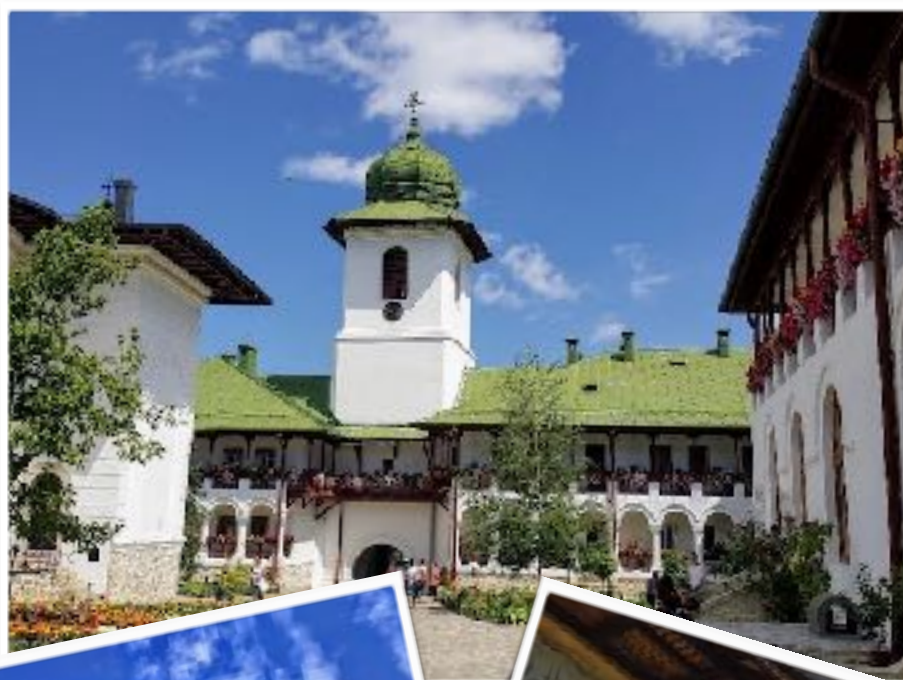


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12 Must-see Moldavian Monasteries

Inspiring you to Travel



Moldavia's Monasteries

Romania's north eastern region of Moldavia is famous for her Painted Monasteries yet so few people venture out this way that these treasures are often missed. Such a travesty. We hope to rectify this and help put this stunning region of Romania firmly on the map.

Churches have been and still are a significant symbol of Romanian culture. In medieval times when Moldavia was classed as a separate country, princes of the time would build churches as a gift to God.

So it's no wonder that churches play an influential role in today's traditions. Although as we discovered in our tour here, Moldavia has far more to offer than just the painted wonders. The whole monastic culture needs to be experienced to really get a sense of Romania's history.

This Guide aims to inspire you to travel here and offers insights into Moldavia's treasure chest.

Romania's religious scene

Romania is a secular state and has no state religion, although it is one of the most devout countries in the EU. The country recognise 18 different denominations, according to the latest Census, although over 80% of the population are identified as Eastern Orthodox.

It's important to understand that we're not just talking about a few cute little churches. We're talking about entire settlements; communities that have built up within and around the monasteries, where nuns and monks live, work and worship together. It is a symbol of harmonious, co-dependency living that has survived through the generations.

Monasteries that are not painted

Your monastic tour begins way before you even arrive in the Moldavian county of Bucovina. *Piatra Neamt* is where it all begins.

As you approach this vibrant town from the south, you enter through an invisible gateway from the grey, flat lands of its neighbour to a luscious land of rolling hills, strewn with narrow strips of sunflowers and wheat.

The first thing that strikes you is that for every ten vehicles, one is a horse and cart carrying their harvest, building materials or simply moving their family from A to B; it's just like they have jumped straight out of the pages of a Thomas Hardy novel.



In July and August huge cone shaped haystacks pop up in every field, built dextrously by the farm hands. Little industrial farm machinery can be found here. This is a tradition that is indelibly etched into the hearts and minds of the locals, who amusingly stare at our Motorhome as we drive by with eager salutations.

Beyond this rustic lifestyle you start to get a hint of Moldavia's monastic treasure, as every village has a church with domes and steeples to rival anything you may see in western Europe.

They are elegant affairs, even in the smallest of villages, giving you a clear message about their religious values.

And then, following the plentiful brown signs, you discover a realm of reverence and peace. The monastery settlements invite you to enter their tranquil haven, where monks and nuns, tend to the land, cut the

timber, grow their vegetables and make the cakes for the local bakery. You glimpse a rare sight of these religious villages working symbiotically, creating an environment where all visitors are embraced albeit transiently.

Monastic Settlements of Neamt

Our monastery experience happened by accident when we stumbled upon Bistrita Monastery, ten minutes outside Piatra Neamt. We were immediately transported into this captivating world of architecture and religious history.

1. Monastery Bistrita - Piatra Neamt



Built in 1406, Bistrita sits at the end of a dead-end road, its entrance accessed through massive wooden gates that feels like something out of a Harry Potter film.

Behind the austere gates you are met by beautifully manicured gardens, majestic chapels and elegant 'cells' as they are called - homes to the resident monks.

2. Varatec Monastery - largest in Romania

25 miles (40km) north from Piatra Neamt, Varatec has a completely different feel as the whole village community is run by nuns and there is a bit of a commercial edge to it.

Founded in 1789 and despite a fire in 1900, this magnificent monastery is now home to 400





nuns, putting it in the record books as the largest monastery in Romania.

Around the corner you can't miss the dominant steeples of the *Church of The Birth of Saint John the Baptist*.

These shiny, silver turrets, that look more like syringes than a church roof, are strangely appealing and most definitely photogenic in an abstract sort of way.

3. Agapia Monastery

Just 10 minutes drive away is the nunnery Agapia, which is another living community where the land is toiled by hand and the gardens tended with loving care. It was built in 1641 and hotly pursues Varatec in the largest monastery stakes.



Its green steeples and roofs make this one completely unique amongst its neighbours.

4. Neamt Monastery settlement - collection of four churches

Your monastery experience is about to change drastically as you approach Targu Neamt. Turning off about 3 miles (5km) before this riverside town, you will marvel at the towering spires that peak out of the forest flirtatiously. And you almost miss it...

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The most magnificent painted church - **Biserica St Joan and Jacob** will knock your socks off.

Not one of the official eight Bucovina Painted Monasteries, although a serious modern contender. It has a new feel to it, as the paintings look fresh and vibrant.



Each wall tells a different story and craning your neck as you look skywards, you just find yourself in awe of the tales that come alive on the church walls.



Immediately across the road is a left-turn to **Biserica Vovidenia**, which has quite a young feel about it. The monks here seem to be in their twenties and it has a really hip vibe.

The views down over the pine valley are just delightful.

Returning back to the main road and a further 200m you arrive at the 'pièce de résistance' - **Neamt Monastery**. This is *the oldest monastery in Romania*, and although it is unclear the exact year of construction, it is thought to be the early 15th century. As you approach the imposing entrance, look up and notice the frescos that are so old and faded, yet tell their own story.



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Walking into the sanctuary of the monastery at Evensong you will be delighted not only by the sound of the monks chanting, also the colour of the steeples as the setting sun catches their crosses.



Don't miss the 600 year old library across the road, which holds 11000 books, many of which are considered rare volumes.

Cycling 4.5 miles (7km), further up the road into the mountains you discover a secret hideaway **Ioana Biserica**, (a small church) which sits proudly amongst the pine forest.

This is an incredible sensory experience;

The first thing that hits you is the peace and solitude as few visitors make the effort to come up this far and more's the pity.

The second thing you notice is the sweet welcome from the lovingly tended rose garden.

And then...your eyes are treated to the most magnificent and vibrant frescos that have a modern feel to them, although beautiful none-the-less. This is a great place to visit and while away 30 minutes.



Bucovina's Painted Monasteries

After the monastery settlements have overpowered you with their veritable feast on the senses, you will be ready to head off towards Suceava. Now begins the Painted Monasteries.

Bucovina, the Land of the Beeches offers you a chance to tread in the footsteps of some passionate Byzantine artists.

These eight churches are unique because of their *exterior* paintings, unlike their siblings that have ornate *interiors*. Such is their historical importance that they are now UNESCO World Heritage Sites, which means we can cherish these sacred buildings for generations to come.

We visited the Painted Monasteries over three days, as there's so much to see and quite of a lot of miles to cover. So we recommend finding somewhere to stopover in *Suceava* and *Gura Humorului*.

5. Probota Monastery



From a route heading north from Targu Neamt, your first stop is Probota Monastery. It's a 24 mile (40 km) trek from the main DN2 out into the heartland of Moldavia, although it is a lovely rustic drive.

The thing that immediately strikes you about this monastery is that there are open excavations and steps down to secret chambers that hide all sorts of historical ghosts.

This feels as if there's a whole legacy underneath the ground that adds a certain mystery to Probota's tranquility.

6. Dragomirna Monastery



Although this isn't a painted church, it is still worth a stop. It has a much more formal feel to it than the architecture of the other churches - more in the style of a French Chateau and was built later than its siblings - in 1609.

7. Patrauti - Oldest frescos

This church is easy to miss just off the main DN2, so keep your eyes open. It's a short drive up through a village bustling with horse carts moving their harvest.

Patrauti might well be the smallest of the churches, although it packs no less of a punch. Its claim to fame is the frescos, which are the oldest in Moldavia and if you're lucky you will have the guided tour and history lesson from Father Gabriel who seriously knows his stuff.



8. Arbore

Next on your list takes you onto the DN2K taking you west towards Sucevita.



This area signals a change in scenery as your journey now takes you through the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains where the smell of pine trees tease your senses.

Arbore is another smaller church, although the southern side of the church has some incredible frescos that are so well preserved. Built by Luca Arbore as his family chapel, this 1503 house of worship is most famous for its green hue artwork.

9. Sucevita - last monastery to be built

From Arbore, head towards Solca taking the DN2E towards Marginea. Now you have *two* options.

You can either head to **Putna Monastery** in the north of the region, or take the DN17A to **Sucevita** and **Moldovita**.



Sucevita was our chosen route and you certainly get a more touristic feel here, with its street sellers. Although as you walk towards the imposing fortress-like walls, you will gasp at the beauty of this church and its monastic buildings.

With the mountain backdrop, this is one of our favourites and so photogenic.

Check out the *Ladder of Virtue* painting.



As you leave the sanctuary of Sucevita, just be prepared as you head towards Moldovita for the stunning road-trip you are about to take.

The ride up over the mountains towards Moldovita is incredible and it's worth a quick photo stop at the Memorial that was built in honour of the road's construction in 1968.

This lovely twisty road with its mountain dwellings and their haystacks dotted all over the slopes, makes for a wonderful driving experience.

10. Moldovita- best preserved paintings



Bearing in mind this was our fourth Monastery of the day, we were getting a bit overwhelmed and there is a real danger at this point of forgetting the uniqueness of each place. Moldovita Monastery was though a lovely end to the day.

Again, protected by fortress walls, you instantly feel safe inside its sanctuary. A statue of Stephen the Great's son Petru Rares sits proudly in the grounds and the archways of the church are fading although characterful, if not for the graffiti!

11. Voronet - The Sistine Chapel of the East



3 miles (5km) south west from Gura Humorului, you will find the charming Voronet.

You have a 300m gauntlet of souvenir shops to walk by, testing your resolve to not buy tourist 'stuff', although the traditional

Romanian embroidered shirts were quite appealing.

Still you're here for the church, so walk on by! Voronet will strike you immediately with her beautiful blue artistry. Whilst as with most paintings, the northern face is faded because of the weather, the opposite side is always far more intact.

Here you must marvel at the *Last Judgement* picture which is classed as a masterpiece and hence its label of the East's Sistine Chapel.

12. Humor Monastery



Although we didn't actually go into this monastery it must get a mention especially as the whole area around Humor is lovely.

This was built in 1530 and was believed to have been on the foundations of a much older church. It was closed as a working nunnery from 1786 until 1990 and now is

back to its former glory.

Our Recommendations for your Monastery Trip

Moldavia is a huge region with much to see - not just monasteries. You have hiking in the Carpathian Mountains, buzzing towns to stop off along the way and the general historical depth of the region to absorb. Doing a whistle-stop tour would miss out so much; here are our recommendations to help you get the best from your visit.

1. Take a least 3-4 days to explore from Piatra Neamt in the south over to Sadova in the east. This is not a place to be rushed, so do build in some rest time if you can.
2. Don't come to Moldavia just for the Painted Monasteries - come to see the range of churches as we've mentioned in this Guide as this will capture the real spirit of the region.
3. There's a lot of options for staying overnight in this region from campsites if you have your own camper or tent, to hotels in the larger towns and plenty of guest houses (Pensiunea) in the villages along the way. Even in August it didn't feel overrun with tourists.
4. Travelling in our motorhome, our overnights were at **Bistrita Monastery (46.957125 26.289086)**, where they kindly allowed us to stay in their car park in our motorhome. Outside **Neamt Monastery (47.262982 26.208707)** we had a couple of nights in their car park with water and free WiFi. **Camping Dragomirna (47.757902 26.22857)**, which is a basic site offering a few pitches, wooden huts and a car park with access to showers and electricity for €8.50 per night. **Pensiunea Cristina Camping and Guest House (47.602546 25.852718)** €10 per night with full facilities.
5. For all monasteries there is a dress code, so come prepared. For ladies, you must cover up with trousers or long skirt and a head scarf. For men it is less strict, although they prefer not to have shorts and t-shirts. In the larger monasteries like Voronet and Sucevita they have wrap around skirts for men and women to wear.

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Although in others you may not be allowed into the churches if you do not have the right attire.

6. For all the Painted Monasteries there is an entrance charge; 5Lei (€1 per person) and a Photography Tax of an additional 5Lei to take any pictures or video. For the other monastery settlements we visited, there was no charge, unless you wanted to take pictures and then there was either a donation or a 5Lei fee. During our trip we spent 100Lei €20, which isn't bad and it funds the churches' upkeep.
7. The Painted Monasteries are generally open from 0900 until 1830 every day, although weekends get significantly busier.
8. Time your visits 'on the hour' as you will then witness the traditional ritual of the *call to prayer*. A nun will take up a piece of wood (a 'toaca') and beat it as they walk around the church, which is followed by the ringing of the church bells. It's a practice that goes back to the siege of Moldavia by the Ottoman Empire when the Turks didn't allow the ringing of bells and the wood tapping replaced the chimes.
9. If you have your own transport, then getting around to the churches is easy. There were only a couple of roads that were gravel and they were short lived. The Painted Monasteries are all accessible by good quality tarmac roads.
10. If you don't have your own transport, then why not pick up a personal tour guide such as Sorin Fodor who has a great website over at www.paintedmonasteries.ro. We didn't use him, although we were impressed by the information he gave on the Painted Monasteries. Alternatively local buses and taxis will give you plenty of options for visiting as they are on the local tourist trail.
11. We only came across one monastery car park that needed paying for, the rest were free. Voronet required a tariff per hour depending on the size of your vehicle. Not expensive, although worth knowing.

12. And finally, do watch out for beggars who loiter around every monastery. Some are children who arrive on horse carts, others are mothers with young children holding kittens asking for money for an operation, yet are wearing the latest branded shoes. So just be vigilant.

And so, there we have it. Our comprehensive guide to Moldavia's beautiful monastery scene. We hope that this Guide ***Inspires you to Travel*** and to uncover the serenity of this stunning region of Europe.

Karen and Myles

The Motoroamers

