The focus of our tour will be the dramatic mountain scenery and exquisite jewel-like villages, farms, churches and monasteries of rural Romania. This simple, agrarian way-of-life is a vestige of the culture that dominated all of Europe but has virtually disappeared elsewhere. Expect to be entertained by wonderful craft traditions, folk music and dance. The towns are equally impressive, most of our overnight stops are in medieval walled burgs built by Saxon settlers. Romania is noted for its vineyards and interesting cuisine, heavily influenced by Hungarian specialties. Romanian is, of course, a Romance language and not too difficult to read. For a taste of what the tour is all about, visit Franz Bauer's website: http://www.pbase.com/bauer/rural__romania and http://dumitru.lucian.free.fr/

Day One: US-Bucharest on Delta

Day Two: Arrival in Bucharest, travel in Transylvania to Brasov. (105 mi)


Bran Castle is a national monument and landmark. The fortress is situated on the border between Transylvania and Wallachia. In addition to its unique architecture, the castle is famous because of persistent myths that it was once the home of Vlad the Impaler. Bran Castle is subsequently featured in multiple film adaptations of Dracula. A small park nearby has examples of traditional Romanian peasant structures (cottages, barns, etc.) from across the country. Sample the famous local smoked cheese. Overnight Hotel City Center Brasov or comparable.

Day Three: Brasov to Red Lake (Lacu Rosa) 125 mi

Day begins with City Tour. Surrounded on three sides by mountains, Brasov was perfect for a medieval settlement. The old city, founded by the Teutonic Knights in 1211, is one of the best preserved in all of Europe. City Tour of Brasov including the Old Town Square, the Black Church, and St Nicholas Church. Time permitting, we'll continue our walk to the White Tower, Ecaterina's gate, Schel gate and "Rope" street, the narrowest in Europe. http://wikitravel.org/en/Brasov

First stop, after departing Brasov, is the Saxon village of Prejmer listed by UNESCO as a World Cultural Heritage site. The round structure of the monumental edifice encircles a fortified church built in a shape of a Latin cross in a Gothic style. Built in 1427 to withstand the attacks of the Ottomans, the walls are 14 meters high and 5 meters thick.

Next stop is Lacu Rosa (Red Lake). The lake, surrounded by the towering Carpathian range is a year-round holiday destination. Downhill skiing in winter is matched by hiking
and boating in summer. We will arrive at Red Lake in time for an afternoon hike around the lake. Overnight at Lacu Rosu Motel or comparable.

Day Four: The wooden churches and monasteries of Bucovina (Moldavia Province)  
http://www.romanianmonasteries.org/bucovina

The day begins with a slow careful descent through the spectacular Bicaz gorge. The road cuts through sheer, 300m-high limestone rocks exposing glimpses of cascading waterfalls.

Voronet Monastery (84 mi from Lacu Rosa) dating from the 15th century, is the first of the exquisite wooden monuments to orthodox faith on our itinerary. It is particularly famous for a vivid, detailed fresco of the Last Judgment and is sometimes referred to as the "Sistine Chapel of the East." Moldovița Monastery (20 mi further) dates from the early 15th century but the brilliant frescos accurately depict the dress and environment of the 17th. Everywhere, the Turks are depicted as threatening these fragile communities. 20 mi further on, through a delightful pastoral countryside, we come to Sucevita, chronologically the last and greatest monastic ensemble among the painted monasteries in Bukovina, as it has the appearance of a real fortress, with towers, buttresses and watch towers. The paintings at Sucevita are the best preserved, painted in purple red and blue against an emerald green background. There is plenty of gold too, taken from the art of miniature. They have a strongly narrative character and many of them represent scenes taken from the daily life of 16th century Moldavia. 33 mi down the road, the last monastery on our tour is Humor, which rivals the others architecturally and in the quality of the interior frescoes.

Following our visit to Humor, we drive 30 mi to Gura Humorului where we overnight at the Hotel Best Western Bucovina or comparable.

Day Five: Gura Humorului to Borsa via Prislop Pass 115 mi

At the Prislop Pass, we'll have an opportunity to hike to the 120 ft "horse" waterfall.

After lunch we board a narrow gauge steam-powered train taking us up into the Vaser Valley with at least one hiking stop. Overnight Hotel Gabriela or comparable.

Day Six: Iza Valley in Marmures Province

http://www.johnrausch.com/Maramures/ The region is known for its beautiful rural scenery, woodwork and craft industries as well as for its churches and original rural architecture.

All along the Iza Valley there are small villages dating back to before the fifteenth century. Our first stop (30 mi from Borsa) is Ieud. Archaeological discoveries show this village dates back to the Bronze Age. Ieud also has two distinctive wooden churches which have been declared historical and architectural monuments. The first one is
Biserica din Deal or "church on the hill." Built in 1364, it is the oldest church in Maramures. The paintings are original, dating from the 15th -16th century. The church also has a collection of glass painted icons. Inside, the stairs to the tower are carved in one piece of wood.

The wooden church in Rozvalea was built in 1720 and holds many beautiful icons painted on wood and glass. Botiza village dates from 1353. Its wooden church is named for St. Paraschiva. Botiza is best known for its beautiful and colorful rugs. Almost every woman in town is a weaver. Only natural colors are used to obtain the thread materials for weaving. At Poienile Izei, the church features what Lonely Planet calls "the most dramatic frescoes of hell you're ever likely to see."

Vadu Izei, at the confluence of the Iza and Mara Rivers, 3 mi south of Sighetu Marmatiei, has a museum in the oldest house in the village (1750). Of course, in Marmures, you realize how little has changed since the 18th century. Villages are made up of thatched roofed homes, giant wooden church steeples, ‘pot trees’ (on which cooking pots are hung to dry) and wooden gates outside every home. Traditional crafts are still practiced by wood carvers, blanket weavers and glass painters.

Sighetu Marmatiei is an old market town, small and sleepy. It has somehow managed to keep an atmosphere of around the year 1900 or so. On the outskirts, we will visit a very fine open-air museum with exhibits providing an ethnographic perspective on rural life in Marmures. Overnight at Hotel 14119 or comparable.

Day Seven: Exploring Marmures

We will have a full day of exploring Marmures, a remote area that time has forgotten. We will visit the "Merry" cemetery in Sarpanta village with unique painted wooden grave monuments. Other well-preserved traditional villages including Hoteni, Mara and Desesti. If we are in luck, there'll be a folk festival in Hoteni to celebrate the first plowing. Overnight in Sighetu Marmatiei at Hotel 14119 or comparable.

Day Eight: Mara Valley south to Sighisoara

As we cross back into Transylvania, we stop for lunch and sightseeing in Bistrita (138 mi from Sighetu Marmatiei). The first fortified town founded by the Saxons in the 13th c. Their heritage is seen today in the old town's quaint 15th & 16th c. merchant's houses and in the unhurried pace. 4 miles to the east the village of Livezile has an authentic Saxon farmhouse living history exhibit and we may have an opportunity to observe working potters in this area.

Continuing on, we drive a further 96 mi through fields, farms and valleys to Sighisoara. During the 12th century, German craftsmen and merchants established Sighisoara. The city has preserved, in an exemplary way, the features of a small medieval fortified burg, it has been listed by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site. Each year, a Medieval Festival takes place in the old citadel in July. Among the places to visit are the famous Clock
Tower Museum and its Torture Room, the Evangelical Church, and the Armory Room. A must-stop is the house in which Vlad Dracula—the Impeller was born and we will also take a tour of the fortress including the Church on the hill. Overnight at Casa Wagner or comparable.

Day Nine: Sighisoara to Sibiu

Heading west, our first stop (after about 15 mi) is Biertan, a kind of lost city, an old medieval fortress, it's origin dates to 1283, and was a flourishing crafts and trade center during the Middle Ages. The fortified church of Biertan was built at the end of the 15th century with architectural elements from the late-Gothic and renaissance style. However, the overall impression is that of a fortress—which, of course it was! The altar is the "gem" of Biertan church, the most beautiful Gothic folding triptychs in Transylvania. It is made-up of 28 pre-Reformation plates, dating from 1483 and attributed to the Vienna "Schottenmeister" school. The Sacristy Door is another of the church’s "jewels". The oak door, with inlaid work, dates from 1515 and has a huge lock with a complicated mechanism on its backside.

A further 55 miles brings us to Sibiu (Hermannstadt), the largest and wealthiest of the seven walled citadels built in the 12th century by German settlers. The riches amassed by its guilds paid for the construction of both impressive buildings and the fortifications required to protect them. Sibiu’s Old Town retains the grandeur of its earlier days when rich and powerful guilds dominated regional trade. Sections of the medieval wall still guard the historic area, where narrow streets pass steep-roofed 17th century buildings with gable overhangs before opening into vast, church-dominated squares such as Great Square and Little Square.

Sibiu is a pedestrian-friendly city with two easily accessible levels: the Upper town, home to most of Sibiu's historic sights, and the Lower town, lined with colorful houses on cobblestone streets and bounded by imposing city walls and defense towers overlooking the river Cibin. Overnight Impartul Hotel or comparable for 2 nights.

http://imparatulromanilor.ro/index_sb.htm

Day Ten: Sibiu

Free day to explore this delightful small city.

http://www.sibiu.ro/index_en.php

Day Eleven: Sibiu to Timisoara

Our first destination (after 75 mi) is the city of Hunedoara which has the most important Gothic-style secular building in Romania: Corvin Castle. This castle looks like what one imagines Dracula's castle should look like. The castle has large and sumptous rooms and halls http://oasis.fortunecity.com/bondi/158/hunedoara.html with arms and artifacts, towers and bastions. Memorable are the gate tower, the club tower, the white bastion, the reception hall, the knights' hall, the family gothic chapel and
Matthew's Loggia. Vlad Dracul (Vlad Tzepesh—the Impaler a.k.a. Dracula) also spent some time here imprisoned in the castle's dungeons.

Continue (115 mi) to Timisoara, known as "Little Vienna", because it belonged for a very long time to the Habsburg Empire and the entire city center consists of buildings built in the Kaiser era, which reminds one much of old Vienna. Timisoara is an important university center, it was the first European city to be lit by electric street lamps in 1884. The impressive 18th century Baroque Palace was formerly the governor’s residence, it now houses the Museum of Fine Arts with works by German, Flemish and Italian artists. At the northwest corner of Piata Unirii stands the spectacular Scont Bank a typical Hungarian-style art nouveau structure, built in the early 20th century. It features an organic shape comprising curved walls studded with turquoise tiles forming patterns drawn from folklore, and extravagant iron gutters and window grills. Another remarkable open space in the city is Piata Libertatii which offers a great display of Secessionist architecture. The Banat region was under Turkish rule from 1552 until 1716 when the Austrian-Habsburg Prince Eugene de Savoy took over Timisoara. At this time, a seven-star- shaped bastion and gate-towers were constructed. One of the most beautiful buildings in Timisoara, the Sinagoga din Fabric was built in 1899 by Hungarian architect Lipot Baumhorn in a traditional Moorish style.

The Banat Village Museum, located three miles from the city centre, exhibits more than 30 traditional peasant houses dating from the 19th century. Wood, stone and clay homes were taken piece by piece and set up in the beautiful surroundings of Padurea Verde (Green Forest). Craftsmen's fairs and folk shows are held here periodically. Recas Vineyards offers a taste of Cabernet Sauvignon, Burgundy Mare, Merlot, Cadarca, Feteasca Regala or Creata. Overnight at Savoy Hotel or comparable.

Day Twelve: Flight Timisoara to Bucharest

Bucharest city tour and overnight.

Day Thirteen: Flight Bucharest to US on Delta

Bulgaria Extension

Day Twelve: Flight Timisoara to Bucharest, transfer to coach for drive to Ruse, (53 mi) crossing the Danube (on a spectacular bridge) into Bulgaria.

Between Ruse and Veliko Tarnovo (66 mi), visit rock carved Ivanovo Monastery (UNESCO site) and the picturesque village of Arbanassi to visit the Church of Nativity, richly decorated in frescos. Overnight Hotel Concorde or comparable.

Day Thirteen: Veliko Tarnovo to Plovdiv (120 mi)

Veliko Tarnovo was the capital of Bulgaria's Second State from the 12th to the 14th centuries. Our AM sightseeing tour is of this mediaeval city, picturesquely situated on
three hills, circled by the Yantra River. Its houses, perched one above the other on the slopes of the hills, still preserve the typical 19th century architecture. Visit the fortress on Tsarevets Hill and Patriarchal Church.

Enroute to Kazanlak, we visit Etara, an outdoor ethnographic museum village, where 18th-19th century crafts and lifestyle come alive in front of the visitors' eyes. Kazanlak is the centre of the famous Rose Valley and we will visit the replica of the Thracian Tombs dating to the 4th-3rd century B.C. You'll get an up-close view of Hellenistic frescoes dating back to the 3th century BC. Continue through the picturesque Valley of Roses where the world famous Bulgarian rose oil is produced. Afternoon arrival in Plovdiv - Bulgaria's oldest town. Enjoy a walking tour of the old center before checking into your hotel. Overnight Hotel Belle Ville or comparable.

Day Fourteen: Plovdiv to Sofia (58 mi)

AM sightseeing tour of Plovdiv, including the Old City, the Ethnographic museum and the Roman Amphitheatre dating to the 2nd century A.D. After lunch, drive to Sofia followed by a late afternoon flight (via Paris) to the US.