

# lost in transylvania

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An account of an eventful tour of Romanian Transylvania, led by Alberto Boralevi and Stefano Ionescu, in search of the the rug collectors' Holy Grail.

**I MUST ADMIT** that I was highly sceptical about this trip. Did I want to go on an organised tour of the 'Transylvanian' rugs and Lutheran churches of Romania, travelling by bus? Like all snobby self-proclaimed world travellers I am highly distrustful of anything structured, abhor coaches, guides, timetables, transfers and, as a rug lover, I secretly despise other rug collectors and only truly appreciate rugs when they are inaccessible to the *hoi polloi*.

Once in the air between New York and London, my companion and I learn that Bucharest is infamous for its packs of rabid, tourist-eating dogs, and that at least ten million Romanians live with a serious shortage of toilet paper. After looting Heathrow airport of all available paper products we set off for Romania. Bucharest is a stately grey old lady of a capital – Thatcher-era communist-lite with grand tree-lined boulevards and bendy buses, all turgid with a sense of hopelessness. Our pleasant boutique hotel with wicker *tiki* bar furniture in the bedroom had the biggest bedside bible this Welsh Jewish girl has ever seen.

The tour is lead by Alberto Boralevi from Florence and Stefano Ionescu of Rome. While Boralevi's generosity of knowledge and gentleness needs no introduction to HALI readers, for those of us meeting Stefano for the first time, this is quite a treat. He is demanding, exacerbating, bossy and charming and runs this motley group with military precision, herding us along with more of an electric cattle prod than a cuddly sheep dog. Perhaps someone should give him an ICOC or a country to run.

The 'Transylvanian' rug is the holy grail of rug collectors and secretly each and every one of us has fantasised about finding one on this trip. We are armed with perhaps bags, customs and excise strategies, wads of Euros, even bigger stacks of Romanian Lei. We each imagine spotting a 17th century Lotto in a country market or haggling over a Holbein fragment in the back seat of a rusty Lada. Will the locals offer us Tuduc copies out of faux-leather suitcases as if they were fake Rolex watches?

Bucharest delivers the most surprising of pleasures with the

**1** Gothic altar and choir in St Margaret's Church, Mediaş. Some forty Ottoman rugs and fragments, including three 'Holbeins', adorn the pews, walls and balconies

**2** A 17th century single-niche 'Transylvanian', discovered in the National History Museum of Transylvania. After our visit, the rug was sent for restoration



Photo credit: Arpad Urvardi & Stefano Ionescu

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Photo credit: David Tolman

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Photo credit: Hermann Fabini

unappetising sounding Museum of the Romanian Peasant, a quirky, imaginative and very moving artist's viewpoint of how a museum should be. The afternoon is spent in the eclectic villa of the Romanian theatrical director Dan Nasta, eating local delicacies and speaking pre-war French in a dimly lit repository of sensational icons, paintings, rugs, ceramics and bizarre curios.

Within hours of leaving the capital, Transylvania reveals itself as an endless rolling verdant plain barricaded from modern Europe by a fortress of mountains. There is a peculiar astonishing pale acid green associated with the countryside. As the land flattens and the green intensifies, so time rolls back and the vestiges of modern life are displaced. It is as if the horrors of the harsh 20th century regime were a mere bruise upon the country rather than a scar. We are in a luxury tour bus full of digital cameras and microphones, I-pods and mobile phones and Blackberrys, driving back into the 19th century without benefit of a DeLorean.

Through drizzle, then driving rain, then vivid sun, come horse-drawn carts full of farmers and their families; the crops are sown and scythed without machinery. The architecture of each town we pass indicates its history – from steeped Saxon to baroque Black Sea. The ramshackle gypsy villages are both horrifying and fascinating in their ghetto separateness and squalor. The people are so poor here, yet the land is so bountiful – it is unimaginable how so many have starved. You can still see the rural hardship and dearth of modern dentistry on the blackened coal-seamed toothless faces that pass by.

Upon waking from a postprandial nap to the microphone screeching and burping into life, our fearless leader announces that we will now see twenty rugs *in situ* (I have to admit that for most of the trip I thought that *in situ* referred to a village between Sighişoara and Târgu Mureş).

Four hundred rugs in seven days is quite a feat. Are all the rugs great? Of course not. It may be sacrilegious to admit in certain fanatical ruggie circles but 'Lottos' and 'Bird Ushaks' and 'Ghirlandaos' come in several grades from very poor to transcendent, and although we may have seen thirty or forty magnificent examples, there is a lot of dross to wade through, sad late 18th century Lotto fragments as robustly woven as an Atlantic trawler's strongest nets; crumpled dishrags of Anatolian carpets bedecked in cobwebs and humming with moth activity; Miss Havershams of Melas prayer rugs crawling with carpet beetles and arousing little expectations. Pieces that would be better off if they were put out of their misery and buried like holy relics, or retired to an old cedar chest at the back of the parish priest's winter closet along with the portraits of Ceauşescu and broken snowshoes. But to quibble at the qualities of the individual rugs is missing the point. To see these weavings, *en masse*, proudly displayed in their original context, is a sublime experience.

Our days are spent in the dark, dank, earth-scented solemnity of silent churches, veritable reliquaries of early rugs. Some

buildings are superb with the remnants of their ornate Orthodox past still present in intricately carved stone and ethereal fragments of ancient frescos. Others are stunningly simple with white-washed walls and homemade cushions on broad-hewn pews. It is May and every church is fragrant with the spring flowers of the Pentecost celebrations. We are privileged to handle and examine so many rugs, even if it means hanging over a balustrade above the apse in a contortionist's stance. Nights are spent in a series of bizarrely themed hotels resplendent with garden gnomes, orange shag-pile carpets and mirrored ceilings; it is easy to see where the vast EU surplus mountain of black ash formica and blonde MDF furniture went to when tastes changed in 1985.

We eat well and heartily – great platters of cheese and mysterious meats with plenty of local wine and the tiny, tart vermilion strawberries of early Spring. Tables sag with vast portions of polenta and sour cream, and vegetarians pale beneath a canopy of stuffed animals. We feast on schnapps and pastries in the grassy courtyards of fortified churches and are the only visitors admitted to the Black Church of Braşov where the organist plays especially for us. Stefano, and by extension, we, his fervent acolytes, are greeted with great hospitality in every parish. This is a land of great contradictions, where election-eering posters are life-size or larger and the façades of buildings are festooned with a rainbow of solid looking politicians shaking hands and looking trustworthy whilst wearing hard hats. A country of abandoned villages and Roma black-and-red-leather Elvis bars, where a dozen Hassidic Jews in black hats will suddenly appear, searching for the graves of the Satmar martyrs. Somehow the authentic austerity of the Lutheran heritage sits comfortably with a tourist industry built on Dracula and the hectic Victoriana of Peleş Castle.

Most benevolent visitors adopt a Romanian baby. We decide to rescue an orphan of a different ilk and pledge to support a previously uncatalogued prayer rug in the National History Museum of Transylvania in Cluj-Napoca. Although the majority of the rugs in Romania have been cleaned and are monitored for risk of infestation, many others desperately need funds for restoration.

On we travel towards Budapest and modern life. It is not about what we brought back in our luggage, but the experience that counts. True believers one and all, we have travelled along the Via Dolorosa of the elusive Turkish rug, collecting parish stamps at each station of the cross. The quest continues.

*The next tour takes place at the end of May 2009. Stefano Ionescu is publisher, editor and co-author of the book 'Antique Ottoman Rugs in Transylvania', the second edition of which was launched on 18 April 2007 at the opening of the exhibition 'In Praise of God: Anatolian Rugs in Transylvanian Churches 1500-1750' at the Sakıp Sabancı Museum, Istanbul, curated by Dr Nazan Ölçer and Michael Franses.*

**3** Bran Castle, also called Dracula Castle, near Braşov. On their way from Danube to Braşov, Turkish goods, including loads of carpets, crossed the Carpathians through the Bran Pass

**4** Top Romanian collectors Liana and Dan Nasta and the participants of the tour. About three hundred items from their collection, including twenty kilims, were donated to the Romanian State and are displayed in the Brâncoveanu Palace at Mogoşoaia

**5** A 17th century white-ground 'Transylvanian' double-niche rug, handled with due care by textile experts at the Brukenthal Museum in Sibiu. 1.22m x 1.63m (4'0" x 5'4"). Formerly in the Evangelical Parish Church of Sibiu. Brukenthal Museum, Sibiu, inv. M.2214

**6** The fortified church in Biertan. From the 16th to the 19th century this was the Episcopal Seat of the Saxon Lutheran Church in Transylvania