COMING TO ROMANIA?
VISITING STUDENT’S SURVIVAL MANUAL
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July 2007

Foreword

Whether it is your first time traveling abroad or your tenth, the experience you have in Romania (or elsewhere) is sure to be a positive one that will expand your knowledge and skills on an international scale. In my opinion, nothing can compare to international experience. It provides a unique opportunity to network with people representing a vastly different culture, language, sociopolitical perspective, and geography. Immersing oneself in such an atmosphere will lead to personal and professional growth as well as practical application of concepts from the classroom. Any challenges that you encounter on your trip will serve as lessons for the future, adding to your ability to adapt and remain flexible in any environment. In fact, accepting and negotiating these challenges is really the point. In many ways, it is what separates the seasoned traveler from the novice. Yet, one does not have to be a world traveler to overcome obstacles. It takes an open mind, a calm disposition, and a lot of patience. It takes confidence, courage, and determination. Keeping these ideas in mind will help you as you travel to Romania or any other country. Remember, you are going for the experience, which in many ways could have a profound effect on your life and career. Whatever happens along the way is part of that experience and one must adjust; one must assimilate.

Before Departure

As you prepare for your trip, it is important to allow enough time to pack your things so that you will not be rushed. There can be a lot of ideas that come to mind at the last minute, so planning early helps. I do not intend on making a laundry list of what to pack, but I will mention some things that were particularly useful and some things that I forgot to bring. The key to preparing for any trip (and arguably the key to success throughout that trip) is organization. This cannot be stressed enough. Stay organized. In general, it is always a good idea to pack some extra clothes and (small; allowable) toiletries in your carry-on luggage in the event that it is lost. While this has never happened to me (great, now it probably will), I have heard countless stories from friends and colleagues. Weight of luggage is another issue, and many airlines are increasingly becoming strict on this issue. Check ahead of time about dimensions and weight restrictions. It is typical for the airline to charge a ridiculous rate for overweight luggage. Also, even if your trip is booked ahead of time by a travel agency (or through the university), you should consider calling the airline directly for preference on seat assignment. An eight-hour flight in a middle seat would be a bit uncomfortable. This is common sense, but always keep your tickets, passport, identification, insurance, etc. in the same place and easy to access from your carry-on. Don’t forget a pen. If you are purchasing luggage for the first time, I suggest looking into a set that is high quality (in terms of durability), but not too costly. I went with a 5-piece set (I needed new luggage anyway) for $65USD, and it has already been falling apart on me.

In addition to this advice, you should buy several books about the country (e.g., Romania), its history, and language. It is important to get a variety of perspectives, so don’t rely on one
There are a lot of great tips for travelers (obviously). The following bullets highlight items that I found particularly helpful/useful to my experience in Romania. Keep in mind that location and accommodations will vary, as will individual preferences and needs. Regardless, it is hoped that my comments will be helpful to you as you prepare for your trip.

**Things I Found Useful**

- An electrical adaptor(s) for my computer and other devices. These are hard to find and very expensive if purchased outside of the U.S.
- Towels and washcloths. There were not any in the room I was staying.
- Office supplies (small) like a stapler, sticky notes, scotch tape, paper clips and binder clips, folders, highlighters, pencils, pens, a small pocket notebook, scissors, and a small three-hole punch (depending on how extensive your research needs are). Also, a flash-drive (USB) is very handy in case you do not have a laptop or do not wish to bring it back and forth with you.
- A personal journal
- Camera with a lot of memory space (or a device to transfer pictures to a computer).
- Gifts for people. The Romanian people are very friendly, helpful and generous. It a good idea to have some thank-you cards and small gifts to give them. You may be invited into someone’s home for dinner, you may need a favor or to borrow something, or you may just wish to express your gratitude (as I did) for exceptionally nice individuals. I have found that gifts from Iowa (like key-chains, t-shirts, shot glasses, books) are nice, although you also might consider small toys for children (matchbox cars, coloring books), or more unique gifts that you can think of. You will meet a lot of different people.
- Comfortable shoes (dress and casual) and sandals. You will walk a lot.
- A small book-bag to carry your laptop and other things.
- Writable CDs. You can obtain a lot of great music through copying CDs from the friends you meet while you are here (or through borrowing their flash-drives with music).
- Wrinkle releaser spray and “fabreeze” spray.
- Playing cards
- Charging adaptors for any electrical device that needs it.
- A calculator
- A small, digital alarm clock.
- A suit and other formal clothes (especially if there will be academic conferences to attend).
- One of those u-shaped travel pillows. They are much more comfortable than the thin, white one they have (or may not have) on the plane.
- An umbrella (travel size; check a camping store).
- If during summer, lightweight “breathable” clothing is better. Avoid polyesters, except for certain dress clothing.
- Hand sanitizer
Things I Forgot (regrettably)

- A light jacket. It rained and was oddly cold for about a week while I was here. I looked into buying a jacket, but found that clothes in Romania are extremely expensive and sizes are different. A friend let me borrow one, but I wish I had thought of it.
- For that matter, a light rain jacket.
- Powdered laundry detergent. I actually brought liquid, but the machines only take powdered for some reason. Another option is to find a dry-cleaning service, which may (or may not) be cheap and convenient. Doing laundry was difficult and often time-consuming (more so than in the states). And they do not have efficient dryers here. Clothes I washed were often damp and very wrinkled.
- An iron. Sounds odd, but I needed an iron after my first load of laundry. Although if you find a drycleaners, this would not be needed.
- More dress shirts (I only brought 3). Of course, I attended two weeks of conferences, which required more formal attire.
- Extra shampoo, deodorant, etc. But this can be bought too, just depends on the brand for price. Some products are more expensive since they are made in the U.S. For that matter, anything made in the U.S. will be more.

Things I Purchased While Here

- A desk lamp (there wasn’t one in the room)
- A power strip (European style), since there was only one outlet.
- Dress shirts (although I recommend bringing any clothes you need)

Challenges (or Differences)

Overall, my experience has been overwhelmingly positive. There are of course challenges (which I term differences) that I have encountered through my interactions with the Romanian people and their culture. This is by no means an exhaustive list, nor is it typical for everyone or every situation. Yet, to ease your experience specific to Romania, it is a good idea to have some familiarities with the challenges I have faced.

- Punctuality varies considerably. Time is seemingly relative. One Romanian friend of mine (who is actually extraordinarily punctual and efficient) half-jokingly commented that “five minutes to a Romanian can mean anything from two to 60 minutes,” in reference to a person showing up to a meeting in five minutes. This has certainly occurred more than once, but I adjusted accordingly. It was very difficult since I am used to planning far in advance, sticking to plans, and expecting fast results (as are most Americans). Put it this way, showing up early is not typical for Romanians. Showing up on time happens about 50% of the time (with exceptions of course; this is a broad generalization that is not necessarily true for everyone). Spontaneity is the norm. The
nice thing, however, is that if they plan to be late they tend to be very polite and apologetic and will inform you ahead of time.

- Internet access might take some time to figure out. I brought a laptop, but there was a problem with the IP address, and its recognition. It will be important to connect with someone familiar with IT issues earlier than later.

- Printing can be difficult sometimes, because most Internet cafés do not have a printer or if they do it may not be working properly. It is probably easiest to print from the facility that you will be working most often (if it is allowed) or to find a copy shop (which is cheap).

- International calling cards may work, but I have not been able to figure out exactly how. Part of the problem is that there is no way (that I am aware of) to connect to an operator via the orange public phones. For this reason, it is easiest to buy phone cards here (10 Euros, which is approx. $25 USD, buys about 130 minutes of international airtime). For local calling, it is easiest to rent a phone and “charge it” with minutes, or have it arranged to have a phone available that you can charge when you arrive.

- Related to phone calls is the fact that Romanians rely on this form of communication over all others. Email communication is not the norm. Do not expect instant replies like in the U.S.; instead, a phone call or text message (which saves money) is best.

- Doing laundry, as mentioned previously, takes a good deal of time. It might be preferable to find a dry-cleaning service, or simply do laundry every two days. The machines are smaller and do not dry the clothes thoroughly. I have not found a Laundromat, but that is also a potential option.

- It would be a good idea to obtain a typical restaurant menu that is in English and Romanian so that you can understand what you are ordering…or just practice your Romanian a lot.

- Customer service in the restaurants is comparatively poor to what we expect in the states, although not everywhere. As long as you are polite and persistent, they are typically willing to serve you better. Still, expect that a typical dinner or lunch in a restaurant will take from 1.5-2 hours.

- Clothing is expensive here; try to bring everything that you would need.

Opportunities

The majority of your time should be enjoyable and worthwhile, which has certainly been my experience. While you are likely here to do academic work or study, it is also important that you see the country and actively participate in activities, especially those that you are invited to participate in. A good rule of thumb is to avoid saying “no” to an opportunity to do something different or go on a trip somewhere. When in your life will you have the chance to do it again? Maybe you will, but maybe you wont. The U.S. dollar, as of this writing, goes a long way and you should not forgo opportunities simply based on financial concerns. For this reason, maybe it is best to save a little spending money for spontaneous opportunities to travel or go out for a nice meal, etc. At the same time, you need to be proactive in how you approach any research or studying you do here. You will get out of this experience only the amount of effort you are willing to invest. The more diligent you are, the more satisfying your experience (and research) will be. If you are here for only a limited time (less than a month) it is particularly important for
you to be persistent and diligent in mobilizing others to help you with your project. The following is a short list of things I found particularly worthwhile or that eased my experience.

- Visiting a rural town or village is an exceptional opportunity. If you can, do this!
- Make a list of all of the ideal tourist sites you would like to see and discuss with your contact(s) when you arrive what would be most feasible given the time constraints. Remember to be proactive in sightseeing as much as you are in conducting any research. Neither will happen without your active involvement and statements of interest.
- Taxis are cheap (like $2USD for a 8 mile cab-ride). It is easiest to have the directions to the places you tend to go on a piece of paper that you carry with you; just show this to the cab driver.
- If you consume alcoholic beverages (and are of legal age), you should try (at least once) the national drink, “tuica”. While potent, it is worth the experience and you will likely be offered it more than once. There are also some great wines, with grape varieties specific only to Romania. Consider a “wine-tasting” or visitation to a vineyard, if you are so inclined.
- Obviously, try to tour other cities outside of the one you are based. Like the U.S., there are rich cultural variations worth your time to experience from city to city (think Iowa City versus New York versus San Antonio).
- Try the local and traditional food dishes; they are quite delicious.

Conclusion

Traveling abroad is one of the best things a person can do throughout their life. There is so much more outside of the “box” of Iowa. Remember above all that you are an ambassador of your country (the U.S.). It is your absolute responsibility, in my opinion, to dispel any negative notions of the “typical arrogant American”. Surely, we are cognizant of the fact that not all Americans are arrogant or rude. Yet throughout the world, this may or may not be the typical stereotype and perception. Thus, your objective should be to present yourself as a culturally competent, flexible, polite, and sociable individual. Accept challenges as part of the experience and do not become overly frustrated when things do not go as you plan. Network with as many people as you can. Maintain your strong work ethic. Above all, have some fun balanced into your work.

Good luck and enjoy your trip!