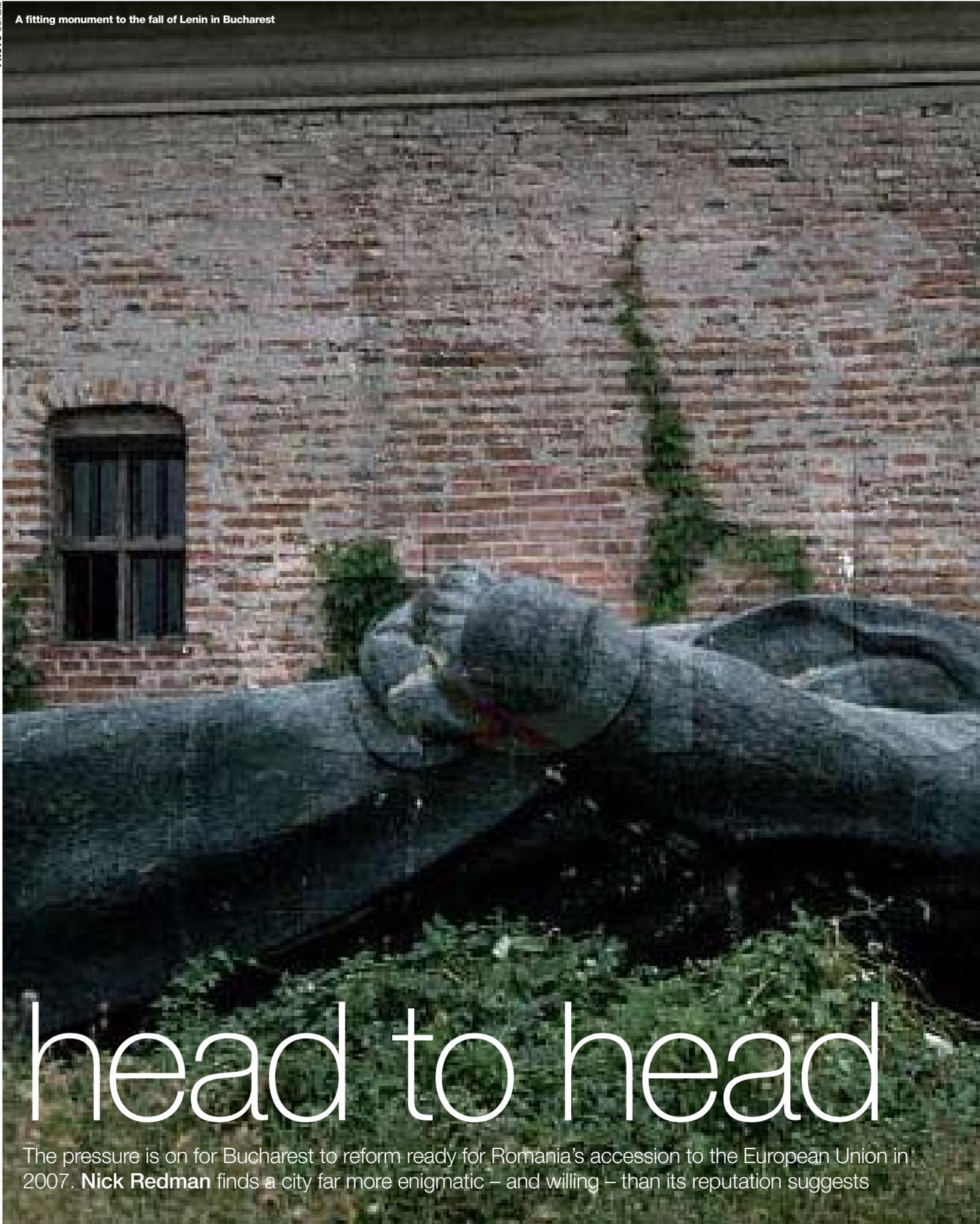


A fitting monument to the fall of Lenin in Bucharest



head to head

The pressure is on for Bucharest to reform ready for Romania's accession to the European Union in 2007. **Nick Redman** finds a city far more enigmatic – and willing – than its reputation suggests



Lenin revealed himself to me unexpectedly one blue Bucharest afternoon. Some miles beyond the Romanian capital I rounded a low wall and found him, lying in the grounds of Mogosoia Palace – the red-brick summer residence of a 17th-century Wallachian prince. While statuesque, he looked long gone, weeds overwhelming him. Dandelion seeds drifted in the breeze, cuckoos warbled in the cypresses, and as children climbed over him, the twisted iron rods protruding from his feet told the story: that of a Soviet repressor brought down, ripped from some city plinth and relegated to rust into oblivion. The white stain on his forehead – the verdict of a passing pigeon – seemed to sum up his legacy.

When the USSR lost its iron grip in the winter of 1989, and the curtain rose on the countries of Eastern Europe, Romania shed more blood in the process than most. Four days before Christmas, troops fired on crowds in Piata Revolutiei (Revolution Square), as pockets of students whipped up repressed resentment of dictator Nicolae Ceausescu. After delivering what would be his last speech from the balcony of the Central Committee Building, the leader fled by helicopter, leaving his people to bite the bullets of a coup. Shortly afterwards he was felled by a firing squad, along with his profligate wife, Elena.

Almost two decades on, Eastern Europe has come a long way, and has come closer, as its nations forge political and commercial alliances, remoulded as EU members and Easyjet destinations. But while nearby capitals seem bent on becoming the next Prague in the beery weekend-getaway stakes, Bucharest, two-and-a-half hours from Heathrow, remains an enigma, out on the edge of Europe. Board the R99 afternoon train from the capital's pigeon-infested Gara de Nord and before long you're in Istanbul. Like that city, Bucharest was built on a crossroads of cultures – Romans, Huns, Ottomans – which influenced the way it developed over the centuries.

While pitifully potholed, Bucharest is beautifully boulevarded. Its infrastructure is dusty and threadbare, yet architecturally it is neoclassically ornate. If it feels coldly communist, it is also animatedly southern European (Romanian is the closest romance language to Latin). And where else could you get the best seats in the house for a Covent Garden production of "Cav & Pag" (Cavalleria Rusticana and Pagliacci) for under a fiver?

In the wrong light – jaundiced late-afternoon sun leaking through a gunmetal grey sky – the Soviet-era masonry appears

New shopping malls are planned to satisfy Bucharest's growing consumer culture



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post-apocalyptic, as traffic sends kerbside blossom whirling like dirty snow. And with grim regularity, media scare stories surface: feral orphans; packs of rabid dogs.

But with the prospect of EU accession for Romania looming in 2007, the question is now: does Bucharest mean business?

"People keep coming back to the Revolution," says Ciprian Domnisoru, business editor of English-language newspaper *Bucharest Daily News*. "It's interesting, but after 17 years of semi-capitalism we are far from the black days of 1989." He chain-smokes as he talks, intensely and intelligently, in the low light of a cheap central pub. "Romania is one of the top optimists, if I may say so. Of all the nations in line for accession, it is one of the most willing."

Willing it may be, but while the EU considers pumping billions of euros into the country, major questions concerning Romania's accession were raised in 2005, according to the Economist Intelligence Unit Country Report in April this year. Among them: industrial pollution; corruption (the black market was estimated recently to constitute 40 per cent of economic activity); food safety standards; and allocation of

EU structural funds. There is evidence that the country is determined to resolve these problems. President Traian Basescu's pledge, on election in December 2004, was "to march in full force towards EU integration". Now, doctors, lawyers and senior politicians – both former and current – are under investigation, as the government takes a broom to the cobwebs of corruption. Notable among them is indicted former PM Adrian Nastase, recently forced to resign the presidency of his party and his position as speaker in the lower house of parliament.

"Corruption in Romania is basically nepotism," says Craig Turp, editor of European city guide *Bucharest in Your Pocket*, when we meet for beers in the faded-fabulous Athenee Palace Hilton. "It's rife, but it's not people turning up with guns, Al Capone-style. Indeed, one of the best things about living here is that there's no violent crime. There is plenty of crime, but it's petty: the worst that can happen is somebody will pick your pocket."

Turp adds: "Life, for people like me, is pretty good here. Although Bucharest is a city of two million people, in terms of geographical size it is a very small one. Most expats know each other and you can get anyone's telephone

number through someone else. It's a tight-knit community, which I enjoy."

The lack of local commercial expertise and resources – an inevitable consequence of half a century of totalitarianism – is boosting an international populace, with foreign investors moving in despite inflation targets for the end of 2006 of five per cent (down from 7.5 per cent in 2005). Opportunities range from finance (Austria's Erste Bank now owns its Romanian counterpart, BCR) to cars (national manufacturer Dacia has been taken over by Renault); hotels and restaurants (Holland is emerging as a key player), to textile manufacture (Italian); and retail (all the major supermarkets in town – including Carrefour – are French). "The state doesn't own much today," explains Ciprian Domnisoru, "and they're actually on a privatisation spree. Gas, electricity, energy, mining – basically everything."

Real estate is Bucharest's most bullish market, with the rush to acquire property prompting some wild overvaluing. Office complexes are mushrooming and 2008 will see the completion of an estimated 15 new shopping malls to meet the demands of a frenetic consumer culture. Sales of food,

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goods, beverages and tobacco rose by 19.2 per cent in 2005, according to the Economist's Country Report. Because demand for hotel rooms exceeds supply by about 8,000 places ("One big conference and the city is full," one hotelier told me), hospitality is a multi-million-dollar market, and big names are sprouting on the skyline. Among them is the 62-room Art'otel, which will inject a touch of design-hotel quiriness into the scene, with artworks, paintings and minimalist decor. Then there's a €33 million four-star Novotel, plus a corporate-sleek, 435-room Radisson opposite – and in direct competition to – the Hilton, with a casino, outdoor pool, three restaurants and 12 meeting rooms.

Along with a boom in domestic mortgages, which were introduced as recently as 2002, the architectural legacy of the city's golden age is turning acquisitive heads. After the First World War Romania doubled in size, acquiring Transylvania and the eastern part of Moldavia, not to mention self-confidence and impeccable taste. Development in the 1930s, when the likes of artist Constantin Brancusi and composer George Enescu rose to international fame, was grounded in forward-thinking theories. And so, over a decade, Bucharest was revamped with cutting-edge examples of modernism. Wander the Cotroceni district (the local answer to Kensington) and you'll see streamline-moderne villas, which you could, theoretically, paint pink and ship to South Beach Miami. Hike up Magheru Boulevard at dusk, and the titanic Ambassador hotel – one of many Deco dames across the city – looms from the gloom like the stern of a ghostly white liner, its glorious tiers of curving balconies begging for five-star refurbishment.

Bucharest's hip hotelier Jerry van Schaik, from Amsterdam, is an optimistic observer of the burgeoning international interest in property (for which investors must pay on the nail as finance systems are not yet in place for foreign purchasers). "Only the other weekend, two English guys who'd checked into my hotel told me they'd read an article on the city and had decided to come for a weekend to see if it was worth buying real estate," he says.

Jerry van Schaik runs Bucharest's best-

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looking boutique hotel, the Rembrandt, set on the fringes of the crumbling (ergo hip-and-upcoming) medieval Lipskani quarter. Here, among the broken roof-tiles, the laundry of Romany gypsies billows from rusted balconies, scarily bewigged mannequins grin from Peter-and-Jane-style shop fronts, and the orientally exotic Stavropoleos Church glimmers with icons as another baptism takes place.



"I never leave home without this," says Craig Turp, editor of *Bucharest in Your Pocket*. He holds up what looks like a TV channel flicker. "It's called a Dazzler II – just flick it on and press the arrows." The Dazzler II, which Turp ordered over the internet from the US, is a canine deterrent, emitting a high-pitched whine to "make dogs think twice". Bucharest's stray dog problem (estimated numbers range from 70,000

to 200,000) dates from the 1980s, when Ceausescu began his urbanisation programme, forcibly rehousing citizens in high-rises, which meant leaving the pet pooch outside (consequence: plenty of puppy love on the streets). It took until last New Year's eve, however, for the dogshit to hit the fan, internationally: a Japanese expat, returning to his central apartment, was bitten by a stray, severing a

main artery. He bled to death before the ambulance could reach him. "It was a freak case," Turp assures me, "and the average visitor to Bucharest won't have any problem. Nonetheless there are about 75 bites recorded every day. And there's a special hospital set up for emergencies." While government response to the situation has been lax, the EU will doubtless have a bone to pick.

There's a hint of what Lipskani could become at van Schaik's Grand Café Amsterdam. Through the maroon-velour vestibule lies the perfect blueprint for an Eastern European evening out. The place recalls Prague a decade or so ago, possessed of huge windows onto loping cobbles lit by orange street lamps, and the stretched shadows of stray canines lurching by. Its marbled globe-lights and candles in etched glasses cry out for a movie encounter between Tom Cruise and some bosomy spy in leather.

preferring to soak up the mood of a place from atmospheric masonry and a long morning spent people-watching in a smoky café. "At the moment, tourism doesn't really exist here, but that's good in a way. I went to Istanbul last month and everything is so laid out for you. Just follow the Japanese to the mosque."

Infrastructure-wise, there is progress in and beyond the capital. A much-needed motorway from Bucharest east to coastal Constanta is two-thirds complete, and a second is under way from central Brasov

Streets away, Market 8 ("design, style, food, photo, music, books, news") reinforces the local potential: a mauve-walled fashion patisserie, selling cherry tart and French furniture covered in Roy Lichtenstein prints.

Intrepid weekenders should certainly nudge Bucharest up their must-visit list. As Van Schaik points out, it is a capital for travellers who don't need tick-lists of galleries,

to the Hungarian border, which will link with a counterpart under construction from Budapest. Yet Romania remains stymied by a lack of international access. While budget airlines exist – Carpatair flies to Paris from several Romanian cities, Blue Air serves Maastricht, Aachen, Lyon and Istanbul, and last December SkyEurope launched a route from Bucharest to Bratislava in Slovakia, with

onward connections – there is no low-cost carrier from the UK.

“It needs cheaper access – it still costs £250 to fly here,” says Craig Turp. “But with the open-skies policy resulting from EU membership, that will change.” Last June Wizz Air, the Central and Eastern European airline, unveiled plans for nine new routes from January 2007, serving Barcelona, Rome, Milan, London, Dortmund and Budapest from three Romanian cities. “Romania is uniquely placed to receive these airlines,” says Turp. “It’s got about 10 international airports, although at the moment they’re only serving expat workers from Spain and Italy.”

On a high stool at the Dutch Oranjebar – a Friday-night social for the global business community organised by van Schaik, I met a Brazilian woman, Andreia Delgado, who somehow summed up the spirit of the city. She’d moved here three years before from her embassy in New York. It was the only European post available to her, but she wasn’t complaining. “I like the city,” she explained, as the wine flowed. “In Manhattan, you never hear birdsong. Here, I listen to the birds. Bucharest is a big city where you can still have this country feeling. I stop to listen to this music.” It wasn’t only the Sauvignon speaking. I’d heard birdsong too – in the horse chestnuts of the parks, in the eaves of Lipsican district.

For all the emerging urban dynamism – with groovy, futuristic nightclub (enter Embryo, with its space-station disco stylings), and great restaurants (try bluefin tuna steak with cuttlefish eggs and fennel raviolis at razor-sharp Balthazar) – Bucharest is a city embraced by pastoral values, the near-medieval agrarian ethic of its hinterland. Ten miles out of town, nunneries bask among daisy-dusted lawns and horses clop by pulling carts as Bucharest careers towards capitalism, gentrification, and the latest BMW.

“The talk on everyone’s lips is how they can buy a car, a house, that little piece of land,” confirmed Dina Litzica, PR manager for JW Marriott, which played host to Nicole Kidman during the filming of *Cold Mountain*, and helped to organise a Michael Jackson tour in the 1990s (she fondly recalls his famous speech – to the people of “Budapest”).

“But too little is being done to make John Smith understand what it takes,” she warned, over a big hotel breakfast. “The people of Romania are not just me and my friends, they are the people working in the fields, and they have been living like this forever. They have not been fully informed by the government why at some point they will not be able to sell their milk because their cows don’t graze at 5am, or march from left to right.” She finished her impeccably turned-out Marriott eggs as, two tables away, celebrity guests Buena Vista Social Club dissected the previous night’s concert. “For the past 50 years people weren’t allowed to make important decisions about their life. Now doors are opening. But the EU won’t be a bed of roses, that’s for sure.” ■

FACT BOX

WHERE TO STAY

Rembrandt

Str. Smardan 11, tel +40 21 313 93 16, rembrandt.ro

With its cosy townhouse feel, polished-wood floors and location, close to the Lipsican district, this is the check-in for weekenders wanting a cool atmosphere. Brown leather upholstery and white linen duvets, with lovely window glimpses of cupolas and copper roof-tiles. Book room 71 for the secluded terrace.

Athenee Palace Hilton

Str. Episcopiei 1-3, tel +40 21 303 37 77, hilton.com

A belle époque exterior conspires with a central setting, overlooking Revolution Square, to make Bucharest’s Hilton a great address. Rooms are corporate-functional and the business floor has a café terrace delivering horizons of stark Eastern European masonry. Le Bistrot (below) is a popular business haunt.

JW Marriott

Calea 13 Septembrie, tel +40 21 4030 000, marriott.com/buhro

Not as central as the Hilton, but comfort levels are noticeably higher in this imposing modern behemoth, which was originally designed to house the offices of Ceausescu’s regime. Hollywood film stars on location in Romania favour its mallow-soft beds, and the Sunday brunch is an expat’s end-of-the-week treat.

K+K Hotel Elisabeta

Str. Slanic 26, tel +40 21 311 86 31, kkhotels.co.ro

With K+K siblings in such cities as Budapest, Prague, Vienna and Paris, this is a real attempt to bring style and value-for-money to Bucharest. It’s nice-looking, with splashes of lipstick colours, bare floors and Scandinavian wood finishes throughout its 67 rooms.

Unique

Str. Caderea Bastiliei 35, tel +40 21 319 45 91, hotelunique.ro

A fashionable, understated newcomer with just 15 rooms,

in a very central district, convenient for embassies.

It has been decorated with marble, chocolate wood and Italian cubic-chic sofas. And there’s atmosphere in the street – shabby corniced villas with flaking ochre facades, creeping ivy and cobbles.

Intercontinental

B-dul Nicolae Balcescu, tel +40 21 310 20 20,

intercontinental.com

Ingrained on the city skyline like a Soviet scar, the “Interconti” was Romania’s tallest building for three decades after its unveiling in 1970. Stylistically, it’s no more exciting than a bog-standard airport hotel, but you can’t fault the vertiginous drama of the views – or the retro-splendid swimming pool.

WHERE TO EAT

Grand Café Amsterdam

Str. Covaci 6, tel +40 21 313 75 81, amsterdam.ro

On a corner in the emerging Lipsican district, this smart bistro-tavern gets plenty of light flooding through huge windows upon glossy brown tables, where there’s energetic talk of the EU and visiting bands (Buena Vista Social Club, Depeche Mode) over innovative dishes.

Casa Doina La Sosea

Sos. Kiseleff 4, tel +40 21 222 67 17, casadoina.ro

The real pull here is the al fresco option: gardens and playing fountains, shaded by horse chestnuts and clipped hedges. Formal staff help you choose from occasionally ambitious, but delicious, dishes – a popular one is chicken sour soup with fresh tarragon and sour cream, followed by fillet of trout with steamed vegetables.

Balthazar

Str. Dumbrava Rosie 2, tel +40 21 212 14 60, balthazar.ro

Inhabiting the rooms of a sprawling old villa, Balthazar trounces competition in the design and ambience stakes. Its succession of high-

ceilinged spaces evokes an of-the-moment Marrakech riad restaurant. As gentle house sounds pulsate, the martinis presented are spot-on, and it’s at least seven out of 10 for a menu big on spices and confits, served, *comme il faut*, on square, white plates.

Cupola

At JW Marriott, Calea 13 Septembrie, tel +40 21 4030 000, marriott.com/buhro

JW Marriott’s in-house restaurant deservedly gets the thumbs-up among business travellers, adhering to plush international convention decoratively, while aiming for culinary excellence: even a simple smoked salmon gets a fine turbo-injection of caviar, lime, lemon, eggs and cream.

Uptown

Str. Rabat 2, tel +40 21 231 40 77

With an atmospheric setting opposite the Qatar embassy, where beret-clad guards cluster in the lamplight, Uptown works wonders with Italian staples. Broken English accents of international diners mingle discreetly with club sounds, and, refreshingly, in summer, the windows are removed for breeze-stirred evenings.

Le Bistrot

Athenee Palace Hilton, Str. Episcopiei 1 to 3, tel +40 21 303 37 77, hilton.com

Hilton’s informal brasserie works a treat, with a soundtrack that ranges from Ella Fitzgerald to KD Lang, and sunlight over half-mast café curtains and bentwood bistro chairs. The classics are represented – *coq au vin*, roast pork – and though there’s beer and wine sipping in evidence among suited circles, you sense deals being done.

GETTING THERE

London-Bucharest flights with BA and Tarom operate from Heathrow. Regional departures (Manchester, Edinburgh, Glasgow) from £90 extra. Return fares with BA: typically £188 in economy and from £380 in business.