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# Eastern Europe

## Hungary and the old Soviet Union

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Parliament at Budapest Romania

**Moldova - Albania - Romania - Bulgaria - Hungary - Slovakia** - Seldom visited and certainly not a hot tourist spot from Western countries this Eastern block of countries are in our opinion the most surprising up and coming future of Europe.

What do we mean by up and coming... it appears to us and lets not forget that we write only on our experience, that the atmosphere in all of these Countries is a bright future.

Torn over the years from oppressive rule and under political and cultural pressure from surrounding countries, the feel on the ground is, they are staying true to their culture and won't be influenced. What do I mean by that? The people are staunch and stoic in their influence from pressure, they keep their strong family ties and traditions

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and the youth are smart and intuitive. Having been through the hardest of times there is very little that can break them from here on.

Which means that when we visit these countries we are amazed at the feeling of "Freedom" on the streets, they are free in their thinking and free in the expression and free in the sense that they will talk about any subject and not shy away from any topic.

We are not travel guides or history teachers so we recommend that people look up the history of these countries as we have learnt a lot from our brief visit.

Here is our journal of the flights and our site seeing adventures.



Arriving at Chisinau Moldova

### **UGSB to LUKK**

#### **Batumi, Georgia to Chişinău, Moldova**

MGH Moldova Ground Handling.

We had a bit of rain in Batumi so the aircraft is slightly cleaner than when we came from TLV but the dirt has left lines everywhere. We are able to get a ladder from the refuellers to put in some oil and I use the time to clean and protect the icing boots who have gathered some bird poop which has eaten into the fine leather type layer.

Departure from RWY 13 with relatively no wind is straight over the Black Sea . At 5000 feet - left turn to a point off the coast of Turkey then we are handed over to Ankara who are not receiving our reports, another pilot responds to relay our requests to take a

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short cut, there seems to be some confusion on them identifying us. When they get back to confirm, they clear us to GOKPA, even better than before, although as we are now fully over the water it is a little unnerving, the Black Sea is a huge body of water!



Lenin statue in Tiraspol

Moldova is a small country sitting between Ukraine and Romania and our flight path is to follow the closest to the coast of Turkey thus avoiding Ukraine airspace (because of some strange problems there 🤔) to the other side of the Black Sea, then right turn to Romania then fly around back to Moldova.

At turn point to Romania we pass above the tail of a squall line of thunderstorms building from the coast of Turkey, we were already on a right of track path to get out of the turbulence that was being created from them, Amir comments that he would not like to be in an SR22 today trying to cross that.

What a surprise is Moldova, when Amir announced our destination I had very low expectations; what could there possibly be to see in such a place, not renown for a tourist spot and how wrong that actually is. There is plenty to see here, notwithstanding the fascination to see post Soviet society trying to climb out of the grips of such devastation but aside from that there are many interesting areas to visit - here are the ones we saw:

## Tiraspol and Bender

In the autonomous zone between Moldova and Ukraine where you pass through Russian military checkpoints and border customs crossing with passport and car registration passes required, is Dniester Nista territories or known as Transnistria; a large agricultural area growing wheat, sunflower, lavender and vast vineyards.

Here is a link to some more information on this interesting area \*\*source:

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/06/05/transnistria-isnt-the-smugglers-paradise-it-used-to-be-sheriff-moldova-ukraine-tiraspol/>



(Since 1990, Transnistria has governed itself independently of the Moldovan capital, Chisinau, fortified by a permanent Russian military presence and annual financial aid from Moscow.

The republic is a living museum of Soviet iconography, from the imperious statue of Lenin standing guard at the steps of Tiraspol's parliament building to the hammer and sickle Transnistrian flags that flutter from the walls of

the city's crumbling gray buildings.....)

The entire province is managed / controlled by Sherrif inc - that is a story within itself and worth the look up....

The distillery of kVint, is here since 1897 initially only producing Vodka and non-alcohol fruit drinks during the prohibition years until many people died of alcohol poisoning brewing their own at home. That prompted the government to end prohibition and they started making Vodka and wine again. The production of Brandy started in 1938. The "Brandy" is world famous and has won over 430 medals and prestigious prizes. The Russian astronauts took quite a few bottles to space in 1998 and only 1 bottle returned 🤔 which is on display in the on-site museum. The factory was closed to public tours but when they heard we came all the way from Australia to

see their factory they gave us a personal tour with the lovely Marketing Executive Anna, who told us, they make the "nectar of the gods" from wine and age it in both ancient barrels and new. They make 20 million bottles of every product a year in this facility and it is exported to 29 Countries. It is the oldest still operating commercial enterprise in the region.

Back in the region of Moldova we visited:



**Cricova Wine tunnels** - This

was most surprising it is a maze of carved out limestone underground tunnels used for the storage of over 1.3 million wine bottles and massive storage barrels. We travel 80 metres underground to their cinema to sip Rose Sparkling wine and hear the story of the tunnels that cover over 120 kms!



**Orheiul Vechi** - Is a city laying in a limestone eroded valley containing ancient caves used as orthodox churches and places for citizens to hideout from the Ottomans , now a tourist attraction with many eco friendly hotels in basic traditional houses with their plots of land full of beautiful vegetable gardens and fruit and nut trees, their water supply still being hauled up from a well outside each property, very quaint and nice alongside the river.



Best restaurant Pegas, full of locals serving fine dining food of the highest quality.  
Avocado grilled and topped with shrimps tartare and a soft poached egg.  
Best borscht, steak and everything!  
As you can see we enjoy eating as much as flying!



Sea buckthorn Tea



Napoleon cake - layers of flaky pastry and creamy custard

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LUKK to LRBS

Chişinău, Moldova to Bucharest, Romania

RAS-Romanian Airport Services

247nm -

It's a very slow climb to FLT200, in 30C heat after a nice no hassle departure from RWY 26. Every square inch of Moldova is covered in perfect agricultural fields all very green and lush.

Here is where went went in Romania -

**Romania mud ponds** - Buzau largest mud volcano in Europe (note to self - don't waste your time on this spot ;)

**Brasov** - A really lovely city - full of history, great mountain air, coffee culture and modern bars at night in the back drop of an old cultural city - loved it.

**Bran castle** - Built for the fortification and protection of German colonists in Transylvania. To revive the tourist trade to this town they made up the story that the castle was the inspiration of the Bram Stokers Dracula novel, it was just a gimmick and they have a very nice display and theme inside of the original movie. I really liked the castle because it was not pompous and opulent it was simple and practical with many small nooks and crannies - making it most interesting.



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**Turda salt mines** - Salt was mined here between 1690 to 1880 , 200 years of mining! Cone shaped pits still containing the equipment used to mine and transport to the surface. One of the huge pits the Theresa mine was renovated in the 90's at a cost of around \$6 million Euros and opened to the public. The entire mine walls are still lined with solid salt and the salt water dripping coats everything so when we traverse down 80m to the bottom of the pit in an elevator it is scary and we hope the maintenance is up to date.



Incredible engineering for such times this whole tour is mind blowing! There is a complete Ferris wheel in the main mine shaft and an amusement park!

Something that is not incredible is the roads in these countries, something we take for granted in a sophisticated society but very lacking in a developing economic country with the absence of highway infrastructure, the journey takes hours and is made perilous by slow moving trucks causing people take huge risks between farming traffic and the occasional horse and cart. Alright they were under control of communist government for decades but it has been liberated for decades so it shows just how hard and long it takes to recover and climb out of such rule.

**Cluj Napoca** the 2nd biggest city in Romania was a little disappointing just a city of University students and not much to see so we travel back to Brasov and stay at a swanky apartment (with a Washing Machine) near the Black Church - Hello clean clothes 😊

Drive outside of the city of Bucharest and the country side is full of quaint old towns, decrepit old houses line the main roads each within their own plot of land that they grow all their own produce. Colourfully painted and rustic cottage charm comes to mind, cobblestone pathways and cities displaying grand churches and architectural glamour of the olden more aristocratic times.



**Rasnov Citadel** was under renovation but a lovely drive up the hill to read the history.

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**Peles Castle** - a Neo-Renaissance castle in the Carpathian Mountains, near Sinaia, in Prahova County, this was probably the most magnificent castle I have ever seen - speechless...



**Bucharest**....Oh what a beautiful City - we stayed at the Hilton during the Euro 2020 (delayed by a year) soccer football championship - the French team stayed in the same hotel which caused all sorts of security problems and we got a taste of how it is to be surrounded by "Fans" and paparazzi. Unfortunately we don't know anything about soccer teams but are told we are amongst the most valuable players in Europe! Pity they lost their first game to Switzerland and were exited from the competition immediately.



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LRBS to LBSF

**Bucharest, Romania to Sofia, Bulgaria**

173nm,

Bucharest has the most confusing taxiway lane markings of any airport we have been to so far, they are all marked on the tarmac in sweeping lines to each parking spot so they are virtually impossible to read from the cockpit and impossible to find the directed pathway alpha, without a "follow me" car.

Nevertheless we did manage to manoeuvre. On our departure the immigration officer asked to come out to see the plane, so he jumps in our ride. He was astounded by the plane, the first Vision Jet they had seen here.

A very quick 30min flight at FLT 180 which gives Amir a good chance to complete flight procedures and checklists super fast and keeping him in good practice which has been lacking due to our extended stays in each country.

We didn't hire a car in Sofia which was probably a mistake but instead we just enjoyed to walk around the City and take it easy in the coffee shops and rest from all our previous places - sometimes it is just nice to sloth around....



Parking in Sofia, Alex (Handler) and Amir

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We were entertained by the traditional dancers and a couple that perform a Fire walking ritual ceremony, a mix from the Orthodox and Pagan tradition. I would never have thought they did this in Bulgaria.



We found one of the best little restaurants in the city - Made in Home - amazing Pizza! look at that oozy egg..



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## **Sofia, Bulgaria to Tirana, Albania**

LBSF to LATI

203nm

Handler: Sofia, Bulgaria - Alex at airport ground handling services who poached us on the arrival from the hands of the local services... we were glad as the handling services were 2nd to none and very cheap!

We nearly left all the computer equipment in the taxi and at security checkpoint I noticed it was missing, we run back to the taxi and he was still there! That was a very close call and a devastating mistake that hopefully we won't make again. Alex takes us through the airport in just a few minutes after all he is also the airport ground services manager. The departure from RWY 27 is smooth and easy as the ground operator held the ground traffic for us,. There was a line of buses and vehicles on both sides of us, waiting for our taxi out of parking, I'm sure they were not impressed.

Amir decides to do some hand flying and we are guided around the 9000 feet mountains by departure services, all very smooth in perfect weather. It is straight to Skopje waypoint also avoiding mountains then onto Tirana. We are only going to FLT200 as it is such a short flight less than 1hr but very picturesque through beautiful mountains, that once cleared, opens to a view of the blue waters of the Adriatic Sea and a smooth long final over the flat landscape around Tirana.



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The handling services basically just met us at the plane and ordered the bus to take us to the terminal, which we easily walked through passport control with a stamp and a have a nice stay! The airport is busy with the arrival of several charter flights and plenty of people waiting for family members, there are no "restrictions" here!



We hire a rental car and drive direct to The Albanian Riviera, also popularly known as Bregu, the coastline along the Northeastern Ionian Sea. We visit also the districts of Sarandë and stay in Vlorë at the Inn Hotel which is on the sea and just opened.

Whilst the coast is for swimming and beach vacation time the Capital Tirana is most interesting, especially walking around and discovering the

anti-nuclear Bunker that was built by the dictator Enver Hoxha and the communist government. There are bunkers built all over Albania some 170,000 of them dotted everywhere. This Country was only liberated in 1998 and people really need to read the



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history of this Country and the atrocities committed by the Fascist and Communist government.



After visiting the museum and reading what happened here and seeing the photos and news footage on display it is hard to believe that this all happened only a little over 20 years ago. However when you emerge from the depths of the bunker to the daylight above and look around it is astounding to see how this Country in particular has moved on and

UP! Now a thriving economy growing and expanding rapidly more so than the Countries that were under Soviet rule in our opinion of course. The City is modern and hip with many bars and coffee shops, great restaurants and embarrassingly cheap. Vegetables with real flavour and colour as they lived secluded from the world for so many years they needed to be self sufficient for everything, which shows in their produce of very high quality.



Ionian Sea sunsets are spectacular

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LATI to LHSM

**Tirana, Albania to Heviz airport - Balaton lake, Hungary.**

Hot weather in both destinations and winds being a concern in Hungary we make a very early morning start. The bus drops Amir at the flight ops office and continues on to drop me at the aircraft which I have ready by the time he gets back to fuel up. It is under 2 hrs to destination in hazy conditions the arrival and landing in a slight cross wind. As we hand over our passports to border control he looks at them and doesn't look happy, "One moment we have problem", reaching for the phone, we can't enter Hungary as Australia is not on their acceptable countries. We are not on business and not taking passengers, basically we don't tick any of their boxes so we can't enter. After a bit of working through every avenue they approached our friends waiting outside to get a business invite letter, this now grants us

entry without any limits. Just a few official stamps in the right spots on numerous pieces of paper and everything is cool. The airport staff are exceptionally helpful and went out of their way to accommodate.

We stayed at the spa and health hotel Carbona but after one night we decided to rent a car and drive a few hours to Budapest, checking into the Hilton at Buda Castle with the view from our suite of the magnificent Parliament House building and the historic Fisherman Castle, we are in magic land!

We meet up with 2 very special young adults Mikola and Anna-Marie, brother and sister who give us a personal tour around their favourite places in Budapest. Coming from a musical family and continuing the tradition, Mikola is a concert master, playing the violin and a music teacher, from which we also learn a little about the lifestyle and grow a new love of the classical music.



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Amir doesn't normally take the train but as this one is historical he suffered for us.



LHSM - LZIB

**Heviz, Hungary to Bratislava, Slovakia**

94nm

We wave goodbye to our friends Karl-Heinz and Agatha who have shown us and hosted us in their 2nd home and holiday place that we would not have ever thought to visit. Originally we met in Cyprus by chance and kept in contact, as a special treat they gave a private concert in an opulent antique house that had a concert hall room with a new piano that Professor Karl-Heinz “massaged out” the most beautiful composers

music along with his partner in love and music Professor Agatha singing Brahms, Gypsy love songs and Hugo Conrat, Hungarian love songs. Karl-Heinz played a piece from Schubert #4 Impromptus that was so magical. We were both honoured and astounded as these two lovely souls performed on our last night. Our appetite for classical music has been awakened!



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In a strong wind take-off straight along the 77 km long Lake Balaton it is a very short flight to Bratislava, Slovakia. Checklists and processes need to be completed quickly with the short flight and lower altitude of just 13000 feet. Sitting as meat in the sandwich between two layer of clouds, which is a little uncomfortable, we don't notice any icing on the wings so we remain at this altitude. The cloud sandwich soon cleared to smooth conditions. The ground now in clear sight is pretty, flat agricultural fields. We stay right in the centre of the City near the Opera historical building in a near empty Radison Blu with the biggest suite all at a budget price of 100 Euro! Again we are just walking the streets in the City and enjoying the good restaurants, coffee shops and shisha bars at night.



**Buda castle-dinner after the concert-Church at Buda**



Bratislava, Slovakia