

# The Best of Eastern Europe

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## 1 THE MOST UNFORGETTABLE TRAVEL EXPERIENCES

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- **Breathing the Air Inside a Thracian Tomb (Sveshtary, Bulgaria):** Entering this UNESCO-protected burial site 95km (60 miles) southeast of Ruse near the village of Sveshtary will send chills down your spine when you mull the thought that you are standing in a chamber where people who walked the earth 300 years before the birth of Christ, their servants, and their animals lay undisturbed for more than 2 millennia. You will marvel that you are viewing the same frescoes and sculptures that ushered these ancient residents to the next life. Be sure you call for reservations because the number of people allowed inside the climate-controlled space each day is limited. See p. 96.
- **Sunset on the City 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, almost to the tempo of the Adriatic Sea lapping at the wall's base. See p. 142.
- **Strolling Across Charles Bridge at Dawn or Dusk (Prague, Czech Republic):** The silhouettes of statues lining the 6-century-old crown jewel of Czech heritage hover like ghosts in 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 "Crossing the Vltava: Charles Bridge," in 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. 248.
- **Discovering the Courtyards of Budapest (Hungary):** Budapest's residential streets are enchanting, but it is the buildings' courtyards that hold the city's greatest secret: Budapesters are villagers at heart. Nearly every apartment building in this city has an open-air courtyard in its center, where fruit trees and flower gardens flourish, cats lounge in the sun, and pensioners congregate on common balconies smoking cigarettes, gossiping, and watching children playing among flowerpots and laundry racks.
- **Sipping Coffee in the Heart of the City (Kraków, Poland):** Superlatives don't do Kraków's Rynek Główny justice. It's said to be central Europe's largest town square and it's also supposed to have the most bars and cafes per square

meter than any place in the world. Yet it's also one of the most beautiful spaces anywhere and the perfect spot to enjoy a beverage and watch the world go by. See p. 427.

- **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 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. 436.
- **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 Europe, where horse-drawn carts outnumber motor vehicles and many households have a cow in the backyard. You'll be surrounded by warm, friendly people, many of whom dress exclusively in traditional costume. See p. 548.
- **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, the only signs of human habitation might be a church steeple peeking through a forest canopy, or farmers cutting grass with hand-held scythes. See p. 520.
- **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 p. 588.

- **Steam Stress Away at the Sandunovsky Baths (Sandunovskiy 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 are a special treat, with Greek sculptures and marble baths. See "Banya Bliss," p. 585.
- **Watch the Neva River Drawbridges Go Up (St. Petersburg, Russia):** An unforgettable outing during White Nights, or anytime, involves perching on the quay at 2am to watch the city's bridges unfold in careful rhythm to allow ships to navigate the Neva.
- **Walking in the High Tatras (Slovakia):** During summer, trails across the peaks are open, meaning you can start in Slovakia in the morning and enjoy a well-earned dinner in Poland the same day. The High Tatras have trails suitable for walkers of all abilities; just choose a route and give it a shot. See section 5 in chapter 11.
- **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 unforgettable. Subterranean architecture comprises stalactites, stalagmites, and limestone pools, not to mention the world's largest underground canyon, stupendous bridges, and drop-away galleries that will reconfigure your understanding of life on earth. See p. 684.

## 2 THE BEST HOTEL SPLURGES

- **Cosmopolitan Hotel (Ruse, Bulgaria):** The level of sophistication, service, and value in this chic hotel that opened in

March 2008 is in another stratosphere compared to properties in the rest of Bulgaria. Guest rooms are done with an

eye to convenience and luxury, with flatscreen plasmas, in-room Wi-Fi, and the liberal use of original artwork. Add a world-class spa, a rooftop pool and terrace, a restaurant serving international cuisine, and lots of complementary services, and you have a runaway winner. See p. 114.

- **Hotel San Rocco (Brtonigla, Croatia):** San Rocco's location deep in Istria in northwestern Croatia adds to the romance you'll find in its impeccably restored stone buildings and grounds. Flowers, olive groves, and an assortment of ruins comprise the hotel's sensual "curb appeal." But it's the beautifully put-together guest rooms with their mélange of antique and modern touches, the inviting pool, and the gourmet restaurant that seal the deal. See p. 172.
- **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 its base. Every detail has been addressed, and whether you hail from America or Azerbaijan, you'll feel like an honored guest. See p. 136.
- **Hotel Vestibul Palace (Split, Croatia):** The Roman Empire meets the 21st century at the Palace, where most rooms share at least part of a wall built by the Emperor Diocletian. Light, history, and gourmet delights align to make this one of the best hotel experiences in Croatia. Each room has a personality of its own, complete with cleverly designed windows carved into the stone walls to reveal views of various aspects of Old Town. See p. 157.
- **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. 226.
- **Hotel Paříž (Prague, Czech Republic):** This restored Art Nouveau hotel recalls 1920s Prague, one of the wealthiest cities on earth at that time. It's across from another remodeled gem, the Municipal House (Obecní dům). See p. 227.
- **Four Seasons Gresham Palace (Budapest, Hungary):** The magnificent Gresham Palace has gained the reputation as Hungary's foremost hotel. The workmanship that recreated the Art Nouveau architecture is breathtaking. Guests get the royal treatment. See p. 295.
- **Hilton Budapest (Hungary):** The only chain hotel in the Castle Hill district, the hotel's award-winning design is incorporated into the ruins of a 13th-century Dominican church and the baroque facade of a 17th-century Jesuit college. See p. 300.
- **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 overlooks the river at the town. See p. 453.
- **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 they are 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. 563.
- **Staying in Count Kalnoky's Guesthouses (Micloșoara, 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 Hungarian village once ruled by his

forebears, he set about restoring its old houses and ended up creating one of the best accommodations in the country. See p. 522.

- **Baltschug Kempinski (Moscow, Russia):** The hotel's views of St. Basil's Cathedral and the Kremlin are so breathtaking that TV networks set up there for their stand-ups. The brunch is fit for a tsar, and the understated elegance of the rooms complements the facade's pastel ornamentation. See p. 582.
- **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 in the mezzanine cafe provide respite from a day of touring. See p. 595.
- **Arcadia (Bratislava, Slovakia):** Bratislava now has two gorgeous boutique hotels: this one and the similarly priced Marrol's. Of the two, the Arcadia gets the nod because of its setting in a beautifully restored 13th-century town house just off the main square. Take a tour of the hotel and choose one that suits your mood: Some are done up in 19th-century Biedermeier, while others hark back to the Middle Ages, with stone walls and wood-beamed ceilings. See p. 619.
- **Grand Hotel Starý Smokovec (High Tatras, Slovakia):** You are in the Tatras, so why not spend a little extra to stay at this beautifully restored 19th-century Alpine manor that manages to match mountains for style and grace? The elegant lobby, billiard room, breakfast room, and "Rondo" dance room will

have you thinking you stepped into *The Great Gatsby* or an Agatha Christie novel. See p. 633.

- **Kendov Dvorec (Slovenia):** Arguably the finest restored manor in the country, this is an idyllic retreat filled with antiques and plush furniture. Each meal is a triumph, and while you're in the country, you're never too far from everywhere else in tiny Slovenia. See p. 683.
- **Nebesa (Kobarid Slovenia):** Anywhere else in the world, this four-cottage "resort" would be considered a bargain. The real splurge is time-related: You'll need to drive several miles to get to Nebesa's mountainside location, from where you not only can see Italy, but also feel the breeze off the ocean, while at the same time you're almost eye level with soaring mountain peaks, often capped with snow. You'll feel like a private guest of the debonair owners while lounging on your private terrace and conjuring 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. 679.
- **Otočec Castle (Otočec Slovenia):** Dating back to the 13th century, Slovenia's only island castle is now fabulously restored and boasts some of the plushiest, most beautiful (and modern) accommodations in the country. But while your luxurious bedroom will seduce you, the real thrill here is getting caught up in the fairy-tale setting, idling alongside the Krka River, then sitting down to an aristocratic feast, accompanied by the region's unique red wine. See p. 690.

### 3 THE BEST HOTEL BARGAINS

- **Niky (Sofia, Bulgaria):** One of the best-kept lodging secrets in Sofia, Niky's rooms often are monopolized by a cadre of repeat visitors who make reservations

months in advance, and no wonder. The hotel, which billed itself as "Sofia's first all-suite hotel" when it opened in 2003, has a great location 2½ blocks

west of Vitosha Street, friendly service, and fairly priced oversize rooms that inspire loyalty. See p. 67.

- **Hotel Gurko (Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria):** This timbered three-story is as traditional and charming as they come: Almost all rooms open onto balconies with geranium-filled window boxes and great views of the hillside and the Yantra River below. Every guest room in this National Revival-era home is spotless and comfortable. Gurko is one of the best options in town: an authentic family-run inn with a lively tavern on the ground floor. See p. 100.
- **Hotel Kaštel (Istria, Croatia):** The Kaštel's perch at the highest point of the walled medieval town of Motovun provides panoramic views of the Mirna valley. Each room has a different view of the terrain and the hotel has an excellent restaurant that serves homemade Istrian specialties you can't get anywhere else. The sizeable guest rooms were refurbished in 2003 but are in character with the hotel's 17th-century origin as a palace. See p. 180.
- **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. 165.
- **Pension Unitas/Art Prison Hostel (Prague, Czech Republic):** This pension is an ideal place for budget travelers who want to take advantage of staying in the very center of Prague. See p. 228.
- **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 prices are unbeatable. See p. 230.
- **BudaBaB Bed and Breakfast (Budapest, Hungary):** Comfortable, modern, and in the city center, it is run by two expat Americans and the author of the Hungary chapter in this book. See p. 299.
- **Hotel Fönix (Pécs, Hungary):** When in Pécs, you'll want to check out this bargain hotel that is beautifully located downtown, making it the ideal location to experience the city. See p. 373.
- **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 linens on beds, everything about this place says quality. See p. 424.
- **Premiere Classe (Warsaw, Poland):** Warsaw is overpriced when it comes to decent accommodations. But here, a French-run chain came up with the novel idea of offering clean, modern rooms the size of a cubicle for a fraction of the price of other hotels. Sure the rooms are tiny, but the beds are big and comfortable, the bathrooms are clean, and the location is just a couple of tram stops from the main sights. See p. 398.
- **Casa Rozelor (Braşov, 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 outrageous contemporary art and furniture. And it's right in the heart of Braşov's medieval center. Seldom does the blend of old and new fit so well, and feel so good. See p. 522.
- **Casa cu Cerbi (Voievodeasa, Moldavia, Romania):** One of the most beautiful guesthouses in Romania is a wooden house painted in bright, difficult-to-miss idiosyncratic green. Interiors are artfully decorated with traditional artifacts—handmade rugs, brightly painted furniture, and evidence of a life spent at work in the fields. While there are few

luxuries (aside from a lavish dinner and a pristine private bathroom), you'll spend your time getting to know a gentler way of life and exploring some of the most stunningly decorated monasteries on earth. See p. 558.

- **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. 583.
- **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. 598.
- **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. 627.

- **Hiša Franko Casa (Kobarid, Slovenia):** A treasure in Soča Valley, near the Italian border. Each beautiful guest room is done in a unique combination of lively colors and all feature such treats as his-and-hers slippers and a choice of in-room amenities. It's more pension than hotel, and it is something of an afterthought to one of the country's finest restaurants, just downstairs. See p. 678.
- **Antiq Hotel (Ljubljana, Slovenia):** In the heart of Ljubljana's Old Town, right near one of the paths that leads to the 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. 662.

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## 4 THE BEST FESTIVALS & CELEBRATIONS

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- **Festival of the Kukeri (Bulgaria):** The days between New Year's and Lent are known as *Mrasni Dni* ("Dirty Days"), a time when it is said that the gates to heaven and hell are left open and demons walk the earth. To scare away evil, villagers all over Bulgaria don terrifying masks and belts sagging with huge bells while brandishing wooden weapons as they patrol the streets, making noise. You can see the best examples and photos of *kukeri* costumes in Sofia's Ethnographic Museum. For the ultimate *kukeri* show, plan to visit in an even-numbered year during the last weekend in January, when some 3,500 revelers participate in Bulgaria's largest Festival of the Kukeri in Pernik. See p. 78.
- **The Karlovy Vary International Film Festival (Czech Republic):** This is the

place to see and be seen. Each summer (in early July), the country's film stars, celebrities, and wealthy folks, supported by a cast of international luminaries, can be spotted taking part in one of Europe's biggest film festivals. Nine venues screen more than 300 films during the 10-day festival. See p. 211.

- **Easter (Hollókő, Hungary):** The entire town dresses in traditional Easter garb to reenact the religious event, and it's a magical experience. These rural Palóc people speak an unusual Hungarian dialect, and they have some of the more colorful folk customs and costumes. See p. 365.
- **September Wine Festival (Budapest, Hungary):** The first weekend of September celebrates the first wheat harvest of the season and the crushing of the

grapes. A parade of traditionally costumed dancers and musicians starts the celebration with a march up to Castle Hill, signaling the opening of the week-end-long wine festival. Each year a different country is invited to share its wine heritage. Entertainment, wine tasting, food, and crafts fill the weekend with fun for the entire family. Check with TourInform, as events change from year to year due to bridge construction.

- **Winter Customs Festival (Maramureș, Romania):** Countless festivals occur throughout the year, but a favorite is over the Christmas holidays when the small town of Sighet, near the Ukraine border, comes to life on December 27 for the Winter Customs Festival, 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. 551.
- **New Year's Day (Russia):** This is the major holiday of the Russian year. It's a family event centered on 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. 574.
- **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 a party; they're a buoyant, carefree attitude of summer-ness. Ride a boat through the canals as the sunset melts into a languorous sunrise, and you'll never want to go south again. See p. 574.
- **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 word *pohoda* means "relax," and that's the whole idea. See p. 614.
- **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. 689.

## 5 THE BEST OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

- **Hiking Rila's Seven Lakes (Rila, Bulgaria):** This moderate 2-day (or more) hike from Rila Monastery into Bulgaria's Alps to view the eerily beautiful Seven Lakes is the most rewarding hike in the country. 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 on the shores of the lowest lakes. If you can, book the newest, which has the best facilities. See "Outdoors in the Rila, Pirin & Rhodope Mountains" in chapter 4.
- **Plitvice Lakes National Park (Croatia):** Plitvice is Croatia'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. The park's 16 crystal-clear turquoise lakes and their countless waterfalls are the marquee attraction, and you'll be fascinated by these pristine ponds, 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 section 9 in chapter 5.

- **Taking a Slow Boat Down the Vltava (Czech Republic):** You can see many 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, tour boats offer floating views, many with meals. Be sure to check the float path to be certain your boat travels past the castles and palaces.
- **Hiking in the Hills Outside Szigliget (Hungary):** You can hike up to the fantastic ruins of a 13th-century castle above this scenic village in the Lake Balaton region, or go farther north and hike into hills covered with vineyards. See “Top Attraction & Special Moments” in chapter 7.
- **Swimming in the Thermal Lake at Hévíz (Hungary):** Even in the depths of winter, the temperature in Europe’s largest thermal lake seldom dips below 85° to 90°F (30°–32°C). Hungarians swim here year-round, and you can, too! If you visit in winter, it’ll be a memorable experience. See “An Excursion to the Thermal Lake in Hévíz” in chapter 7.
- **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 “Outside of Zakopane” in chapter 8.
- **Idling Through the Backwaters of the Danube Delta (Romania):** Considered by some to be Europe’s most important wildlife sanctuary, the Danube Delta once was threatened by Communism’s unchecked industrial program. Now the Delta once again is 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 “The Danube Delta” in chapter 9.
- **Picnic at Kolomenskoye (Moscow, Russia):** This architectural reserve boasts the breathtaking 16th-century Church of the Assumption and the wooden house where Peter the Great sought refuge before assuming Russia’s throne. The surrounding lawns beckon visitors to stretch out with caviar or cucumber sandwiches and a thermos of strong Russian tea. See p. 586.
- **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 bedecked in the traditional folk costumes of the region. See “Rafting on the Dunajec” in chapter 11.
- **Having the Ride of Your Life (Slovenia):** Compact and oozing spectacular scenery, Slovenia may be the ultimate cycling destination. Verdant valleys, dark forests, and rural countryside and hills beckon, but the challenge that your muscles will remember forever is the steep ascent up and over the Vršič Pass in the Julian Alps; the 50 hairpin bends will exhaust you, but the views along the way will leave you breathless. Of course, it’s less tiring by car! See “Outdoor Activities in the Soča Valley” in chapter 12.



## 6 THE BEST LOCAL DINING EXPERIENCES

- **Manastinska Magernitza (Sofia, Bulgaria):** Its name translates to “Monastery Kitchen,” and the traditional recipes from 161 Bulgarian monasteries executed here translate to culinary bliss. There is plenty on the menu you won’t find elsewhere in Bulgaria, like *plak-ovsjka hayverna*, peeled garlic mashed with salt, oil, lemon, bread, and walnuts. This is a place to linger over your meal and make plans to return. See p. 70.
- **Kopitoto (St. Konstantin, Bulgaria):** “Folk restaurant” might be the best way to describe Kopitoto, located about 10 minutes north of Varna on the road to Sunny Beach. Bulgarian bells and other folk objects are used in the decor and there is a fire pit in the center of the outdoor dining area that provides ashes for the nightly “ember dance” during which dancers stomp around on warm ashes to music. Entertainment aside, you should go to Kopitoto (translation: horse hoof) for traditional Bulgarian food. See p. 109.
- **Bitoraj (Fužine, Croatia):** Bitoraj is a 75-year-old restaurant in a new building, which only enhances the dining experience. The menu offers game dishes available nowhere else in Croatia, plus a huge selection of traditional delicacies. From bear ham to Bitoraj’s signature dish of wild boar baked under a lid (*peka*) on an open fire, all dishes utilize the best ingredients the surrounding woods can offer. See p. 183.
- **Paprika Vendéglő (Budapest, Hungary):** Escape the city without leaving Budapest when entering this restaurant. Whether you want to sample wild boar or a more domestic dish, the overflowing portions and excellent service will fill all your needs. See p. 307.
- **Karczma Jana (Olsztyn, Poland):** You’d expect to find excellent food in Warsaw, Kraków, and Gdańsk (and you do), but in Olsztyn, it’s a surprise. Karczma Jana is one of the distinctly Polish restaurants with traditional decor and local specialties done very well. See p. 414.
- **Piwnicka Świdnicka (Wrocław, Poland):** It looks like a classic tourist trap with big wooden tables set right on the main square, but Piwnicka Świdnicka is actually an excellent traditional Polish restaurant. Come for big plates of classic dishes like pork knuckle or beef roulade served with puréed beets. See p. 446.
- **Casa cu Cerbi (Voievodeasa, Moldavia, Romania):** As a guest at the House of the Stags in this tiny village near the painted monastery at Suceviț, you’ll be treated like family. You’ll be served huge portions of soup, bread, meat, and vegetables in the kitchen-cum-dining room of this new-but-traditional wooden house. See p. 558.
- **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. 584.
- **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. See p. 599.
- **Le Colonial (Košice, Slovakia):** Too many Slovak chefs still follow the old recipes by rote, but here they mix it up a bit, to good effect: Fried chicken breast is a staple on every Slovak menu, but here it comes stuffed with tart sheep’s cheese and served with freshly cooked string beans. The interior is perfect for a romantic meal. See p. 644.
- **Hiša Franko (near Kobarid, Slovenia):** Fans of this renowned family restaurant (where you can bed down for the night

in the sumptuous rooms upstairs) come from all over Europe to join chef Ana Roš's latest culinary adventure. Leave

the choice of wine to her husband, Valter Kramer, Slovenia's most accomplished sommelier. See p. 678.

## 7 THE BEST MUSEUMS

- **Varna Archaeological Museum (Bulgaria):** The fine detail in a gold figure of Victory carved on an earring taken from the tomb of a Thracian noble woman will reveal the skill of the goldsmith who made this exquisite piece 2,400 years ago. With 15,000 tombs and 400 ancient settlements scattered throughout the country, Bulgaria is so rich in Thracian burial mounds that archaeologists think some of Europe's oldest artifacts are waiting to be unearthed there. See p. 111.
- **Roman Amphitheater (Pula, Croatia):** Smaller than Rome's coliseum but in much better shape, the amphitheater is more accessible than its Rome counterpart. Don't miss the restored underground chambers, which house museum exhibits featuring Istrian history. And if you happen to be in town when a concert is scheduled, buy a ticket no matter who is headlining. See p. 166.
- **Ivan Meštrović Gallery and Kaštelet (Split, Croatia):** The Meštrović Gallery occupies the mansion Croatian sculptor Ivan Meštrović built from 1937 to 1939 as a home/atelier for his family. Meštrović lived there for just 2 years before emigrating from Croatia, but he left behind a house and garden on a hill overlooking the Adriatic that showcase some of his best work. Up the road is the 16th-century **Kaštelet**, a Renaissance-style summer house Meštrović purchased and remodeled in 1939 as a showcase for his "Life of Christ" reliefs. See p. 159.
- **Alfons Mucha Museum (Prague, Czech Republic):** Posters, decorative panels, objects, excerpts from sketchbooks, and oil paintings from this well-known Art Nouveau master are displayed at the Baroque Kaunický Palace near Václavské náměstí. See p. 244.
- **Holocaust Memorial Center (Budapest, Hungary):** Opened on the 60th anniversary of the Holocaust, the center is the first of its kind in central Europe to be government funded. A refurbished eclectic synagogue is located in the center of the building. See p. 312.
- **Museum of Fine Arts (Budapest, Hungary):** Critics agree that this museum has one of the most important collections in Europe. The collection of Spanish masters is second only to Madrid. See p. 313.
- **Museum of the Warsaw Uprising (Poland):** The audiovisual displays and sound effects are 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. The photos of Warsaw's destruction alone will leave you in awe that a modern city actually still exists. See p. 403.
- **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 centuries. No stunning high-tech visuals, just beautifully carved furnishings and a wonderful aesthetic feel. It's a log cabin made into a palace. See p. 441.
- **Peleş (Sinaia, Romania):** Built as a summer residence for Romania's first king in what is now a popular ski resort, Peleş Castle looks like it was built for the next *Harry Potter* blockbuster: It's

an architectural triumph of German neo-Renaissance architecture that is at once stylish and fantastical. It remains one of the finest castles in Europe, with 170 opulent rooms, only some of which are open during the country's best guided museum tour. See p. 516.

- **Memorial Museum of the Victims of Communism and the 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. 554.
- **Armory Museum (Moscow, Russia):** Fabergé eggs, coronation robes, royal

carriages, and jewels fill what was once the tsarist weapons storehouse. See p. 587.

- **State Hermitage Museum (St. Petersburg, Russia):** The museum holds one of the world's biggest art collections, from Egyptian carvings to Impressionist masterpieces. It is in the Winter Palace, stormed in 1917 by revolutionaries. See p. 601.
- **Kobarid Museum (Slovenia):** The Kobarid is Slovenia's best antiwar museum, dedicated to the memory of those who lost their lives in the fierce battle of Caporetto (Kobarid), which took place near this peaceful town, now a center for adventure activities. See p. 681.

## 8 THE BEST TOWNS & VILLAGES

- **The Heritage Villages of Pirin, Rhodope, Balkan, and Sredna Gora Mountains (Bulgaria):** Besides the charm of the 18th- and 19th-century stone-and-timber architecture, village life here 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 Rhodope ranges, Zheravna by the lush Balkan foothills, and pretty Koprivishtitsa in the undulating Sredna Gora. See "Outdoors in the Rila, Pirin & Rhodope Mountains" in chapter 4.
- **Hum (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 almost always seems crowded.

The village elders have done a wonderful job of restoring buildings to make Hum tourist-friendly. See "Motovun, Roč & Hum" in chapter 5.

- **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 below. No wonder UNESCO named this town a World Heritage Site. See "Český Krumlov" in chapter 6.
- **Karlovy Vary (Czech Republic):** A slow pace and pedestrian promenades lined with turn-of-the-20th-century Art Nouveau buildings turn strolling into an art form here. Nighttime walks take on a mystical feel as the sewers, the river, and multiple major cracks in the roads emit steam from the mineral waters running underneath. Sample the

town's 12 hot spring waters; each is full of healing power. See "Karlový Vary (Carlsbad)" in chapter 6.

- **Pécs (Hungary):** This delightful city in southern Hungary is home to one of the country's most pleasing central squares and some great examples of Turkish architecture. See "Pécs: The 2,000-Year-Old City" in chapter 7.
- **Szentendre (Hungary):** Right along the Danube bend and only 45 minutes from Budapest, this small Serbian village has a different cultural flavor than the rest of the country. It is worth a trip outside the capital for a half-day to see the architecture. See "Szentendre" in chapter 7.
- **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 Hanseatic town that's brimming with life. The hotels and restaurants are superb and the city couldn't be more inviting. And when you tire of Gdańsk, there's Sopot and the beaches and nightclubs just up the road. See "Gdańsk" in chapter 8.
- **Wrocław (Poland):** This city feels (at least in terms of the architecture) very much like a provincial German capital. The Old Town is gorgeous. The Baroque and Renaissance facades sing with color, and 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 "Wrocław" in chapter 8.
- **Sibiu (Romania):** 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 "Sibiu" in chapter 9.

- **Sighișoara (Romania):** This medieval citadel was the birthplace of the man who inspired Bram Stoker's Count Dracula. Today, it remains inhabited, and despite its compact size, it is one of the best preserved hilltop fortress cities in Europe, a jumble of ancient crannies, cobbled streets, medieval homes, and towers protruding from battlements. See "Sighișoara" in chapter 9.
- **Old Town (Bratislava, Slovakia):** Yes, it's technically part of a city, but Old Town feels more like a village. Indeed, it's hard to imagine a more active, fun, and user-friendly town center than Bratislava's Old Town. The past decade has witnessed a major effort to bring new life into what once was a quiet part of town. The result is a nightly street party. See "Exploring Bratislava" in chapter 11.
- **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 "Piran & the Istrian Coast" in chapter 12.

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## 9 THE BEST LOCAL BEER & WINE

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- **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 Melnik, Mitko lets you taste his wines directly from the barrel, then bottles your choice (two types of red, not dissimilar to grape juice); it's worth it if only to watch him fill, cork, and

label right in front of you. See “Drinking Wine with ‘Six Fingers’ Manolev” in chapter 4.

- **Grgić Vina (Trstenik, Croatia):** About 32km (20 miles) north of Dubrovnik lies a turnoff for Trstenik, an out-of-the-way town with a couple of small, uncrowded beaches, a few restaurants, and a concrete pier for diving. Along the way, you’ll find the Croatian branch of Grgich Hills, one of the world’s great wineries. Grgić Vina is modest compared to its California counterpart—it’s basically a concrete bunker—but it produces some of Croatia’s most sought-after wines. Buy a bottle of the latest vintage at about half the cost elsewhere. See “Pelješac Peninsula” in chapter 5.
- **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 “Touring the Beer Shrines” in chapter 6.
- **House of Hungarian Wines (Budapest, Hungary):** Located on castle hill, here you can savor the flavors of more than 60 of the most important Hungarian wines in one spot while being educated about them at the same time. Hungary is famous for its Tokai, the king of wines and the wine of kings, and it is the only country where Tokai is legally produced. See p. 338.
- **Okocim Beer (Poland):** Of the big national beers, Poles seem to favor Żywiec (maybe it’s folk dancing on the label that wins them over?). For our 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 “Polish Cuisine” in chapter 8.
- **Țuică (Romania):** Țuică (also referred to as Pălinca) is a homemade brandy distilled from plums, pears, apples, or other fruit, and it is a popular after-dinner or welcome drink, particularly in Romania’s village communities. 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 “Getting Fortified in the Citadel” in chapter 9.
- **The Jeruzalem Wine Road (Slovenia):** This route in Slovenia’s “far” east is perfect for purveyors of fine wine and gentle drives through rambling vineyards. You can stop at many farms, with private tastings conducted by one of the owners, and should things get out of hand, you simply can stay the night and pick up where you left off after a scrumptious farm breakfast. See “Touring the Jeruzalem Wine Road” in chapter 12.