

# Crişana & Banat



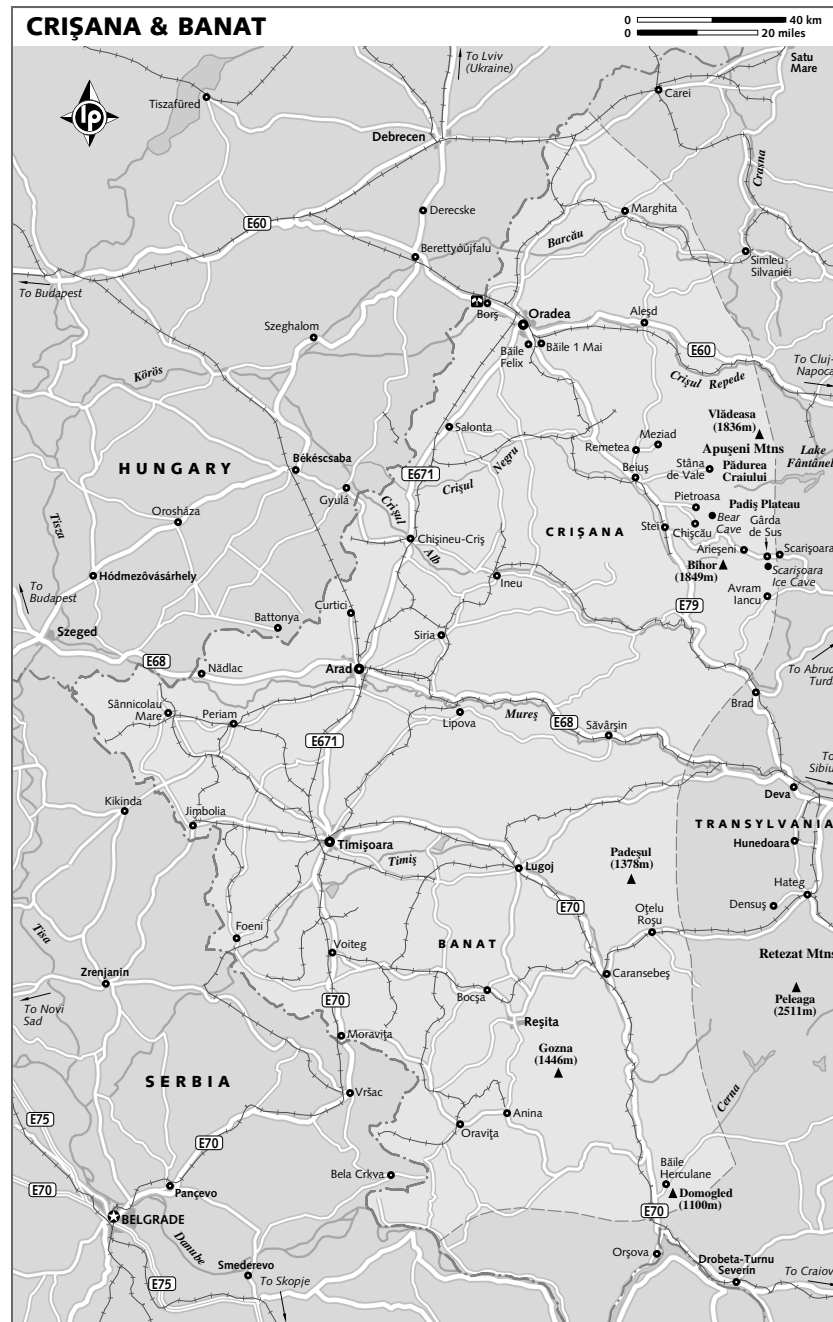
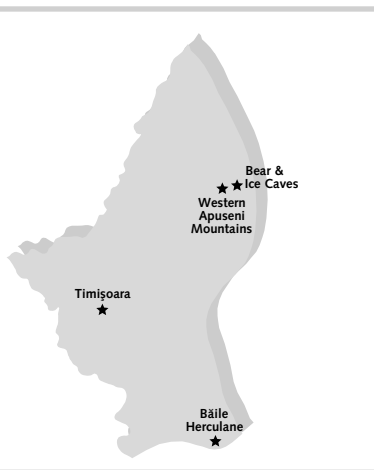
The areas of Crişana (north of the Mureş River) and Banat (to the south) have a lively, spiritual autonomy found nowhere else in Romania, driven by their sense of regional identity, ethnic diversity and tangible Habsburg influence. Oradea, Arad and Timişoara were once large military fortresses marking the southeastern extent of Austria-Hungary, while being culturally and politically married to Yugoslavia's Vojvodina and Hungary's Great Plain. Following WWI, Crişana and Banat were dealt out to Romania, despite their predominantly Hungarian populations, and even now they have more in common with Subotica (Serbia) and Szeged (Hungary) than with the rest of Romania.

It was in the stylish city of Timişoara that the seeds of the 1989 revolution were sown, a fact that has left these charming and proud people with a scarcely concealed grin. Hungarian and Yugoslav TV have given the region stronger links to the West, evidenced by cutting-edge restaurants, clubs and a forward-looking society.

While flaunting three of Romania's most 'European' cities, in both essence and crumbling Habsburg architecture, the regions are also sprinkled with tempting offerings such as the soaring Apuşeni Mountains, ski runs, deep caves, gorges, waterfalls and curative thermal waters. Zigzag from giddy excitement to recuperative leisure all within a few hours' drive.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Stew in the soothing thermal waters of Băile Herculane's **Roman baths** (p221)
- Look at (but don't touch!) the ancient stalactites and stalagmites in the magnificent **Bear Cave** (p227) and the surreal **Scărişoara Ice Cave** (p227)
- Eavesdrop on a candle-lit service in Timişoara's beautiful **Metropolitan Cathedral** (p218)
- Ski, hike, cycle or gaze stupidly at the western **Apuşeni Mountains** (p226)
- Indulge in a lazy day in Timişoara, starting at the **outdoor pools** (p218), then clean up for an evening at the **opera** (p219) and finally take a nightcap in a **Piaţa Victoriei** (p216) bar



## HISTORY

Historical Crișana and Banat are today divided between western Romania, eastern Hungary and northern Yugoslavia. First settled in the 6th century BC, by AD 106 the region was part of the Roman province of Dacia. From the end of the 9th century until the Ottoman conquest of Crișana and Banat in 1552 the region was under Hungarian rule.

In 1699 the Turks relinquished Hungary to Austria but held Crișana and Banat until their defeat by Habsburg prince Eugene of Savoy in 1716. In 1718 Crișana and Banat became part of the Austro-Hungarian empire.

The Treaty of Trianon in 1920 split the territory among Romania, Hungary and Yugoslavia, setting Crișana and Banat's current borders.

## BANAT

### TIMIȘOARA

☎ 256 / pop 321,930

Timișoara (tee-mee-*shwa*-ra) stunned the world and disrupted sleep for evil dictators everywhere when its incensed residents insti-

gated the 1989 revolution. Romania's fourth largest city is known by locals as Primul Oraș Liber (First Free Town), for it was here that anti-Ceaușescu protests first exceeded the Securitate's capacity for violent suppression, eventually punching Ceaușescu's ticket to Hell (see boxed text, below). Less courageous, but still noteworthy achievements include being the first city in Europe to have electric street lamps (1884) and the second to introduce horse-drawn trams (1867). With its charming Mediterranean air, regal Habsburg buildings and a cultural and sporting scene that's unequalled in Romania, it's a city that's loved by residents and tourists alike.

Timișoara, dubbed the 'city of flowers' after the ring of pretty parks that surrounds it, is one of the country's most developed and multicultural cities, comprising strong Hungarian, German and Serbian minorities. In recent years the city has been designated as 'Romania's economic showcase', spurring debate as to whether the 'Timișoara Model' can be applied to other cities.

In addition to being superior to Bucharest as a Romanian road/rail access point from

the west, Timișoara is the hub of Carpatair (p220), Romania's thriving semi-budget airline. 'Flashpackers' and people with an aversion to spine-jangling overnight train trips will want to make Timișoara their Romanian base of operations.

### Orientation

Confusingly, the northern train station (Timișoara-Nord) is west of the city centre. From here, walk east along B-dul Regele Ferdinand (which becomes B-dul Republicii) to the Opera House and Piața Victoriei. To the north is Piața Libertății; Piața Unirii, the old town square, is two blocks further north. Timișoara's bus station is beside the Idsefin Market, three blocks from the northern train station. Take B-dul General Drăgălina south from the train station to the canal, cross the bridge and head west to the next bridge.

### MAPS

Hotfoot it around Timișoara with Amco Press' *City Plan* (1:10,000; €3), sold in most bookshops. There is a tourist map in the bilingual city guide *What? When? Where? Timișoara*, available free all over the city. Be aware that many street names have changed but many maps and locals still use the old names.

### Information

#### BOOKSHOPS

**Humanitas** (Map p217; ☎ 433 180; Str F Mercy 1; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri) Sells some English-language books about Romania.

**Librăria Mihai Eminescu** (Map p217; ☎ 494 123; Piața Victoriei 2; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat) Stocks a less exhaustive range than Humanitas.

#### CULTURAL CENTRES

**British Council** (Map p217; ☎ 497 678; Str Paris 1; ☎ 1-7pm Mon, Tue & Thu, 9am-3pm Wed & Fri)

**French Cultural Centre** (Central Cultural France; Map p217; ☎ 490 544, 201 453; B-dul CD Loga 46; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon, Wed & Fri, 2-7pm Tue & Thu, 10am-1pm Sat)

#### INTERNET ACCESS

**Internet Café** (Map p217; per hr €1; ☎ 9am-1am Mon-Fri, to 3pm Sat) It's located inside Cinema Timiș.

**Internet Java** (Map p217; ☎ 432 495; Str Pacha 6; per hr €1; ☎ 24hr) Inside the Java Coffee House.

#### MEDICAL SERVICES

**Farmacie Remedia** (Map p217; B-dul Revoluției 1989; ☎ 7am-8pm Mon-Fri, 8am-3pm Sat)

**Sensi Blu Pharmacy** (Map p217; ☎ 406 153; Piața Victoriei 7; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, 9am-8pm Sat & Sun)

### MONEY

**Currency exchange** (☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat) Inside Hotel Continental.

**HVB Bank** (Map p217; ☎ 306 800; Piața Victoriei 2; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri)

**Volksbank** (Map p217; ☎ 406 101; Str Piatra Craiului 2)

### POST & TELEPHONE

**Central post office** (Map p217; ☎ 491 999; B-dul Revoluției 2; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sat)

**Post office** (Map p217; Str Macieșilor; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri) This branch near B-dul Revoluției is useful when the central PO's too busy.

**Telephone office** (Map p217; Str N Lenau 4; ☎ 7am-9pm) Has fax facilities.

### TOURIST INFORMATION

**City Centre Travel Agency** (Map p217; ☎ 292 960; www.aerotravel.ro; B-dul Republicii 4; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri) A can-do kind of agency with people exclusively dedicated to all varieties of domestic tourism, car hire and flight bookings.

**Qual Tours** (Map p217; ☎ 294 411; office@qualtours.ro; Str Nicolaus Lenau 10; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat) Staff speak excellent English and French, and can organise car hire, regional tours and guides.

### Festivals

Like many cities in Romania, Timișoara hosts a raucous **beer festival** in October for the pure joy of public inebriation and live music.

### Sights

#### PIAȚA UNIRII

In the heart of the old town, Piața Unirii (Map p217) is Timișoara's most picturesque square, featuring the imposing sight of the Catholic and Serbian churches facing each other. The eastern side of the square is dominated by the baroque **Roman Catholic Cathedral** (Catedrală Episcopală Romano-Catolică; ☎ 430 671; Piața Unirii 12), built in 1754. The main altar painting was completed by Michael Angelo Unterberger, director of the Fine Art Academy in Vienna. On the opposite side is the **Serbian Orthodox Church** (Biserica Ortodoxă Sărbă), built the same year as its Catholic counterpart; local Banat artist Constantin Daniel painted the interior.

The **Trinity Column**, in the square's centre, was erected by the people of Timișoara at the end of the 18th century in thanks to God for allowing them to survive the plague that hit

### DON'T MESS WITH TIMIȘOARA

Even at the height of his power, Timișoara gave Ceaușescu the creeps. The dictator's visits to the city were few, brief and required surreptitious, dread-fuelled travel and sleeping arrangements to allay his assassination concerns. So, when the Securitate overplayed its hand in the already truculent city by trying to deport popular Hungarian pastor and outspoken Ceaușescu critic László Tőkés, the dictator should have sensed disaster looming. However, like most megalomaniacs, he didn't grasp the full scale of his folly until he was being shoved in front of a firing squad, looking genuinely stunned, 10 days later on Christmas Day 1989.

What started on 15 December 1989 as a human chain of Tőkés' parishioners protecting him from arrest mushroomed and lost all focus – many of the protesters that joined the initial rally mistakenly thought they were demonstrating for religious freedom, not for the defence of Tőkés – until it peaked as a full-scale, anti-communist revolt on 20 December. Overconfident Ceaușescu actually left Romania during this time for a visit to Iran, leaving his wife Elena and various subordinates to cope with the escalating protests.

When Ceaușescu returned a few days later, the situation was critical. Factory workers, armed with clubs brought in by Party officials to crush the demonstrations, spontaneously joined the protesters in Piața Operei (today Piața Victoriei), chanting antigovernment slogans and singing an old Romanian anthem ('Wake up, Romanians!') banned since the communists took power in 1947. The crowd, now over 100,000 strong, overpowered then commandeered some of the tanks that had previously fired on demonstrators. Protests ensued in Bucharest (see p28) and Ceaușescu's fate was sealed.

Despite the events in Timișoara leading to the revolt being confused and directionless, there's no denying that the people were primed for rebellion. While other cities are said to have mounted similar revolts in the weeks and months before, only to be hastily subdued by Securitate forces, it was the tenacious Timișoarans that first successfully defied their government, leading to the undignified downfall of their least favourite guest.