

Serendipity resides in rural Romania



Rick Steves

Romania is full of surprises and wonderful people. And as you leave the capital of Bucharest, it gets even better. In the Romanian countryside, the nation's history and traditional culture live on — vividly.

A hard-fought past is evident in the fortress-like churches scattered through the central region of Transylvania. In medieval times, big towns were well-protected, but smaller villages were vulnerable to invaders. So industrious German settlers, imported by the local overlords to tame the wild frontier, fortified their churches.

Like medieval fortresses, these Saxon churches have beefy bastions, stout lookout towers and narrow slits for raining arrows on enemies. Entire communities could take refuge inside — within wraparound defensive galleries.

Today, most of Romania's ethnic Germans are gone, having emigrated in the late 19th century or fled to Germany after World War II or after the fall of communism in 1989. But their legacy lives on: Stepping inside these churches feels like stepping back into medieval Germany. Decoration is humble, pews are simple benches, and Bible quotes are in German.

The whitewashed and ramshackle church of Viscri, hidden deep in the Transylvanian hills, is one of the oldest (c. 1100). Most of the pews here don't have backs, because traditional village women — who wore starched dresses and long headaddresses — wanted to avoid creases in their best clothing. The pews with backs were for the families of those who were from



Whether dotting the countryside — or piled onto horse-drawn carts — you'll find haystacks all over the Romanian region of Maramures. **CAMERON HEWITT**

elsewhere — usually the minister and the teacher.

Farther north, Romania's Maramures region is Europe's most traditional corner. While it takes some effort to reach, Maramures is well worth the effort for those who want to see a real, living, open-air folk museum. It's a rolling, pastoral landscape speckled with haystacks.

Thanks to its rugged terrain and its great distance from Bucharest, Maramures avoided communist farm collectivization — so people still tend their small family plots by hand. Horse carts seem to outnumber cows. Men in overalls and distinctive straw hats pile hay onto their wooden wagons. Women wear big, puffy skirts just above the knee, babushkas on their heads and baskets laden with heavy goods on their

backs. This region feels like Europe's version of Amish Country, where centuries-old ways endure. It's not for the benefit of tourists — it's just their lifestyle.

Wander through any village and peek into family compounds. Each one is marked with a huge, ceremonial wooden gateway — just big enough for a hay-loaded horse cart to trot through. The gates are carved with a whole iconography of local symbols: starburst (pagan sun worship), wolf teeth (protection), bull horns (masculinity), leaves (nature), and — most importantly — the “rope of life” motif, a helix-like design suggesting the continuity of life from generation to generation. Inside each courtyard, you'll usually see — in addition to the main house — a humble barn with a paddock, a garden patch,

and an old-fashioned, hand-pulled well.

You'll be surprised how often you're invited inside. Many Maramures residents are eager to show curious visitors their humble homes. In Romania, meeting people often comes with a welcoming glass of the fruity, 100-proof Romanian moonshine called palinca. It's strong stuff — kind of like rubbing alcohol with a touch of plum.

One of the most memorable sights in Maramures is the Merry (as in “joyful”) Cemetery. I've enjoyed a variety of graveyards throughout Europe, but I can safely say that this Romanian one is one of a kind. In 1935, a woodcarver — inspired by a long-forgotten tradition — began filling this cemetery with a forest of vivid memorials. Each one comes with a whimsical

poem and a painting of the departed doing something he or she loved.

Although the cemetery is dubbed “merry,” many of the poems are downright morose. Tales of young lives cut short by tragic accidents, warriors mowed down in the prime of life or people who simply never found happiness, are a reminder that death, and life, are sometimes nothing to be cheerful about. Even if you can't read the poems, the images speak volumes: weaver ... loved bikes ... television repairman ... soldier ... hit by a car ... struck by lightning ... nagging mother-in-law.

And yet, each memorial is a poignant celebration of individual lives, a chronicle of village history, and an irreverent raspberry in the face of death. And it's all painted a cheery blue to

match the heavens where the souls are headed.

Traveling in the Romanian countryside, you'll find both evocative reminders of the past and time-warp lifestyles, seemingly oblivious to the modern world that's the norm elsewhere. More than anywhere else I've found in Europe, this is a place where, when you slow down and let adventures unfold, they will. In Romania, you'll find that rather than famous sights, it's the happy and unpredictable serendipity that leaves you with lifelong memories as souvenirs.

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CELEBRITY TRAVEL

Williams balances teaching, his music

By **Jae-Ha Kim**
TRIBUNE CONTENT AGENCY

As a music professor at the University of Massachusetts Lowell, ethnomusicologist Alan Williams said that his students don't know he's a recording artist as well.

“I did have an odd moment performing at a coffeehouse in western Massachusetts,” said Williams. “A group of students stumbled upon their professor when they were just looking for a night out away from school. Thankfully, we all got over the shock and had a lovely time.”

His latest album is “Floating on the Dreamline.”

Of the title, Williams said the dreamline is wherever our imagination takes us, which allows everyone to travel without ever leaving home.

This interview with Williams has been edited for clarity and length.

Q: When you tour, do you plan gigs so you won't be on the road when school is in session?

A: You've hit on one of the biggest challenges to balancing the music and the academic careers. Essentially for eight months of the year, I'm locked in place, though I try to play shows locally. And while my job does allow for some blocks of time to tour, it isn't conducive for booking the tour dates. The net result is that I have only infrequently traveled to play, though I've had wonderful brief excursions to areas across the country.

Q: From your travels, what musical trends have you



Alan Williams is a college professor by day and a singer-songwriter by night. **ADRIEN BISSON**

heard that grabbed your attention?

A: I've seen brilliant collaborations between improvising musicians and dancers in Amsterdam, hybrid medieval and electronic dance music in Copenhagen and punk bands playing the nyckelharpa — a fiddle with keys — in Stockholm. But I also know that more recent generations of my students from the U.S. have much more broad listening habits and seem more predisposed to accept and engage with music from around the world and across time periods. ... Seeing my students listening to K-pop, Congolese street bands playing heavily distorted metallophones and Cambodian pop from the golden age before the Khmer Rouge gives me hope for the future.

Q: Have you worked on any songs while on the road?

A: Absolutely. A number of songs on the album began during a road trip in a rented camper van. In the moment between camp stove dinner and the mosquito apocalypse, a little guitar plucking at the picnic table resulted in the seedling of a song. I have clear memories of crafting lyrics crammed into the middle seat of an economy class airplane flight. And I have developed the odd habit of writing some of my most despairing or heart-broken songs while lying on a beach.

Q: Have you visited places

for work that were so nice that you traveled back there later for a personal trip?

A: For a few years, I found myself frequently traveling to Europe for academic conferences, research projects and guest lectures. I made it a point to fly into Amsterdam before heading to my final destination. There was a spa (that was) a short bus ride from Schiphol airport where I could steam, sweat (and) soak away jet lag and then head back to the airport for a short flight. I often extended my trips to allow an extra day or two to roam the city. The old center of Amsterdam is so walkable. With each trip I tried to explore some of the surrounding neighborhoods as well.

Q: What is your favorite vacation destination?

A: For many years, I would save up money to allow for multiweek stays in Hawaii. I never really took to the tourist areas like Waikiki, but I loved being in some of the less traveled areas of Maui and later the Big Island. Obviously, the weather is a draw, but the landscape is so dramatic. Each island has its own character. I ended up owning a little cottage with no kitchen on the Big Island where I will retire to when I no longer have the desire to travel with a guitar.

For more from the reporter, visit www.jaehakim.com.

TRAVEL TROUBLESHOOTER

Attempts to repair suitcase with lifetime warranty unsuccessful

By **Christopher Elliott** | KING FEATURES SYNDICATE

I purchased a Travelpro Platinum 29-inch suitcase with a lifetime warranty in 1998. The bag handle broke and is inoperable.

My attempts to get it repaired have not succeeded because the parts are not available to make the repair.

I think Travelpro should replace the bag with a new one because I paid for a bag with a lifetime warranty. What can I do?

— *David Tashji, Westford, Massachusetts*

A: You're absolutely right to be frustrated — Travelpro stopped manufacturing the replacement parts for your suitcase. It should have offered you a comparable replacement or refund. This is what “lifetime warranty” means — not “lifetime warranty unless we decide to stop making parts.”

Travelpro's limited warranty covers defects in materials and workmanship for major components like wheels, zippers and handles.

The Magnuson-Moss Warranty Act, which is the federal law that governs warranties, requires companies to honor their written warranties. Travelpro's own warranty language specifically covers a retractable handle, which is exactly what your situation entails. A company can't simply abandon their warranty obligations because it's inconvenient.

In fairness to Travelpro, the Rollaboard lasted for 28

years, which is a long time for luggage. To put this into perspective, my luggage lasts for about a year. (But I live out of my suitcase.) Typically, the wheels are the first thing to go. Modern handles are practically indestructible.

It looks like you talked to Travelpro's AI chatbot when you were trying to get this resolved. I've found better results by keeping everything in writing and dealing with real human representatives. When you email a business, it also creates a paper trail, which is essential to resolving a problem.

You also could have escalated this to Travelpro's executive team. I publish the names and contact information of the company's executives on my website, elliott.org. The Travelpro contact page has the information that you need to reach the decision-makers.

I've owned Travelpro luggage before, and I've

found the company to be responsive, so I was curious about what happened here.

Could Travelpro really weasel out of a lifetime warranty obligation by saying that it no longer manufactured the part?

I didn't see any fine print in its warranty suggesting that it could do this. I think most reasonable customers would take “lifetime” to mean, well, exactly that.

I contacted Travelpro, and a representative said that the company needed more documentation from you about your broken handle. It also reviewed your case and agreed to send you a replacement suitcase. So apparently, “lifetime” really does mean for a lifetime!

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