whether it's tasting the robust, wintry warmth of a creamy "ciorbă" (soup) or indulging in "papanasi," the exquisite Romanian desserts, every meal tells its own story.

The charm of Romania also lies in its people, known for their hospitality and warmth. Visiting travelers are often met with open arms, treated to home-cooked meals, and invited to partake in personal and festive celebrations. This genuineness in hospitality ensures that each traveler leaves not just with souvenirs, but with memories and friendships that last a lifetime.

For prospective tourists, this guide offers a detailed pathway to experiencing the country's many delights. It aims to help in not just planning a trip, but in preparing

adequately to appreciate the depths and nuances of Romanian culture and hospitality. With the practical information furnished here, a journey through Romania promises to be not just a vacation, but an adventure, an exploration into the heart of what makes this country such a unique and captivating destination.

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CHAPTER ONE: Getting to Romania

Reaching Romania, nestled in the crossroads of Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe, is more straightforward than its somewhat remote location on the map might initially suggest. Whether you're soaring through the clouds, rolling across borders by train or bus, or embarking on a road trip adventure, multiple pathways lead to this land of captivating contrasts. Understanding the options available for your journey is the first practical step in transforming your travel plans from hopeful ideas into booked realities. The method you choose will likely depend on your starting point, budget, available time, and perhaps even your appetite for adventure.

For the vast majority of international visitors, particularly those coming from further afield than Romania's immediate neighbours, arriving by air is the most practical and time-efficient option. The country is well-integrated into Europe's extensive air travel network, offering numerous connections to major hubs and cities across the continent and beyond. Flying significantly reduces travel time, turning what could be a multi-day overland journey into a matter of hours. This convenience makes it the default choice for travellers from Western Europe, North America, Asia, and other distant locations.

The primary gateway for air travellers is Henri Coandă International Airport (OTP), situated in the town of Otopeni, approximately 17 kilometres north of Bucharest, the nation's capital. This airport handles the lion's share of Romania's international air traffic and serves as the main hub for the national carrier, TAROM, as well as a significant base for several low-cost airlines like Wizz Air and Ryanair. Numerous major European airlines, including Lufthansa, Air France, KLM, British Airways, Austrian Airlines, and Turkish Airlines, operate regular flights connecting Bucharest to their respective hubs, facilitating onward travel from virtually anywhere in the world.

Landing at Henri Coandă offers a relatively modern airport experience. Navigating through passport control and baggage reclaim is generally efficient, although waiting times can increase during peak hours or when multiple flights arrive simultaneously. Facilities within the terminal include currency exchange offices, ATMs, car rental desks representing major international and local companies, cafes, duty-free shops, and various options for onward travel into Bucharest itself. While detailed transport options within Romania are covered later, it's useful to know upon arrival that pre-paid taxis, ride-sharing services, and public buses provide connections from the airport to the city centre.

While Bucharest's Otopeni airport is the dominant entry point, Romania boasts several other international airports serving key regions, which can be strategically advantageous depending on your travel itinerary. Flying directly into a regional airport

can save considerable time and internal travel hassle if your primary interest lies outside the capital. Consider these alternatives carefully when planning your route, as they often cater heavily to low-cost carriers, potentially offering very competitive fares from various European cities.

Cluj-Napoca International Airport (CLJ), officially Avram Iancu International Airport Cluj, is the second-busiest airport in Romania and serves as the main aerial gateway to Transylvania. Located in the heart of this historically rich region, flying into Cluj is ideal for visitors planning to explore Cluj-Napoca itself, Sighișoara, Sibiu (though Sibiu also has its own airport), or the traditional villages of Maramureș further north. The airport has seen significant growth, with expanding routes offered by low-cost carriers like Wizz Air connecting it to numerous destinations across Europe, making Transylvania more accessible than ever.

Further west, Timișoara Traian Vuia International Airport (TSR) serves the Banat region. Its strategic location near the borders with Hungary and Serbia makes it a convenient entry point for those arriving from or combining their trip with travel in Central Europe. Timișoara itself is a vibrant city with significant Austro-Hungarian architectural influence. Like Cluj, Timișoara airport is well-served by low-cost airlines, offering direct links to various cities in Italy, Germany, Spain, the UK, and elsewhere, alongside connections operated by legacy carriers like Lufthansa via their hubs.

In the northeast, Iași International Airport (IAS) provides access to the historical region of Moldavia (Moldova in Romanian) and the famous painted monasteries of Bucovina. Iași is a major cultural and economic centre, and its airport facilitates travel to this somewhat more remote part of the country. Recent modernizations and route expansions, particularly by Wizz Air and TAROM, have improved its connectivity within Europe, making it a viable entry point for tourists heading specifically to explore the monasteries or the city of Iași itself.

Sibiu International Airport (SBZ), located in central Romania, is another excellent option for accessing Transylvania. Sibiu, a former European Capital of Culture, is renowned for its picturesque medieval centre and proximity to the Făgăraș Mountains. The airport offers connections to several German cities, London, and Vienna, among others, primarily served by carriers like Lufthansa, Austrian Airlines, and Wizz Air. Flying into Sibiu places you directly in one of Romania's most charming and popular tourist destinations.

Other smaller airports, such as Mihail Kogălniceanu International Airport (CND) near Constanța on the Black Sea coast, primarily handle seasonal charter flights during the summer months, catering to beach holidaymakers. Airports like Craiova (CRA) and Bacău (BCM) also offer a limited number of international connections, mainly through low-cost carriers. Checking flight availability and pricing into these secondary airports is always worthwhile, particularly if they align closely with your specific travel plans.

When booking flights to Romania, consider the usual factors like price, duration, and airline preference. Utilise online flight comparison websites to search for the best deals, but also check directly with airlines, especially low-cost carriers whose fares might not always appear on all aggregators. Be mindful of baggage allowances and additional fees, which can significantly impact the final cost on budget airlines. Flexibility with travel dates and booking in advance, particularly for travel during peak summer months or holidays, generally yields better prices. Sometimes, flying into a major European hub like Frankfurt, Vienna, Amsterdam, or Istanbul and then taking a connecting flight to Romania can be more cost-effective or offer better scheduling options than direct flights from your origin.

For those who prefer or require overland travel, Romania is accessible by international train services, connecting it to the wider European rail network. While perhaps not as swift or extensive as the networks in Western Europe, arriving by train offers a different kind of travel experience – a chance to watch the landscape unfold and transition as you cross borders. It can be a particularly atmospheric way to enter the country, especially if arriving through the scenic routes from Central Europe.

The primary hub for international trains is Bucharest's main railway station, Gara de Nord. This historic station, while perhaps appearing a little rough around the edges to some, is the terminus for services arriving from cities like Vienna, Budapest, Sofia, Chişinău, and historically Kyiv and Istanbul (though services can be subject to change based on current events and operational decisions). The journey from Vienna or Budapest, traversing the Hungarian plains before entering Romania, is a popular route, often offering overnight sleeper options which can save on accommodation costs and travel time simultaneously.

Booking international train tickets usually requires planning ahead. Tickets can often be purchased online through the website of the Romanian national railway company, CFR Călători, or via the national railway providers of the origin country (e.g., ÖBB for Austria, MÁV for Hungary). International rail booking platforms also exist. Be aware that international train journeys can be lengthy, and border crossings involve passport and customs checks onboard, which can sometimes add delays. While generally comfortable, especially in first class or sleeper compartments, speeds may be slower than what travellers accustomed to high-speed Western European lines might expect.

An extensive network of international bus services also connects Romania with numerous countries across Europe. Companies like FlixBus, Eurolines, and various regional operators offer routes linking major Romanian cities (primarily Bucharest, but also Cluj-Napoca, Timișoara, Iași, Brașov, and others) with destinations ranging from neighbouring capitals like Budapest, Sofia, Belgrade, and Chişinău to cities much further afield in Germany, France, Italy, Poland, and the UK.

Buses represent one of the most budget-friendly ways to reach Romania overland. Tickets are often significantly cheaper than train fares or flights, making them an attractive option for backpackers and budget-conscious travellers. Bus terminals are typically located near main train stations or in accessible parts of the city. The journey duration, however, can be considerable, especially on longer routes, and comfort levels vary depending on the operator and type of coach used. While modern coaches offer amenities like Wi-Fi and toilets, long hours on the road, potential traffic delays, and border crossing procedures (where passengers might need to disembark) are factors to consider. Booking is usually straightforward via the bus companies' websites or through ticket portals.

For travellers seeking maximum flexibility and the freedom to explore at their own pace, driving into Romania with a private vehicle is a viable option, particularly if coming from neighbouring countries or embarking on a larger European road trip. Romania shares land borders with Hungary, Serbia, Bulgaria, Ukraine, and the Republic of Moldova. Numerous border crossing points facilitate entry, ranging from major highway crossings to smaller local roads.

Before setting off, ensure you have all the necessary documentation. A valid driving license is essential; drivers from EU countries can use their national license, while those from outside the EU may need an International Driving Permit (IDP) in addition to their national license – it's crucial to check the specific requirements for your nationality before travel. You must also carry the vehicle's registration documents (V5C or equivalent) and proof of valid third-party liability insurance. For most European vehicles, insurance is covered by their domestic policy (check for specifics), often evidenced by the vehicle's license plate. For others, obtaining a Green Card from your insurer as proof of international coverage is highly recommended, and may be mandatory depending on your origin and insurance policy.

Upon entering Romania by road, you will encounter border control procedures. This typically involves a passport check for all occupants and verification of vehicle documents. Customs checks may also occur. One crucial requirement when driving in Romania is the purchase of a mandatory road toll vignette, known as the 'rovinieta'. This electronic vignette is required for using national roads and motorways outside of towns and cities. It can be purchased online in advance, at border crossing points (look for specific kiosks or offices), major petrol stations near the border, or post offices. Prices vary depending on the vehicle type and the duration of validity (options range from 7 days to 12 months). Failure to display a valid rovinieta (or have proof of its electronic purchase linked to your license plate) can result in significant fines if checked by authorities. Ensure you purchase it immediately upon entry.

Be prepared for potentially variable road conditions immediately after crossing the border, particularly when entering from certain directions or via smaller crossings. While major highways and European routes (marked 'E') are generally in good

condition, secondary roads can range from acceptable to needing significant repair. Awareness of local driving styles, which can sometimes seem assertive or unpredictable to foreign drivers, is also advisable from the moment you cross the border, though deeper insights into navigating Romanian roads are discussed later.

If you plan to enter Romania using a rental car hired in another country, it is imperative to check the rental company's policy regarding cross-border travel. Many companies restrict taking vehicles into certain countries, including Romania, or require special permission and additional insurance documentation. Ensure you have explicit written permission and all necessary paperwork before attempting to cross the border in a rental car to avoid potential legal issues or invalidation of your insurance.

While less common for the average tourist, arrival by water is also a possibility, primarily via the Danube River. Several international river cruise companies operate itineraries that navigate the Danube through Central and Eastern Europe, with some cruises concluding or passing through Romania. Cruise ships might dock at ports like Giurgiu (south of Bucharest), Fetești, or continue downstream towards the Danube Delta and the Black Sea. This mode of entry is specific to pre-arranged cruise packages rather than independent travel.

Historically, passenger ferry services connected the Romanian port of Constanța on the Black Sea with ports in Turkey, Georgia, or Ukraine. However, the availability and reliability of such services can fluctuate significantly due to economic factors and geopolitical situations. Currently, regular international passenger ferry services to Romania are limited or non-existent for typical tourists. Freight ferries (Ro-Ro) operate, but passenger options are scarce. Therefore, arriving by sea is generally not a standard option for most visitors planning a trip to Romania today, unless part of a Black Sea cruise itinerary which includes a stop in Constanța.

Choosing your mode of transport to Romania involves weighing convenience against cost, and speed against the experience of the journey itself. Air travel offers speed and connections from afar, landing you directly in major cities or strategic regions. Trains provide a more grounded, potentially scenic, overland journey, particularly appealing for travel within Europe. Buses offer the most economical overland route, connecting a vast network of cities. Driving grants ultimate freedom but requires careful preparation regarding documentation and road awareness. Each method opens the door to exploring the diverse landscapes and rich culture that Romania holds within its borders. The journey there is just the beginning.

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