

- 01 Can you resist the Romanian Santa figurines?
- 02 Inside the ice hotel bar—coldest drinks that side of the Atlantic.
- 03 No shred honeymoon in Romania would be complete without a few pow turns—Sean Busby finds some spray in the shady spots.



FLY BY

BÂLEA BOUND

A Honeymoon in Romania

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THE ROMANIAN FORECASTS

were all the same: dry. It was mid-December and my husband Sean was engaged in a serious stare-down with Eastern Europe's weather predictions. Mere weeks separated us from a two-week expedition to the Balkans. Eastern Europe was having some of the worst snow since the 1800s, but our flights were booked and our travel plans were arranged. So we went.

An expedition to Eastern Europe was our first choice for a honeymoon. Sure, we could have gone the all-inclusive-resort-on-a-tropical-beach route, but Romania posed more of an adventure with its roadside gypsy villages, magnificent peaks in Dracula's backyard, and a backcountry base camp made completely of ice. The cheap beer didn't hurt either.

Although it has been more than 20 years since the communist downfall, the former government's oppressive reign was still quite evident upon arrival. Stark block housing punctuated busy neighborhoods, and abandoned war-torn buildings were left to ruin in the cold, hazy air. The wrinkles of the elderly told of the difficult times the people have had, and the smiles from Romania's younger generation showed the future—hopeful, and waiting. Travel was slow due to rough roads strewn with potholes, horse-drawn carriages stopping traffic in the most inconvenient of places, and plenty of Romania's famous lunatic drivers. But after successfully (and shakily) navigating our way through Bucharest, Sinaia and Brasov over the course of five days, we headed west for the final leg of our trip to the Fagaras Mountains, the highest peaks of the Southern Carpathian range, spliced by its only access route: the Transfagarasan highway. While this road allows easy, albeit winding access via car in the warmer months, the areas of Bălea Lake and beyond are only accessible via cable car in the winter.

About 60 miles from Brasov, we found the Bălea Waterfall Chalet resting in the Fagaras foothills. Surrounding the building were Romania's trademark gypsy shops—stocked with Romanian-themed trinkets made presumably in countries far away, manned by quiet, grumbling shop owners smoking cigarettes and eyeing your every move. We opted out of souvenirs and boarded the cable car, ascending quickly through a thick layer of clouds with about 10 others—mostly Romanian tourists heading up to tour the Ice Hotel for the first time. Our destination at 2,034 meters was the remote mountain hideout of Bălea Lake—glacial runoff surrounded by two chalets, a restaurant, and Romania's famed Ice Hotel, which is rebuilt with new ice from the lake every year. Essentially, the hotel is a glorified igloo made of oversized ice bricks. Its main artery is a hallway, sprinkled with ice tables and ice benches, the focal point being an ice bar at which one acquires icy beverages—not quite what we were craving, all bundled up on our tour. On each side of the hallway are four hotel “rooms” which don't have a door, so much as an opening facing an ice wall that blocks the view of the bed.

Outside, the landscape was visible under clear skies: jagged peaks, sleek faces and icefalls in every direction. Not wasting any time, we quickly ascended a steep, north-facing slope upon a stable snowpack. The afternoon timeframe and short winter days threw much of the area into shadow, but nonetheless, we took our first descent down crusty, day-old powder on a wide-open face that led right down to the lake.

The following day, we started our morning from our igloo bedroom, wiping the condensation from our animal pelt blankets, shimmying on our chilly gear and quickly skinning outdoors, gathering warmth from the high alpine sun. After pillaging lines in and around the lake, we donned headlamps to access terrain on the opposite side of the mountain through an ominous, dark tunnel (aptly named Bălea Tunnel) on the Transfagarasan—Romania's longest tunnel at roughly half a mile. Hiking through the darkness for about 10 minutes—not knowing who, or what we would find on the other side—we finally saw light and a snow-covered road.

We skinned into a small, deserted mountain village of crumbling stone buildings flanked by wooden houses with steeply pitched roofs covered in rusted metal shingles. Although some of the structures seemed sturdy, many were without windows, and the bone-dry wood was a telltale sign of the rough winter weather. Peering in busted-out windows, we found beer bottles and cigarette butts littering dirt floors—signs of squatters passing through in the summer months. Above, virgin slopes waiting to be ridden.

Leaving the village after sampling its alpine offerings, we were greeted by a stray dog that had found its way over the pass—possibly from a faraway city like Brasov. During the communist rule, the government forced Romanians into group housing and likewise, forced pets out into the streets to roam and breed. On nights spent in the cities, you fall asleep and wake up to the same sound: a chorus of barking dogs. Even deep in the mountains, stray dogs serve as another reminder of the country's hardship.

The peaks surrounding this high-alpine ghost town were vast and steep—visible for miles in the bright, afternoon sun. The only human inhabitants were those working at a nearby meteorological and mountain rescue station called Salvamont. We had barely scratched the surface of the surrounding terrain—countless faces and couloirs shone in the distance.

As we skinned back through the darkness hand in hand, we took time to reflect. No typical white sand beaches on this honeymoon; just gypsy shops, hunched old women wearing babushkas and hundreds of stray dogs. And as foreign as it sounds, the mountains of Romania, specifically those around Bălea Lake, still spoke to us in the same universal language that only mountains can. In this moment, even in a dark, ominous tunnel in the middle of the Fagaras Mountains, we felt at home—together. ▲