



WHO GOES TO PLOIESTI



In equal proportion to my love of travel is my loathing of being a tourist. I mean a camera-case-toting, loud-and-slow speaking, tennis-shoe-wearing, "hello"-and-"thank you"-in-the-local-language-knowing, Ameri-

can sense of the word *tourist*. I lean toward quiet, blended travel exploring local spots in typical towns, and my brother's marriage to a woman from Ploiesti, Romania, provided the perfect opportunity to be an un-tourist.

**T**ourists have no reason to go to Ploiesti. It's located about an hour from Bucharest, which attracts visitors from around the world to take in its massive architecture and history. Going the other way, Ploiesti is about an hour from the city of Sinaia from where ski buffs and day trippers flock in air-conditioned buses, making an arc from Bucharest, a stop to see Peles Castle, on to Brasov (a German-built town that's home to The Black Cathedral), and off to Bran Castle (better known as Dracula's Castle) before getting back to the

big city in time for a late dinner. Ploiesti doesn't make the itinerary, and neither does its history.

An industrial city, Ploiesti was one of the world's leading oil extraction and refinery regions in the late 1800s. Between the two world wars, several major oil companies set up plants and the city's refineries provided 80 percent of the petroleum processed in Romania. In World War II, Germany appropriated Ploiesti as its main source of oil and the U.S., in turn, conducted such massive air strikes that it became the most bombed city in Romania during the war. The city was captured in 1944 by the Soviets and the Communist regime nationalized the oil industry, which had been mostly privately owned. Romania did not regain its independence until the Revolution of 1989.

Today, Ploiesti is Romania's ninth largest city with nearly 250,000 residents and continues to be a working city as evidenced by its extensive public transportation system. Its yellow bus fleet is one of the most modern in Eastern Europe and connects with trolley buses and trams to transport nearly 150,000 riders daily. The town supports the second largest railway center in the country and is home to the Oil & Gas University as well as the Ploiesti Philharmonic Orchestra.

I visited the small town of Baicoi outside of Ploiesti and the countryside—oh, the

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views—would be reason enough to go. Imagine a stretch of pasture dropping to an endless valley filled with varying shades of green and spotted by sheep and cows being herded by men with sticks, all set against a backdrop of foothills, then rolling mountains, backed by snow-capped peaks in the distance. You sit on the hill and are transported.

All of this might not make a guidebook, but it does make Ploiesti a perfect place to visit if you want to experience actual Romanian life. In my case—I was the guest of a local family, on the inside of a big cultural event, and staying in Ploiesti itself—it was an ideal opportunity for some un-tourism. Now, before I go further, I must explain the generous hospitality of my guests. They were not going to let me get away with a week of bumbling around, deciphering local bus schedules and just seeing what I'd find. Many days were arranged with barbecues at grandma's house, van taxis to some of the previously mentioned sites, food, wine, wine, food, and warm hosts. I visited the Zoican family, whose daughter Codruta is now my brother Benjamin's wife.

The trip provided the opportunity to meander around a town not accustomed to seeing tourists, forcing me to reconcile my place in its history and allowing me to be inside homes, pastures, to participate in ceremonies, and to experience culture that a tourist normally wouldn't have access to.

Let's start with the food. Do not visit a Romanian family without your appetite and an eye ready to admire culinary beauty. Their idea of an appetizer is not your average meat and cheese and veggie dip. You think you are fancy when you roll up the cold cuts before arranging them on a tray? At each lunch, dinner, or barbecue, Course 1 consisted of exquisite serving plates overloaded with various meats, cheeses, and vegetables cut to look like flowers or other appealing shapes. Everything looks so good, you don't know where to start, and you are afraid to start because it looks so pretty and you don't want to mess it up.

At the wedding, we were each served a plate—knowing four more courses were to come. Next comes fish or soup, which precedes the main meat course, followed by dessert, which is not a dessert but a beautiful array of little cakes of various flavors and styles. I'd have a chocolate one, try a strawberry, then I'd have to eat a vanilla cake and I still hadn't gotten to the coconut or pecan that my family was oohing about. I could go on and on, because that's what we did in Romania—eat on and on.

The wedding reception began at 7 p.m., with the greeting of guests and general socializing. The band was playing, and dancing picked up by about 9 o'clock, by which time most everyone had arrived. Drinks flowed the whole evening: a light wine, homemade by Mr. Zoican, and gin, whiskey, and champagne. Early on, the musicians played a mix of traditional Romanian folk music during which huge circle dances would form.

Even the Americans could follow along some approximation of the steps and move with the group for the very long songs. I worked up an appetite, but around 9:30, when the first course was served, I was still shocked that the whole gorgeous plate was just for me. My instinct was to take a few things and pass it.



More dancing ensued, including the bride and groom's first dance, parent dances, and more traditional folk dancing. Somewhere in there, the wait staff brought out Course 2, a lightly breaded fish with diced potatoes. Mid-bite, a hush fell over the room when Nina Predescu, a famous Romanian folk singer, entered. Predescu, a friend of the family, had agreed to perform at a private ceremony. We finished eating to be treated to her singing and the world-class fiddler who kept everyone dancing until at least midnight, when we had to further sustain ourselves with *sarmale* and *mamliga*, both traditional foods. *Sarmale* is small cabbage rolls stuffed with rice and pork. *Mamliga*, served as the side, is a cornmeal mush often known to Americans as polenta. *Mamliga* has historically a staple in poor rural areas, is now considered trendy.

The main course ,pork and chicken served with veggies and potatoes, did not arrive until after 1 a.m. The final course, the wedding cake, was served at around 2:30 in the morning. But who was keeping track at this point? Needless to say, the Romanians know how to throw a party and feed you while you're there!

Enough eating. Let's go for a walk. I had to reassure our guests that we would survive on our own for at least one "free day," assuring them we'd be able to secure transportation, get around town, experience Ploiesti, and arrive back at the hotel in one piece. My sister and I chose to head to the center, taking a six-lei (the equivalent to three dollars with tip) taxi to "centru" and walking around from there. On a sunny Friday afternoon, the town center was bustling, people of all ages were out, and there was a big festival set up in the square with groups of kids performing both folk and modern dance. On one corner was a McDonald's and across the street was a massive Soviet-style building that wrapped around the entire block. Taxis and buses zoomed by on the wide main thoroughfares

and the interior common areas were filled with vendors and people milling about. We were on a mission to get our nails done—after all, the big day was coming up and we were unofficial bridesmaids ("Unofficial" this custom doesn't really exist in Romania.)

We cut across the main square and started looking on side streets, searching for signs of a nail shop. In a second-story window, we saw first, in the universal language of pictures, the image of a hand with sculpted nails and a pair of scissors, and then the Romanian words *manichiur* and *pedichiur*. We entered through a heavy two-part steel door that opened into a dark hallway in one direction and a large concrete stairwell in the other. It looked more like an abandoned warehouse than a place of business, but we were not dismayed. If everything looked just like it did at home, what would be the point of traveling? We took the stairs, heard women's voices at the top, and entered through what seemed like a classroom door among a series of others along the hall. Inside was a bustling salon with hair in various stages of color and cut. The bustling came to a halt as a roomful of Romanians turned to stare at us.

"Uh, manichiur, pedichiur, is possible?" I held out my hands and indicate flaky, travel-neglected nails. Most of the people in the room went back to their business after glancing in one woman's direction with uncertain eyes.

She paused for a moment more before jumping into action: "Da, da," she said, breathing a long sigh which I took to mean, "Okay, I can do this," but which might mean, instead, "Ah, why are these stupid Americans bothering me?" She ushered us into another small room and pointed for me to sit. My sister was left to linger in the doorway. Finally my sister was offered a chair, which looked as if it belongs to another stylist's station. We shrugged, gestured, used lots of facial expressions and settled in. My feet were in warm water and my nails were being

below: scenes from benjamin and codruta's wedding



filed. Some things don't change much no matter the culture. When the second stylist entered, she sat across from my sister, looking annoyed, filing her own nails, and huffing to the point where my sister was sure she was committing some great disrespect by being in the client's chair. She offered to get up. "No, no,"—she was waved back to the chair. The offended stylist decided to speak, a long Romanian phrase directed at my sister. We conferred in English. We had no clue until the lady, through a series of gestures, made it known that she wanted to know whether my sister would like to have her nails done.

"Da, da!" We were sure we had already communicated this, but such is the nature of foreign exchange. From that point, the second stylist softened (or was never hard, but just seemed so to us) and we started "explaining" that we were there for a wedding. I pantomimed a ring on my left ring finger and kissing.

"Ahhh!" The ladies were now interested and my stylist started removing her paint job from my index finger. I realized that she thought I was the one getting married and started again. It took about ten minutes. She understood me pointing at myself and saying "No," but then she didn't understand who it was that was to be wed. My sister dredged up the word for "children." (On the spot, we couldn't remember "brother," "sister," "marriage," or anything from the language lessons we'd added to our iPod in preparation.) We managed to explain there are three children: me, my sister, and another, whose name is Benjamin.

"Benjamin, Codruta," we said, making kissy faces.

"Ahhhh, da, da."

"Benjamin, Americano...Codruta, Romanian, from Ploiesti."

"Ahhhh, da, da, da."

My non-bridal nail design resumed and the ladies were smiling, happy, I presume, that we had placed our presence in their shop in their town. To test my theory, I asked, "Americans, here?" while pointing around the shop.

Her eyes grew wide, "Nooooo, ooohh, no, niciodat,"—which I guessed from its context, and later confirmed, means *never*.

In the end, we came out laughing, imagining already the stories we'd have to tell, and with shiny nails and toes lined with a reddish creamy substance around our cuticles. We wondered what it was and if it would come off. We scraped at it a bit. My stylist had pointed to the jar, asking, to which I had shrugged, indicating she should choose. To us, it looked like we had picked and torn at our nail linings all day. We later found out that it was a disinfectant specifically dyed red because the look is popular among older Romanian women. We'd be going to the wedding with a, well...traditional look.

The last stop of our walking adventure was at huge public market. Baskets and tables filled with fresh produce, meat, spices and some presumably edible things we'd never seen. I have the same experience whenever I am traveling and encounter this form of commerce. It is so refreshing, seems so much more alive and less sterile than a fancy grocery store with fake lighting—not that I am ungrateful for the plethora of food choices and abundance available to me. It's just that at these outdoor markets I feel as if I am picking the food from the ground myself, fresh, and as I barter for some apples it makes me think happily of the growing trend of farmers' markets back in Charlotte.

The wedding itself was a formal traditional Romanian Orthodox

ceremony in a cavernous church that seemed older than the ground it stood upon. Codruta and Benjamin stood center on a podium facing the priest, flanked by their godparents and then the best man and the maid of honor. The parents formed a line behind them. The godparents have a very important role in a Romanian wedding. The couple must choose carefully, and it is a great honor and responsibility to accept the invitation. The godparents give a lot of time and money to the marriage proceedings, and they serve as counselors and guides to the new couple throughout their relationship.

For about an hour, all the wedding guests (somewhat less than the 200-plus people who attended the reception) stood and watched the proceedings of the priest and his attendant. The priest's table was located between the couple and the altar, which was adorned and layered with gold and ornate painting. The table boasted its own array of shiny objects: candelabras, a cross, crowns, a cup and a gilded bible. As he performed the rites in Romanian, the priest sometimes intoned chants and sometimes spoke frankly with the bride and groom, even cracking a couple of jokes. Meanwhile, the wedding guests wandered about, taking pictures, whispering to each other occasionally, and seeing the ceremony from different angles. It was one of those cultural moments. I had no idea exactly what was expected, what I was permitted to do, and what would be a faux pas. Meanwhile, my brother's friends were urging me to scoot forward, get pictures, move to the back and get more pictures, and my aunt and uncle across the church were signaling with hand gestures to get more pictures. I tried to be discreet and snap away and play with the camera settings so the flash didn't go off, hoping something in the dim church will still show up.

The ceremony was as fascinating as it was baffling, as I actually had no idea what the priest was saying or what the various rituals signified. Definitely should have done a little more homework! Some of the major acts during the wedding are the crowns, the common cup, and the wedding party walking in a circle around the table. In the service of the crowning, the priest literally crowned both Ben and Codruta as the king and queen of their own little kingdom (their home or domestic church). The couple wears their crowns until the end of the entire wedding ceremony, symbolizing martyrdom, the idea that every true marriage involves immeasurable sacrifice on both sides. In the wedding at Cana, Jesus performed his first miracle and turned water into wine to give to the newlyweds. In the Orthodox ceremony, the couple drinks from a "common cup" of better life. The cup is a token of a harmonious life. By drinking, the couple accepts a mutual sharing of joys and sorrows. Then, also representing the wedding at Cana, the pair takes their first steps as a married couple, and the priest leads them in the way they must walk.

While repacking my bags and squeezing in a few souvenirs, I couldn't help thinking of other times I've traveled. I would walk by a church emptying itself of dressed-up people or down a vineyard lane imagining the backyard view, and wish, just wish, I could be on the inside. My new Romanian family and their hometown of Ploiesti provided me that very opportunity. 📷

You can reach Celina at [celinamincey@yahoo.com](mailto:celinamincey@yahoo.com)

For more info go to [www.uptownclt.com](http://www.uptownclt.com)