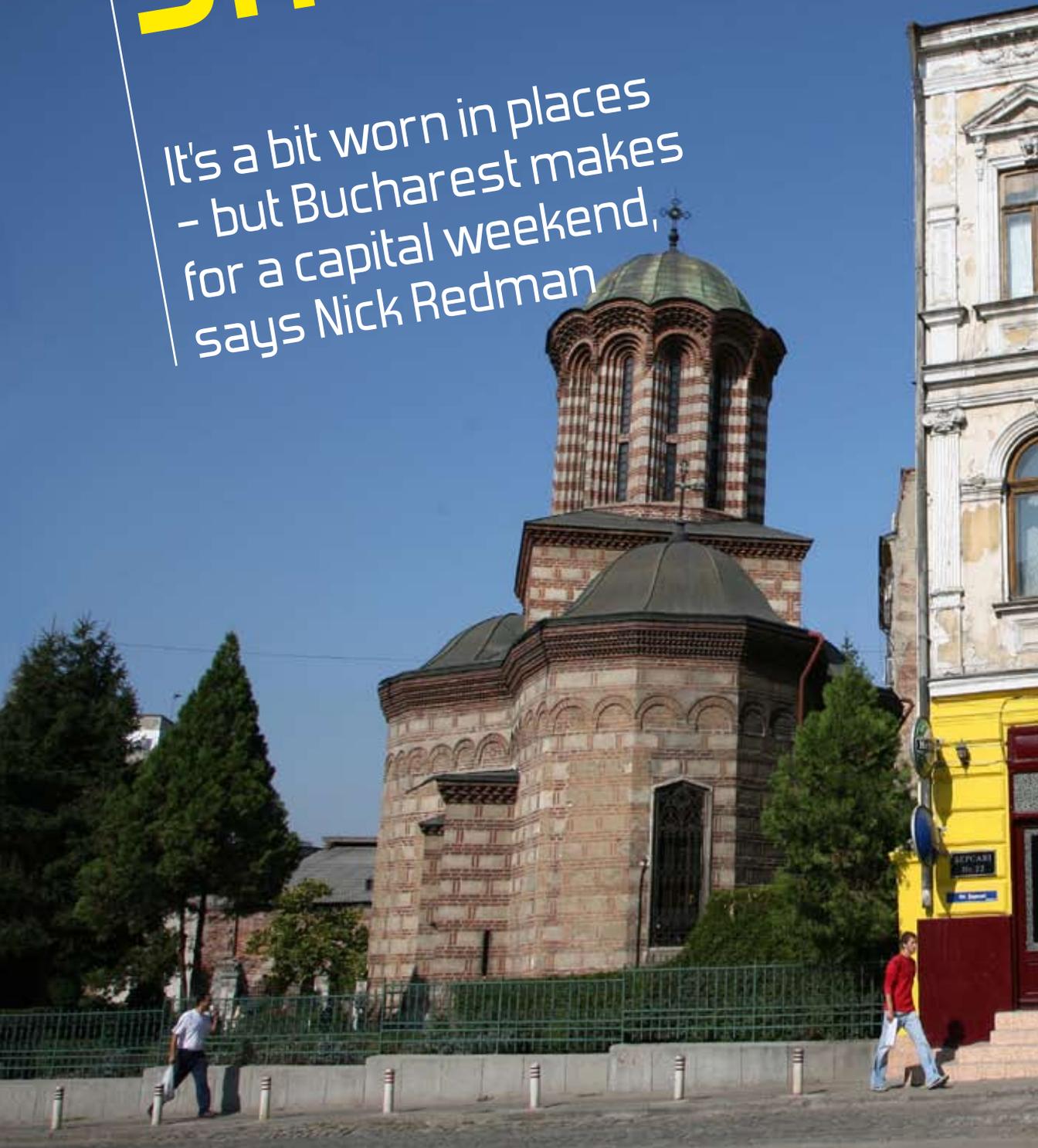


BUCHAREST

Shab Fab

It's a bit worn in places
- but Bucharest makes
for a capital weekend,
says Nick Redman





An elegant but shabby building in the Lipskani quarter

Massive, monstrous against the Bucharest skyline, it stands there, an interwar Gotham City-type building with all the vaulting ambition, if not the height, of the Empire State Building. The Palace of Parliament is a tyrannical essay in Transylvanian marble. There's one million cubic metres of the stuff. Through heavy double doors are hand-embroidered curtains in gold and silver honed by nuns in northern Moldavia, a five-ton crystal and gold chandelier and a rolled-up carpet weighing the same in the stadium-size ballroom. There are 1,000 rooms, more than 400 offices. This is the world's second-largest building by surface area, after the USA's Pentagon. In terms of content, it is perhaps the greatest legacy of the country's feared late dictator, Nicolae Ceausescu. In terms of intent, it is probably his worst.

One-sixth of Bucharest was bulldozed for what Ceausescu called his 'House of the People', an administrative centre begun in 1984. 700 architects directed 20,000 workers, who toiled in 24-hour shifts, seven days a week, to finish it. They never did. Inside, while now home to parliament and senate, it is still only 70 per cent complete. Ceausescu and his high-maintenance wife, Elena, died by firing squad on Christmas Day 1989, in the coup that dealt the death knell to Soviet supremacy in Romania. But their freakish monument remains a compelling reminder of the uniquely tweaked-up brand of totalitarianism that moulded a country and its people for half a century.

Gritty not pretty

If you've ticked off the chocolate-box-cute cities that once lay beyond the iron curtain – Budapest and its gothic parliament, Cracow and its student-filled cafes – and come expecting more of the same from Bucharest, you're in for a big surprise. It is, it let's face it, more gritty than pretty, although there's a familiar Eastern European sense of older grandeur suppressed by Soviet overlay. Baroque churches and neoclassical municipal buildings sit alongside pitted streets, thrusting civic Stalinism and rust-streaked high-rises in various shades of February-

sleet grey. Way out east, as close to Istanbul as to Berlin, Bucharest feels in many ways like one of those 'flat-pack' Mediterranean cities – Marseille, maybe, or Tunis.

Tip: you can get the bigger southern-European picture by ordering the more-ish mushroom risotto of an evening at Uptown, a restaurant in the ambassadorial district. With window-box geraniums

An article in the New York Times epitomised for me the capital's singular appeal: 'It may be that the real strength of Bucharest is in how much it pushes visitors to understand it on its own terms... Somehow it manages a certain exoticism yet without seeming too far removed from the norms of any other Western city.' A chance sideways glance on airy Boulevard

“ word-of-mouth bars and parties in rich Romanians' villas. G&Ts for a Euro a pop and an arty crowd just in from Berlin

stalking out of their pots, and a carafe of woozy rose growing slowly lower, you could easily be in a smart part of Barcelona, Naples or Athens.

Arcul de Triumf

Bucharest has a classic drama that predates Communist intervention. It is routinely grass-green and leafy, sprinkled with parks, lakes and parades of horse chestnuts. It is spun with grand cobbled boulevards, centring on monuments such as the familiar-looking Arcul de Triumf (that's right, the Arc de Triomphe). Roads radiate directly back to Bucharest's golden age, between the wars, when economic confidence bestowed a Parisian frivolity upon the ambitions of town planners. As a result, sweeping, if slightly shabby, Art Deco and modernist architecture ripples before you at every third turn. However the real pleasure of a weekend here is how often you feel you've got the place to yourself. No snaking queues for over-subscribed-to museums. No day-glo tour buses obscuring the facades. No pavement cafes charging £5 for a crappy cappuccino. Perhaps it's only to be expected. There's currently no tourism office in Romania. But right now, their loss is your gain.

'A certain exoticism'

N Balcesco confirmed the sentiment. In a travel agent's window reflections of grimed Soviet apartments and sooty, skeletal trees were superimposed upon a sun-bleached poster of Capri. A few doors down Misiune Imposibila III pulled crowds to Cinema Patria, whose façade was so worn it looked war-torn.

Spend, spend, spend

If you thought there was no money around, however, you'd be mistaken. On the contrary. Given the prospect of EU accession, a whole swathe of Romanian society is out to spend, spend, spend, as levels of corruption and inflation shrink and the economy grows. The whirl has been stimulated by international investment in banking and heavy industry, and by that self-propelling consumer stimulus – keeping up with the Joneses. People here will spend more on cars – especially Mercedes, Audis and BMWs – than on anything else. Fashionable restaurants such as Casa di David, serving sweet chilli prawns to an ostentatious clientele, are "full of Romanians who'll send the bill back because it's not enough money," says Craig Turp, editor of English-language city guide Bucharest In Your Pocket. Not entirely, you sense, in jest.

Up for it

Come the weekend, they're all up for







Top, dessert at Balthazar. Above, marble overload in the Palace of Parliament

it in Bucharest. The key to a good time lies, of course, in knowing where to go. There's a Time Out but it's in Romanian, so your best bet is a copy of Turp's acerbically entertaining Bucharest In Your Pocket, available free from big hotels. In an ideal world you'd check in at boutique hotel Rembrandt and make instant friends with the owner, Jerry Van Schaik from Amsterdam. He'd then spend the weekend taking you to word-of-mouth bars and parties in rich Romanians' Le Corbusier-style villas on the back his scooter: G&Ts for about a Euro a pop and an arty crowd just in from Berlin. It worked for me, but

“ Come the weekend, they're all up for it in Bucharest.

don't tell him I told you. And good luck. Do, however, try the Rembrandt. In a city of monotonous hotel monoliths, it's the closest thing Bucharest's got to an individually run, non-corporate check-in - all brown leather armchairs and views of red rooftiles. And you're handily placed for the so-shabby-it's-fabby Lipskani quarter, the oldest part of the city. Here, while ogling the odd modish shop- and gallery-front showcasing Roy Lichtenstein-print armchairs, you can do your 'tick-'em-off' tourist duties on Saturday morning.

Tourist tick'em offs

Start with coffee in the Manuc Inn's sunlit courtyard, once the biggest in Bucharest, where there's an old cart artfully crippled on the cobbles. Later on, ye olde worlde folkloric bands pump their accordions here. Next, pay homage to Vlad Tepes - 'the Impaler' and inspiration for Dracula - whose inscrutable bust stands beside the Byzantine Princely Church. Then order that much-needed Bloody Mary at Grand Café Amsterdam - a fine, big-windowed corner joint with walls of duck-egg blue, a huge stopped clock over the bar and





Clockwise from top left: the man to know - Jerry van Schaik; the Arcul de Triomf; Bucharest commuters - they're all up for it at night; the Amsterdam café

Leffe on tap. Notting Hill for real people, if you like. And it's buzzier still by night.

A martini or three

Because of a predominance of north-south thoroughfares, there's no core to Bucharest's social scene.

"You can argue about it all night," says Craig Turp. "There are good places to eat and drink, but they're all over the place."

On the positive side, the city is compact, and taxis cheap. For my money, no

Saturday night out would be complete without at least a martini or three, and ideally dinner, at Bucharest's most fashionable restaurant, Balthazar. In a villa, it has a whiff of Paris and Casablanca. Three courses and three martinis: €56 a head.

Check out Embryo. It was under renovator's wraps when I last checked, but it was space-age funky in a previous incarnation, so doubtless it'll return even sexier.

Try non-poncey, nicely boozy club Frame, or put your two left feet forward at Salsa.

It's exactly as the name suggests and a

bit of a city legend. If you're flying back Monday, The Office does the trick on Sunday nights: folks who favour mirror shades and too-tight T-shirts, big, louche chandeliers wrapped in chiffon, bare brick, wood underfoot, flickering candles and lovely funky house from a DJ named Sasha. Just don't overdo it on the cheap house white and the chit-chat with Sasha, or you might miss your flight. Then again, in Bucharest right now, you might just be glad you did. ■

Info to go

Stay

Rembrandt – Smart leather armchairs and bright white sheets create a peaceful townhouse retreat that's handy for the Lipskani district. Rooms from Str. Smardan 11, tel 313 93 16, www.rembrandt.ro. More hotels in Bucharest at www.inyourpocket.com

Hotel Concordia
Superb, modern stylish Hotel, perfectly situated in the centre of Targu Mures 45, Trandafirilor square, 540053 Targu Mures, Romania +40 265 260602 rezervari@hotelconcordia.ro

Car rental:

www.romana-car-rent.ro
Head office: Romania – Bistrita 420060
Romana 17 +4 0 263 234020
Info and Res: +40 740 527 161

Eat & Drink

- Uptown, Str Rabat 2. Tel + 40 21 231 40 77
- Casa di David, Sos. Nordului 7-9, Bucharest. Tel + 40 21 232 47 15
- Manuc Inn, Address: Str Franceza 62-64 Tel: + 40 21 313 1415
- Grand Cafe Amsterdam, Str Covaci 6 + 40 21 313 75 80
- Balthazar, Str Dumbrava Rosie 2. Tel + 40 21 212 14 60
- Embryo, Str Ion Otetelesanu 3a. Tel + 40 (0)727 37 90 23
- Frame, B-dul Magheru 38b. Tel + 40 21 211 01 44
- Salsa, Mihai Eminescu 89. Tel + 40 21 (0)723 53 18 41
- The Office, Str Tache Ionescu 2. Tel + 40 21 (0)745 110 064

See

Palace of Parliament, Constitution Square
Old Princely Church, Str. Franceza 3



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