

The Best of Eastern Europe

1 The Most Unforgettable Travel Experiences

- **Discovering the Courtyards of Budapest (Hungary).** Budapest's residential streets are truly enchanting, but it is inside the courtyards of the buildings that the city's greatest secret is held: Budapesters are villagers at heart. Fruit trees and flower gardens flourish, cats lounge in the sun, and jars of pickled vegetables line the window ledges. Nearly every apartment building in this city has an open-air courtyard in its center, where pensioners sit on the common balconies smoking cigarettes, gossiping, and watching the children race around the yard, dodging flowerpots and laundry racks. The main entrance doors to many apartment buildings are left unlocked during the daytime hours.
- **Experiencing Time Travel (Country to Coast, Bulgaria).** Lying on an upholstered daybed on the beach, watching bikini-clad waitresses deliver cocktails to a cool house beat, one struggles to comprehend how this sophisticated beach bar could be located just a few hours from villages where people have never heard of the Internet. Bulgaria encloses as many realities as is possible in an MTV world: From its myriad ancient tombs, untouched since they were built more than 2,000 years ago, and its far-flung rural and religious communities, where life is lived as it has been for 100 years, to its dour Communist-era elders and edgy urban youth, Bulgaria is the closest you get to time travel in one country. See chapter 4.
- **Sunset on the Wall (Dubrovnik, Croatia).** When evening approaches Dubrovnik, views from the top of Old Town's protective wall become a kaleidoscope of color and pattern as shifting light and visual perspective change position in tandem. See p. 146.
- **Strolling Across Charles Bridge at Dawn or Dusk (Czech Republic).** The silhouettes of the statues lining the 6-centuries-old crown jewel of Czech heritage hover like ghosts in the still of the sunrise skyline. Early in the morning you can stroll across the bridge without encountering the crowds that appear by midday. With the changing light of dusk, the statues, the bridge, and the city panorama take on a whole different character. See chapter 6.
- **Stepping into History at Karlštejn Castle (Czech Republic).** A 30-minute train ride south of Prague puts you in the most visited Czech landmark in the environs, built by Charles IV (Karel IV in Czech—the namesake of Charles Bridge) in the 14th century to protect the Holy Roman Empire's crown jewels. This Romanesque hilltop bastion fits the image of the castles of medieval lore. See p. 254.

- **Swimming to Bled Island (Slovenia).** Officially the rules say you shouldn't do it, but the most memorable experience of Lake Bled—one of the most beautiful bodies of water in Europe—is a muscle-working swim from the shore to its miniature isle, which has a lovely church dedicated to the Virgin Mary. If you're one of the not-so-brave, you can always hire a boat and row yourself there, or get one of the aspirant gondoliers to take you over in a *pletna*, Bled's very own answer to Venetian gondolas. See chapter 12.
- **Discovering Magnificence in the Bowels of the Earth (Slovenia).** Slovenia has thousands of Karstic caves, but those protected by UNESCO in the Škocjan park are truly unforgettable. Matchless subterranean architecture is built with stalactites, stalagmites, and rim limestone pools not to mention the world's largest underground canyon, stupendous bridges, and drop-away galleries that all work to reconfigure your understanding of life on earth. See chapter 12.
- **Staying in a Village Home in Maramureș (Romania).** The farming villages of Maramureș occupy an idyllic mountainous landscape near Romania's northern border with the Ukraine. Here you'll discover some of the most bucolic communities in all of Europe; there are still more horse-drawn carts than there are motor vehicles, and many households have a cow or two in the backyard. You'll be surrounded by warm, friendly people, many of whom dress only in traditional costume. If you stay with the Pop family in Hoteni, you'll also be introduced to genuine folk music by a genuine Eastern European legend. See p. 544.
- **Traveling by Train through Transylvania (Romania).** You may not have Count Dracula as your guide, but the terrain encompassed by the land “beyond the forest” will set any heart racing. As you wind through vast tracts of forest and pass soaring mountains, often your only reminders of human habitation will be a church steeple peeking through a forest canopy, or a small family of farmers cutting grass with a hand-held scythe. Or the horrifying spectacle of a hideous abandoned industrial complex—built by the Communists—suddenly appearing in the middle of nowhere. See chapter 9.
- **Discovering the Order in the Chaos of an Orthodox Mass in Stavropoleos Church (Bucharest, Romania).** Attending the beautifully sung Mass at this small but delightful church in the very heart of Bucharest will make your spirit soar. Each day, a Byzantine-style chorus draws a dedicated congregation, while during quiet periods one of the five young nuns will happily talk you through the deep spiritual significance of most every aspect of Orthodox faith. See p. 503.
- **Viewing Red Square at Night (Moscow, Russia).** The crimson-and-ivy-colored domes of St. Basil's Cathedral rise in a dizzying welcome to this most majestic of Russian plazas. Stand on the rise in the center of the square and feel a part of Russia's expanse. See chapter 10.
- **Steam Your Stress Away at the Sandunovsky Baths/Sandunovskiye Banyi (Moscow, Russia).** Thaw your eyelashes in January or escape snow flurries in May in the traditional Russian bathhouse, something between a sauna and a Turkish hammam. The pristine Sandunovsky Baths in Moscow are a special treat, with Greek sculptures and marble baths. See p. 582.
- **Watch the Drawbridges Open Along the Neva River (St. Petersburg, Russia).** An unforgettable outing during

White Nights, or anytime, involves perching yourself on the quay at 2am to watch the city's bridges unfold in careful rhythm to allow ships through the Neva.

- **Kraków's Old Town (Kraków, Poland).** Few cities have the sheer knockout attraction of Kraków. And the Old Town is where it delivers the TKO. And the charms are not just skin deep. The Old Town is choked with stunning cafes and restaurants, student clubs, galleries, and shops. Take the day and explore. See p. 427.
- **Długa (Gdańsk, Poland).** Amberphiles will think they died and went to heaven. It's hard to imagine a more beautifully restored pedestrian main street than Gdańsk's main drag. See p. 456.
- **Auschwitz-Birkenau (Oświęcim, Poland).** Words cannot convey what a deeply shocking and moving

experience it is to visit what was the largest of the Nazi extermination camps. Plan to spend some time and visit both camps (just a couple of miles apart). Auschwitz is undeniably horrible, but it's at Birkenau where you really grasp the scale of the tragedy. See p. 435.

- **Walking in the High Tatras (High Tatras, Slovakia).** Follow the red-marked Magistrale Trail from one end of the Tatras to the other for some of the most jaw-droppingly beautiful mountain scenery you're likely to see anywhere. The Tatras are not particularly high (most of the peaks are in the 2,400m/8,000-ft. range), but the rocky, snowcapped tops are highly inspiring. The Magistrale takes you around the mountain faces at just above and below the tree line, with incredible views both up and down. See p. 632.

2 The Best Hotel Splurges

- **Hilton Imperial (Dubrovnik, Croatia).** Rather than build a hotel from scratch, Hilton had the wisdom to restore what was salvageable from Dubrovnik's historic 19th-century Imperial and graft a modern hotel onto the base. Every detail has been addressed here, and whether you hail from America or Azerbaijan, you'll be treated as an honored guest. See p. 141.
- **Diamant (Poreč, Croatia).** Though it looks like an impersonal '70s package-style hotel from the outside, it is much more—management has thought of everything, and the hotel has an activity to match guests' every whim. The Diamant deserves special kudos for its efforts to accommodate guests with disabilities. Every part of the hotel can accommodate wheelchairs, even the pool and locker rooms. See p. 175.
- **Hotel Aria (Prague, Czech Republic).** A new luxurious hotel opened in the heart of Malá Strana just around the corner from the St. Nicholas Cathedral. Its melodious theme will especially please music lovers. See p. 224.
- **Four Seasons Hotel (Prague, Czech Republic).** The best luxury Old Town hotel with the best view of Prague Castle and Charles Bridge. If price isn't a concern, choose a room at this new addition to the luxury-hotel list with its unbeatable location. See p. 225.
- **Four Seasons Hotel Gresham Palace (Budapest, Hungary).** The splendid, sprawling hotel is Hungary's foremost hotel. The Art Nouveau architecture is exquisite, and the customer care and attention to detail will leave you feeling pampered. See p. 296.
- **La Residenza (Timișoara, Romania).** One of the most stylish and least

pretentious upmarket hotels in Romania, this is where VIPs visiting the country's most western city stay when they're striking the latest deal or hiding from the press. If you can drag yourself out your plush room, you'll probably get no farther than the lounge or garden—where you'll be tempted to curl up next to the fire or laze beside the pool. It's like being in your favorite uncle's mansion. See p. 538.

- **Staying in Count Kalnoky's Guest-houses (Micoșoara, Romania).** Tudor Kalnoky was born abroad but returned to his Transylvanian homeland after the fall of Communism to reclaim his royal birthright. Having fallen in love with the little Hungarian village once ruled by his forebears, he has set about restoring some of its old houses, and ended up creating one of the most wonderful accommodations opportunities in the whole country. See p. 524.
- **Delta Nature Resort, Danube (Delta, Romania).** This is the first luxury resort in what is widely regarded as the last wilderness in Europe. Guests are ensconced in plush cottages for the night (after enjoying local caviar), while during the day you're given endless options for wildlife encounters (including spying the 300 species of birds that find their way here each year) and cultural exploration (including rubbing shoulders with nuns and members of the small Lipovan communities that have settled in the Delta). See p. 561.
- **Baltschug Kempinski (Moscow, Russia).** The hotel's views of St. Basil's Cathedral and the Kremlin are so breathtaking that TV networks set up here for their stand-ups. The brunch is fit for a czar, and the understated elegance of the rooms complements the facade's pastel ornamentation. See p. 577.
- **Grand Hotel Europe (St. Petersburg, Russia).** This baroque confection in central St. Petersburg charmed Tchaikovsky and Bill Clinton, among other dignitaries. The harpist and the plush furniture of the mezzanine cafe provide respite from a day of touring. See p. 594.
- **Królewski (Gdańsk, Poland).** Rooms to die for just across the canal from Gdańsk's Old Town. Room no. 310 is a corner room, with views over the city in two directions. The breakfast room looks over the river at the town. You'll feel like they've handed you the keys to the city. See p. 453.
- **Grandhotel Praha (High Tatras, Slovakia).** You're in the Tatras, so why not spend a little extra to stay at this beautifully restored turn-of-the-20th-century Alpine manor (that manages to match the mountains for style and grace). The elegantly restored lobby, billiard room, restaurant, and cafe will immediately have you thinking you stepped into *The Great Gatsby* or an Agatha Christie novel. See p. 628.
- **Vila Bled (Slovenia).** It was good enough for Marshall Tito to entertain some of the most powerful men on earth, and now its suites are like miniature museums to the monumental and fatal ambitions of Communism, all preserved like a staid 1950s mausoleum. The lakeside setting may be perfect, but imagine a world in which everything is monogrammed and guests get to lounge on a private lido with a perfect view of a 1,000-year-old hilltop castle. Oh, and the handsome lifeguard doubles as your cocktail waiter! See p. 666.
- **Nebesa (Slovenia).** Anywhere else in the world, this paradisiacal four-cottage "resort" would be considered a bargain. The real splurge is time-related: You'll need to drive several

miles to get to this mountainside location, from where you can not only see Italy, but feel the breeze off the ocean, while you're almost eye-level with soaring mountain peaks, often capped with snow. You'll feel like a private guest of the debonair owners as you lounge on your private terrace and conjure up dreams of owning the world as you look down over the beautiful Soča Valley and

watch the deer in the adjacent field frolicking at dusk. See p. 672.

- **Kendov Dvorec (Slovenia).** Arguably the finest restored manor in the country, this is an ideal and idyllic retreat filled with antiques and plush furniture. Each meal is a triumph, and while you're pretty much in the country, you're never too far from everywhere else in tiny Slovenia. See p. 675.

3 The Best Hotel Bargains

- **Villa Filipini (Poreč, Croatia).** Despite its location a couple of miles outside Poreč's center and the lack of a beach in the vicinity, the warmth of the hosts, the casual but elegant decor of this tiny inn set in the woods, and the innovative gourmet cuisine in Filipini's restaurant make up for any shortcomings. See p. 176.
- **Hotel Peristil (Split, Croatia).** The Peristil is tucked in a corner inside the walls of Diocletian's palace, and while its facade is respectful of the magnificent Roman ruin, its interior is brand-new (2005) and comfortable. See p. 161.
- **Valsabbion (Pula, Croatia).** The hotel's seven rooms and three suites are decorated with flair in a breezy, romantic style that carries over to its exquisite restaurant, one of the best in Croatia. There is also a spa with a long menu of beauty treatments. See p. 168.
- **Dryanovo Monastery (Near Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria).** Many Bulgarian monasteries offer cheap accommodations, but facilities are usually spartan (no hot water, shared toilets) and often less than hygienic. Not so Dryanovo Monastery, where the monks offer spotless en-suite rooms. Admittedly they are tiny, with two single beds, but throw open the window to allow the gushing "prana" of

the river coursing past the fortified walls below to lull you asleep, and you'll wake miraculously refreshed. If you'll forego the sight of a long-bearded monk in a black cassock entering your name into a massive leather-bound ledger, you could also opt for a bigger room (and a towel that's larger than the face cloth the monks supply), at Komplex Vodopadi, an independently run hotel within the monastery grounds. See p. 109.

- **Kapsazov's House (Kovachevitsa, Bulgaria).** Located in one of Bulgaria's most attractive heritage mountain villages—all narrow cobbled lanes, and timber homes perched above towering stone walls—this is the classiest guesthouse in the country. Right on the edge of the village, with an immaculate stonewalled garden, you can loll about all day watching swallows dive-bomb the pretty pool, but it is in the evenings, seated at Sofia Kapsazov's table (often with a fascinating mix of expat diplomats and Sofia intelligentsia) that you really know you've landed up in heaven. The angel in charge is Sofia, who hosts regular cooking courses—after one of her meals you'll wish you had time to sign up for one. See p. 99.
- **Pension Větrník (Prague, Czech Republic).** This family-run romantic hideaway is reachable in about 20

minutes by tram from the city center. Its atmosphere and price are unbeatable. See p. 228.

- **Pension Unitas/Art Prison Hostel (Prague, Czech Republic).** An ideal place for budget travelers who want to take advantage of staying in the very center of Prague. See p. 225.
- **Charles Apartment House (Budapest, Hungary).** Comfortable and clean flats—complete with bathrooms and fully equipped kitchens—in Buda apartment buildings. See p. 299.
- **Rembrandt Hotel (Bucharest, Romania).** This chic Dutch-owned boutique hotel embodies the spirit of rejuvenation being experienced in the Romanian capital. It's squeezed into an impossible slither of property in the old quarter, which is steadily coming back to life. Special guests get the small top-floor room with a terrace with views all the way to the Parliamentary Palace built by that madman, Ceaușescu. See p. 496.
- **Casa Rozelor (Brașov, Romania).** With three of the most idiosyncratic guest suites in the country, this guesthouse is a project of love that has taken years of painstaking restoration (now continuing in a similar building nearby), followed by careful detailing with eclectic antiques bought from Gypsies, complemented by some outrageous contemporary art and furniture. And it's right in the heart of Brașov's medieval center. Seldom does the blend of old and new fit so well, and feel so good. See p. 519.
- **Casa Epoca (Sighișoara, Romania).** This recent guesthouse addition to Transylvania's best medieval fortress town occupies a 15th-century Gothic building and comes with few frills. It's done out almost entirely in wood and includes reproduction medieval Saxon beds. Everything is clean, neat, and stylish, and unlikely to attract a crowd. See p. 526.
- **Pulford Apartments (St. Petersburg, Russia).** Furnished, renovated flats with views of St. Petersburg's greatest monuments. A range of room sizes and services is available, including cleaning and airport transfers. Moscow apartments are also available. See p. 594.
- **G&R Hostels (Moscow, Russia).** Several floors of a drab Soviet hotel have been transformed into clean, comfortable accommodations. Services include cars with drivers and visa support. While the location is not central, it's right next to a metro station. See p. 580.
- **Hotel Karmel (Kraków, Poland).** This lovely family-run inn, tucked away on a quiet street in the former Jewish quarter of Kazimierz, is a total surprise. From the warm and smiling woman at the reception desk to the parquet flooring and the crisp linen on beds, everything about this place says quality. See p. 423.
- **Penzión pod Hradom (Trenčín, Slovakia).** Every town should have a pension as clean, quiet, delightful, and cheap as this one. And the location is ideal, perched on a small lane beside the main square and just below the castle. If the pension is empty, the owners will give you the nicest room in the house for the price of a standard. See p. 623.
- **Hiša Franko Casa (Slovenia).** A treasure just outside Kobarid, near the Italian border in Soča Valley. Beautiful guest rooms are each done out in a unique combination of lively colors and feature such treats as his-and-hers slippers and your personal choice of in-room amenities. It's more pension than hotel, and is something of an afterthought to one of the country's finest restaurants, just downstairs. See p. 671.

- **Antiq Hotel (Ljubljana, Slovenia).** In the heart of Ljubljana's Old Town, right near one of the paths that leads to Castle, this small hotel is brand-new and stuffed full of lovely antique pieces in a wonderful, tasteful jumble that will remind you of the city's excellent Sunday morning market. See p. 656.
- **Max Hotel (Piran, Slovenia).** In this popular destination where Venice is

your most obvious point of reference, accommodations are hard to come by during the busy summer season. Affable Max offers just a few simple rooms, but they're bright and tasteful and your life-loving host will do everything to make your stay a pleasurable one (providing you don't interrupt his afternoon siesta). See p. 677.

4 The Best Festivals & Celebrations

- **Festival of the Kukeri (Bulgaria).** During a 30-day period over New Year, known as "*Mrasni Dni*" (Dirty Days), it is said that the gates to heaven and hell are left open, and demons walk the earth. To counter this, villagers don terrifying masks and girdles sagging with huge bells and, armed with wooden weapons, stalk the streets to sound them off. You can see the best examples of the frightening *kukeri* costumes, as well as plenty of photographs, in Sofia's Ethnographic Museum, or plan to visit during an even-numbered year on the last weekend in January when the largest "Festival of the Kukeri" is held in Pernik, and some 3,500 revelers participate in this ancient ritual. See p. 63.
- **Maramureș (Romania).** Countless festivals occur throughout the year, but a favorite is over the Christmas period; the small town of Sighet, near the Ukraine border, comes to life on December 27 when the **Winter Customs Festival** stirs good old-fashioned fun filled with folkloric symbolism. Participants dress up in traditional costumes and young men run around with grotesque masks, cowbells dangling from their waists. See p. 548.
- **New Year's Day (Russia).** This is the major holiday of the Russian year. It's a family event centered around a fir

tree, a huge feast, and gift-giving traditions transferred by Soviet leaders from Christmas to the more secular New Year's Day. See p. 571.

- **White Nights in St. Petersburg (Russia).** Two weeks of festivities in late June celebrate the longest day of the year, when the northern sun never dips below the horizon. The White Nights are more than just a party; they're a buoyant, carefree attitude of summer-ness. Take a boat ride through the canals as the sunset melts into a languorous sunrise, and you'll never want to go south again. See p. 571.
- **Jewish Cultural Festival (Kraków, Poland).** Every year in July, Kazimierz opens its doors to Jews and Gentiles from around the world to come and celebrate Jewish culture. The festival has a purpose—it's to promote understanding of Poland's Jewish heritage and to remember what the ghetto once was. Nine days of food, music, and film. See p. 385.
- **Pohoda Music Festival (Trenčín, Slovakia).** Every year in mid-July the normally industrious town of Trenčín lets its hair down for 3 days of independent folk, rock, and pop. The festival has grown in recent years and now lures some of the best bands around. But don't just think traffic jams, mud, and long lines for beer. The atmosphere here is the real draw.

The word “pohoda” means “relax,” and that’s the whole idea. See p. 610.

- **The Kurentovanje Festival (Slovenia).** Each winter in Ptuj, revelers don crazy masks and take to the streets in a positively pagan celebration that once had some bearing on trying to control the climate. Now it’s a spirited reminder that Slovenes love to party. See p. 680.
- **Lent Festival (Maribor, Slovenia).** Maribor’s quaint waterfront promenade draws an excellent live music lineup each June, attracting fans and party animals from all over Europe. Right near the main venues is the Stara

Trta, apparently the oldest wine-producing vine in the world. See p. 649.

- **Ljubljana Summer Festival (Slovenia)** goes on for several months, during which music, theater, and other types of performances are staged in venues around the city, and also on the streets. Many of the shows are world-class, and some of the most memorable happen in the **Križanke Summer Theater (Slovenia)**, a former monastery converted to an outdoor venue in the 1950s by Slovenia’s top-rated architect, Joze Plečnik. See p. 664.

5 The Best Outdoor Activities

- **Hiking Rila’s Seven Lakes (Rila, Bulgaria).** The most rewarding hike in the country, this is a moderate 2-day (or more) hike from Rila Monastery into Bulgaria’s Alps to view the eerily beautiful Seven Lakes. After the first day (a fairly strenuous 6-hr. hike) you reach the Ivan Vazov hut, which you can use as a base to visit the Seven Lakes; better still, push on to one of the *Sedemte ezera* huts, situated on the shores of the lowest lakes—if you can, book the newest, which has the best facilities. See p. 100.
- **Plitvice Lakes National Park (Croatia).** Plitvice is the country’s best-known natural wonder. You can choose the difficulty of your exploration, from challenging 8-hour hikes to shorter treks eased by ferry and tram rides. Either way, you’ll be rewarded with an infusion of unspoiled nature. The park’s 16 crystal-clear turquoise lakes and their countless waterfalls are the marquee attraction and they put on a great show. You’ll be fascinated by the lakes, which flow into one another and tumble over deposits of travertine, creating waterfalls that drop a few feet or plunge as much as

64m (210 ft.). All this beauty is set in a dense forest accessed via footpaths, ferries, and fuel-friendly people-movers. See p. 199.

- **Taking a Slow Boat Down the Vltava (Czech Republic).** You can see many of the most striking architectural landmarks from the low-angle and low-stress vantage point of a rowboat you pilot yourself. At night, you can rent a dinghy with lanterns for a very romantic ride.
- **Riding a Faster Boat Down the Vltava (Czech Republic).** For those not willing to test their navigational skills or rowing strength in their own boat, large tour boats offer similar floating views, many with meals. Be sure to check the direction of your voyage to be certain it travels past the castles and palaces.
- **Taking a Walk in the Buda Hills (Hungary).** It’s hard to believe that such a large expanse of hilly forest is right here within the capital city. There are hiking trails aplenty; every Budapest native has a favorite. Ask around.
- **Hiking in the Hills Outside Szigliget (Hungary).** You can hike

up to the fantastic ruins of a 13th-century castle above this scenic little village in the Lake Balaton region, or go a few miles farther north and hike up into hills covered with vineyards. See p. 362.

- **Swimming in the Thermal Lake at Hévíz (Hungary).** Even in the bitterest spells of winter, the temperature in Europe's largest thermal lake seldom dips below 85°F to 90°F (30°C–32°C). Hungarians swim here year-round, and you can, too! If you're here in winter, it'll be a particularly memorable experience. See p. 360.
- **Climbing the Eger Minaret (Hungary).** Eger, a beautiful, small city in northern Hungary, is home to one of the country's most impressive Turkish ruins: a 14-sided, 33m-tall (110-ft.) minaret. Those who succeed in climbing the steep, cramped, spiral staircase are justly rewarded with a spectacular view. See p. 366.
- **Hiking in the Tatras (Poland).** Zakopane is the jumping-off point to hundreds of kilometers of gorgeous hiking trails. You can choose one of the 2,000m-plus (6,560-ft.) assaults on the peaks, or a more leisurely stroll along breathtaking valleys, carved out by tiny mountain streams. See p. 441.
- **Hiking the Apuseni Mountains (Romania).** Accessible from Oradea in Romania's far west, the Apuseni Mountains are the lowest lying in the Carpathian range. With minimal planning, professional ecofriendly guides can take you caving (in several of over 7,000 caves), skiing, rock-climbing, and even wolf and bear tracking.

You can stay in remote villages and discover a way of life long forgotten by the rest of Europe. See p. 537.

- **Idling Through the Backwaters of the Danube Delta (Romania).** Considered by some to be Europe's most important wildlife sanctuary, the Danube Delta was once threatened by Communism's unchecked industrial program. Now it's once again a haven for bird life, including its famous pelican population, which you can observe while on a boat safari through this unique ecosystem of waterways, lakes, reed-beds, sand dunes, and subtropical forests. See p. 560.
- **Rafting the Dunajec (Slovakia).** This is fun for the whole family. It's not intense white-water rafting, but a gentle group-float down a winding, twisting river that marks the boundary between Poland and Slovakia. The guides are good-natured and all bedecked in the traditional folk costumes of the region. The 13km (8-mile) ride lasts about 90 minutes, after which you can climb a hill to have lunch and ride a rental bike (or take a bus back) to the starting point. See p. 633.
- **Playing in the Great Outdoors of the Soča River Valley (Slovenia).** Whether you're white-water rafting, caving, sky diving, or skiing in winter, the Soča offers great opportunities for inexperienced paddlers and professional adrenaline junkies. No matter where you are or what you're getting up to, the views will take your breath away, again and again. See p. 673.

6 The Best Local Dining Experiences

- **Ego (Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria).** Bulgaria's medieval capital comes into its own when the sun goes down. In the languid light the narrow red-roofed buildings that rise precipitously from

the limestone cliffs above the Yantra River start to turn a pale pink, while swallows ride the thermal waves at eye level. Bag a ringside seat on the terrace at Ego—it's not the most

atmospheric restaurant in town but food and service are excellent, and the views will have you mesmerized. See p. 110.

- **Krachma (Leshten, Bulgaria).** The most charming restaurant in Bulgaria, Krachma's tables are covered in red-and-white gingham cloth and spread out under the canopy of a magnificent old tree. Beyond are the rolling forested hills of the Rhodope, backdropped by the snowcapped Pirin; behind are a quaint collection of 18th-century timber-and-stone houses, surrounded by lush fecundity. From the tree wine corks dangle; tug one and a tinkling bell summons the waiter. The "Kofte Leshten Style" is superb—a single tender cut of pork rather than the usual patty, delicately flavored—order it with Ljutenitza (mashed red peppers, leek, and spices) and hand-cut potato chips—all "hand-reared" on owner Misho's farm. See p. 100.
- **Kampa Park (Prague, Czech Republic).** This is the best bet for summer outdoor dining in Prague. The restaurant has a riverside view, where you can dine in the shadow of Prague's most famous bridge during the high season. See p. 230.
- **Kavárna Obecní Dům (Prague, Czech Republic).** This reinvigorated Art Nouveau cafe at the **Municipal House** has re-created the grandeur of Jazz Age afternoons. See p. 233.
- **Kisbuda Gyöngye (Budapest, Hungary).** The huge branches of a wonderful old tree create a canopy under which guests dine by candlelight in an interior courtyard.
- **The Aristocratic Atmosphere at Cafe Pushkin (Moscow, Russia).** Plunge into the refined opulence of 19th-century Russia as you spear a bite of suckling pig or sip fine tea from a silver samovar. See p. 581.
- **Fresh Fish at Staraya Tamozhnya (St. Petersburg, Russia).** The spare stone arches of this restaurant evoke the building's history as an 18th-century Customs House. The fish is so fresh you can forget any fears and indulge. See p. 595.
- **Karczma Jana (Olsztyn, Poland).** You'd expect to find excellent food in Warsaw, Kraków, and Gdańsk (and you do), but one place you wouldn't necessarily expect it is in the small city of Olsztyn. Karczma Jana is the best of a new breed of distinctly Polish restaurants, with traditional decor and local specialties done very well—all at a fair price. The riverside location doesn't hurt. See p. 415.
- **Le Colonial (Košice, Slovakia).** There's something to be said for a traditional restaurant that's willing to experiment a bit with the classics. Too many Slovak chefs still follow the old recipes by rote, but here they mix it up a bit, to good effect. For example, the lightly battered and fried chicken breast is a staple on every Slovak menu, but here it comes stuffed with some of that tart sheep's cheese instead and served with freshly cooked string beans. The interior and atmosphere are perfect for a romantic meal or a fun group night out. See p. 640.
- **Planšar (Slovenia).** This is a delightful little pension and restaurant in the bucolic village of Stara Fuzina, not far from Slovenia's magnificent Triglav National Park. Renata Mlakak serves real, traditional Bohinj cuisine, so you can try such delicious down-home specialties as farmer's soup and Bohinj cheese with mashed corn with sour cabbage. But Renata's real talent lies with her perfect homemade *štruklji*—dumplings made with cottage cheese. See p. 667.

7 The Best Museums

- **Varna Archaeological Museum (Bulgaria).** Looking at the small gold figure of Victory—an earring taken from the tomb of a Thracian noblewoman, the detailing so fine it must be appreciated through a magnifying glass—one can't help wonder whether we have progressed much in the 2,400 years since the goldsmith made this exquisite piece. Bulgaria is so laden with Thracian treasure that archaeologists now posit that it the country has, along with Greece and Italy, the most ancient artifacts in Europe, with some 15,000 tombs and 400 ancient settlements scattered throughout the country. Varna's Archaeological Museum is the best place to view the world's oldest gold; Sofia's History Museum is another. See p. 119.
- **Alfons Mucha Museum (Prague, Czech Republic).** Posters, decorative panels, objects, and excerpts from sketchbooks, as well as oil paintings from this well-known Art Nouveau master are displayed at the baroque Kaunický Palace near Václavské náměstí. See p. 242.
- **Resistance, Sighet (Romania).** This evocative memorial to people who died because of Communism in Romania, occupies a chilling former prison in Maramureș, not far from the Ukraine border. Each of the cells—including the one where former Prime Minister Iuliu Maniu died—is an exhibition space. See p. 547.
- **Muzeul Național al Satului (Bucharest, Romania).** There are village museums all over Romania, designed to keep the architecture of the country's rural communities within living memory. This one in the capital is so large, it might well be a village unto itself. There's a remarkable range of village houses, churches, and even a windmill, brought from across the country to this outdoor site in the north of the city. See p. 507.
- **Muzeul Național de Artă (Romania).** Bucharest's National Museum of Art is an exhaustive (and exhausting) collection of Romanian and European art housed in a wing of the former Royal Palace on Revolution Square. This is the best place to get acquainted with Romanian greats like world-renowned sculptor Constantin Brâncuși, and treasured Impressionist Nicolae Grigorescu, among many, many others. See p. 503.
- **State Hermitage Museum (St. Petersburg, Russia).** The museum holds one of the world's biggest art collections, from Egyptian carvings to Impressionist masterpieces. The museum is located in the Winter Palace, stormed in 1917 by revolutionaries. See p. 597.
- **Armory Museum (Moscow, Russia).** Fabergé eggs, coronation robes, royal carriages, and jewels have filled what was once the czarist weapons storehouse. See p. 583.
- **Tretyakov Gallery (Moscow, Russia).** The largest collection of Russian art. Chagall and Kandinsky share space with penetrating medieval icons. See p. 584.
- **Museum of the Warsaw Uprising (Warsaw, Poland).** With all of the audiovisual displays and sound effects, it's an assault on the eyes and ears. But when you're done walking through the exhibitions and watching the startling documentaries filmed during the fighting in 1944, you'll understand a lot more about Poles' resolve to preserve their nation. Just the photos alone of Warsaw's total destruction will leave you in awe that a modern city actually exists. See p. 402.

- **Museum of Zakopane Style (Zakopane, Poland).** This low-key museum is dedicated to the fine woodworking craft of the early Zakopane architects of the late 19th and early 20th century. No stunning high-tech visuals, just beautifully carved furnishings and a wonderful aesthetic feel. They took the log cabin and made it a castle. See p. 441.
- **Kobarid Museum (Slovenia).** The Kobarid is Slovenia's best antiwar

museum, dedicated to the memory of those who senselessly lost their lives in the fierce battle of Caporetto (Kobarid) which took place around this tiny, peaceful town that's now a center for adventure activities. If the indoor museum doesn't stir your soul, there's an outdoor "walking museum" which you explore with a map over several hours, taking in natural scenery and interesting ruins along the way. See p. 673.

8 The Best Towns & Villages

- **Hum (Istria, Croatia).** It calls itself the smallest town in the world, and population-wise, it might be. But so many people visit this village high in the Istrian interior that it always seems crowded. The village elders have done a wonderful job of restoring the buildings in town to make it tourist-friendly. See p. 178.
- **The Heritage Villages of Pirin, Rhodope, Balkan, and Sredna Gora Mountains (Bulgaria).** Bulgaria has the best-preserved mountain villages in the Balkans. Besides the charm of the 18th and 19th-century stone-and-timber architecture, village life appears untainted by the 21st century, with toothless old-timers in headscarves sunning themselves on benches while young lovers holding hands head off to the fields, hoes casually slung over their shoulders. The most photogenic and evocative villages are hidden deep in the mountains: Kovachevitsa and Dolen are surrounded by the forested flanks of the Rhodope ranges, Zheravna by the lush Balkan foothills, and pretty Koprivishtitsa in the undulating Sredna Gora. See p. 57.
- **Český Krumlov (Czech Republic).** If you have time for only one excursion from Prague, make it Český

Krumlov. This living gallery of Renaissance-era buildings housing many galleries, shops, and restaurants is 167km (104 miles) south of Prague. Above it towers the second-largest castle complex in the country, with the Vltava River running underneath. No wonder UNESCO named this town a World Heritage Site. See p. 260.

- **Pécs (Hungary).** This delightful city in southern Hungary is home to one of Hungary's most pleasing central squares and some great examples of Turkish architecture. See p. 368.
- **Sighișoara (Transylvania, Romania).** This medieval citadel, built in the 15th century, was the birthplace of the man who was to inspire Bram Stoker's Count Dracula. Today, it remains inhabited, and despite its compact size, is one of the most gorgeously preserved hilltop fortress cities in Europe, a tiny jumble of ancient nooks and crannies, with cobbled streets, medieval homes, and towers protruding from the battlements. See p. 525.
- **Sibiu (Transylvania, Romania).** Set to be a joint European City of Culture in 2007, Sibiu has received a remarkable makeover, transforming it into a whitewashed version of its

former self: a walled city with bastion towers, large open squares, impossible alleyways, and countless marvelous Gothic, baroque, and Renaissance buildings. See p. 529.

- **Gdańsk (Poland).** If you were expecting a dirty port city on the Baltic, you're in for the surprise of your life. Gdańsk is a beautifully restored old Hanseatic town that's brimming with life. The hotels and restaurants are great; the city couldn't be more inviting. And when you tire of Gdańsk, there's Sopot and the beaches and the nightclubs just up the road. See p. 449.
- **Wrocław (Poland).** This city gets short shrift from Poles—possibly because it still feels, at least in terms of the architecture, very much like a provincial German capital. But don't let that deter you. The Old Town is gorgeous. Those baroque and Renaissance facades sing with color, and will elevate your mood in any season. Wrocław is also filled with students,

ensuring lots of great little clubs tucked away in places you'd least expect. See p. 443.

- **Old Town (Bratislava, Slovakia).** It's hard to imagine a more active, fun, and user-friendly town center than Bratislava's Old Town. The past decade or so has seen a major effort to renovate the facades and bring new life into what was until recently a relatively quiet part of town. The result is a nightly street party. In good weather, the bars and cafes move their tables to the sidewalks and the whole city, it seems, comes out to have a good time. See p. 620.
- **Piran (Slovenia).** Piran is Slovenia's Venice, occupying a sharp promontory on the Istrian Coast. Piran doesn't have canals, but it will make your head spin as you get lost in a jumble of narrow cobblestone streets lined with lovely architecture, some beautifully preserved, some crumbling perfectly. See p. 676.

9 The Best Local Beer & Wine

- **Mitko Manolev (Melnik, Bulgaria).** Mitko, aka “six fingers,” may not make the best wine, but he sure offers a great tasting experience. Seated in the cool sandstone cave burrowed into the side of a cliff in the little village of Melnik, Mitko lets you taste his wines direct from the barrel, then bottles your choice (two types of red, both not dissimilar to grape juice, made with no preservatives and slightly sparkling, rather good when served ice cold); worth it if only to watch him personally fill, cork, and label it right in front of you—the most personally handled bottle of wine you're likely to purchase anywhere. See p. 93.
- **Quiet Nest (Black Sea Coast, Bulgaria).** If you want an introduction

to Bulgaria's independent producers, the Queens Winery House, a boutique wine shop on the grounds of the Quiet Nest (the Black Sea Coast palace built by Romania's Queen Marie), is the best place in the country to do so. At the helm is 21-year-old Elleanna, a young winemaker who stocks a superb selection of little-known labels and produces (among others) *Ducesa Aperitiv*, an “Aromatic Wine Drink”: Apparently the Romanian queen's favorite tippie, Elleanna managed to pry the recipe from the queen's winemaker before he passed away in 2005. Passionate about the untapped potential of Bulgarian wine, the new queen of the Nest is one to watch. See p. 116.

- **Plzeňské Pivovary/Pilsner Brewery (Prague, Czech Republic).** At U Prazdroje 7, Plzeň will interest anyone who wants to learn more about the brewing process. The brewery actually comprises several breweries, pumping out brands like Pilsner Urquell and Gambrinus, the most widely consumed beer in the Czech Republic. See p. 265.
- **Okocim Beer (Poland).** This is going to generate a lot of controversy. Of the big national beers, Poles seem to favor Żywiec (maybe it's folk dancing on the label that wins them over?). For my money, Okocim is the brew of choice. The slightly sweetish taste is reminiscent of Czech Budvar (Budweiser), and all the other beers more or less taste blandly the same. Drink it straight or add a shot of fruit syrup to the mix (but don't try this if you're male). See p. 382.
- **Țuică (Romania):** Țuică (also referred to as Pălinca) is a homemade brandy distilled from plums, pears, apples, or other fruit, and is a popular after-dinner or welcome drink, particularly in Romania's village communities. You'll probably get to taste it whenever you dine or stay with local families, or at traditional restaurants. You can purchase some of the country's best-known Țuică from Teo Coroian, who runs a small distilling business from his home in the medieval fortress town of Sighișoara. See p. 528.
- **Movia Estate (Slovenia).** You don't even need to visit the wine farm to enjoy tastings of some of Slovenia's favorite vintages. Movia has a wonderful little *vinoteka* right next to the Town Hall on Mestni Square. Luka, your obliging sommelier, will hardly bat an eyelid as you order another glass of something award-winning, but he will certainly remind you just how good it is. See p. 664.
- **The Jeruzalem Wine Route (Slovenia).** In Slovenia's "far" east, this route is perfect for purveyors of fine wine and gentle drives through rambling vineyards. You can stop off at any number of farms, with private tastings usually conducted by one of the owners, and then—should things get out of hand—you can simply stay for the night and pick up where you left off after a scrumptious farm breakfast. See p. 680.