

# Transylvanian trip tops traditional Halloween fare

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I WAS THUMBING THROUGH THE Sunday paper on a lazy afternoon when I saw the ad for the trip to Transylvania. The ad promised an exciting tour the week of Halloween. I took another bite of my Snickers, squinted to avoid the stream of sunlight filtering through the window, and contemplated the trip.

I could really get the true essence of Halloween traveling through Transylvania. No more silly Halloween parties standing around slurping on "trash can" punch in my Mickey Mouse costume. This year, Halloween would be an adventure.

I stretched out on the couch and took a deep breath. I could feel my body relax. A muscle in my leg twitched. I snuggled deeper into the fluffy, soft cushions. My slow, rhythmic breathing lulled me further into my thoughts.

I was going to Transylvania.

The plane to Romania was packed with people from the tour group. I had kind of hoped I'd meet an eligible-type guy on this trip, so I was pleased to find I was seated next to the only single male in the group. He was a tall, slim, dark-haired guy. He was quiet. He seemed to be preoccupied with something. But I blew it off thinking he might just be squeamish about the flight.

It was long after I had gobbled the last of the peanuts the stewardess handed out when the shy guy told me his name. Damon. A different sort of name, but then again, he was no ordinary guy.

Damon seemed to be more relaxed once we arrived in Bucharest, but I noticed he was pale. He probably doesn't spend much time in the sun, I thought.

Romania was a lovely country. Steep mountains with snowcapped peaks, and rivers snaking through the rugged countryside. The cool daytime temperatures turned into chilly nights.

Although thrilled with the scenery, I soon realized the tour wasn't going to be the haunting adventure I had hoped. The setting was perfect for tales of Dracula, but I was stupid to believe the tour would get me any closer to true horror. I resigned myself to this fact and enjoyed the beauty of old monasteries and the museums of Romania.

I noticed Damon was never around on our daytime excursions. I was jealous. I guessed he was off exploring on his own. I wished I could wander off and see the parts of Transylvania that our tour didn't cover. But the KGB guide who was constantly with us warned us about

wandering off. Being the chicken I am, I decided to be good while visiting this communist land.

One slate grey afternoon, Damon and I talked with an old, haggard peasant in a little village near the site of Castle Dracula. The peasant told us that some Romanians feel life after death is not much different than life now. Some feel there is no purely spiritual world, he said. He added that some believe if a person who has been cursed dies, he will be doomed to a life of roaming the land at night. That person is unable to live, yet unable to die (his body can't decay) unless a stake is driven through his heart or unless his body is burned.

I shivered even in the warmth of my heavy sweatshirt at the thought of vampires roaming around the earth.

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While the peasant explained how a vampire could take the form of anyone, Damon wandered off. The friendly peasant said that if a vampire goes undetected for seven years, he can even travel to another country. He told me vampires couldn't stand garlic or crosses so I made a mental note to wear my cross at all times — not because I was dumb enough to believe these silly stories mind you. I wanted to take all the precautions just to play along.

**T**HAT NIGHT THE TOUR GROUP ate dinner in a crowded cafe, and I told Damon about the rest of the legends I learned from the peasant. I was hesitant to gorge myself on the tasty dish I ordered, because it had so much garlic in it. It would be my luck that tonight Damon might try to kiss me, and my garlic breath would give him nosebleeds. My only comforting thought was that he'd have garlic breath too, because he'd ordered the same thing. But my hopes were shattered when Damon pushed his plate away without eating a single bite.

I ruined my chance, I thought to myself as we walked back to the hotel. The nearly full moon was just starting to shine through the tree tops as I looked over at Damon. His face had a pasty glow in the moonlight. But my hopes were dashed when he quickly deposited me at my door with a mumbled "good night." It must have been due to the sickening breath of his companion.

The next morning we hopped a bus that would take us to Dracula's birthplace. It was hard to imagine baby Dracula growing up in this simple structure. Somehow innocence had escaped this Jack the Ripper of the 15th century, who placed no value on human life.

One account about Dracula says he ate dinner in the midst of hundreds of people who were dying slow, painful deaths with stakes pierced through their bodies. Although behavior of this sort was common among some rulers of this period, for Dracula it was a sport. Damon told me Dracula would even slit animals' necks just to see the blood spill.

Looking around the narrow, winding streets, I could imagine the fear and anguish of Dracula's subjects. He could pick anyone in the surrounding villages for his next victim. He was even known to turn against honored guests visiting him at the castle. He'd order them to be tortured.

I tried to push the gloomy thoughts of Dracula out of my mind before nightfall. Tonight was Hallo, a Pagan holiday, and the reason I had come to this foreign land. Finally, an authentic Halloween.

**O**UR TOUR GUIDE HAD arranged a party for all of us. I was careful not to eat any garlic because this might be my last chance with Damon. But my heart sank when I saw Damon's attention had turned to another girl at the party. I bet she didn't have garlic breath. But then again, I don't look like that in a low-cut blouse. Depressed, I decided to turn in.

I spent the last day hurriedly buying souvenirs and packing, disappointed that my trip hadn't been more adventurous. We boarded the plane that night, and I finally had time to relax. As our plane lifted through the cloud cover, a full moon made haunting shadows through the window.

I was almost convinced vampires didn't exist and that Dracula was merely a blood-thirsty tyrant. I turned to share my thoughts with Damon. His seat was empty. The tour guide told me he never rejoined our group. I figured he'd found a home in Transylvania. □

