

Romania's Capital A Reflection of Its Past

By Julia Ross

Standing at a crossroads between East and West, the city of Bucharest displays a unique mix of cultural and historical influences accumulated over its 500-year lifespan. Originally founded as a trade route settlement connecting Istanbul with Western Europe, Bucharest lies along the Dimbovita River in Romania's southeastern region, not far from the Bulgarian border. Today, this metropolis of two million--host to AIHA's Third Annual CEE Partnership Conference May 6-8--is struggling to recover from decades of Communist rule and a turbulent revolution in 1989, but retains a character that makes it one of Eastern Europe's most intriguing capitals.

Bucharest's heyday arrived in the late 19th century when a cadre of French-inspired architects transformed the city into a grand capital of wide, tree-lined boulevards and neo-classical architecture, earning the moniker "Little Paris of the East." Unfortunately, World War II and subsequent Communist regimes would take a heavy toll in the next century: Many of Bucharest's charming, older neighborhoods were destroyed by German and Allied bombs or replaced by concrete, Soviet-style housing projects.

In fact, one of the city's most notorious landmarks--the Casa Poporului (the People's House or the People's Palace)--was constructed as part of the late dictator Nicolae Ceausescu's plan to create a new civic center reflecting Communist values. This urban behemoth, designed to house government ministries and apartments for high party officials, is the second largest building in the world after the Pentagon in Washington, DC. One-sixth of Bucharest's land area was cleared and 40,000 residents displaced to make way for the building and its grounds. Still unfinished, it is said to contain 1,100 rooms and 4,500 chandeliers, and today houses the Romanian Senate and Parliament.

Just east of the People's Palace, across the Dimbovita, lies the historic core of Bucharest in what is known as the Lipscani District. Here, the Curtea Veche Museum exhibits the remains of a palace built by Vlad the Impaler (the inspiration for the mythical Count Dracula) in the 15th century, and the 16th century Curtea Veche church remains a popular center of worship for Bucharest natives. A bevy of open markets and artisans' stalls can be found on Lipscani Street, and the National History Museum is a must-see for its collection of royal crowns, weapons and jewelry, dating from the 4th century B.C.

The district's Biserica Stavropoleos is also worth a visit--this small church features ornate wood and stone carvings in Byzantine, late Renaissance and Romanian folk art styles.

Up the Calea Victoriei--Bucharest's grand north-south boulevard--is the Piata Revolutiei (Revolutionary Square), where one can find the National Art Museum, home to numerous pieces by the world-renowned sculptor Brancusi; the Romanian Athenaeum Concert Hall, built in 1888; and the remains of the University Library, which was gutted by fire during the political upheaval in December 1989. The Athenee Palace Bucharest Hilton--site of the CEE conference--is located on the north side of the square. Formerly known as the Athenee Palace Hotel, it garnered a reputation as a hotbed of espionage activity from the 1930s through the end of the Communist era.

The city's northern edge offers the picturesque Lake Herastrau and the open-air Village Museum, where more than 300 dwellings have been erected to represent the wide array of folk architecture found throughout Romania. This quarter of the city also boasts an obvious homage to the French: the Arcul de Triumf, a copy of the Parisian Arc de Triomphe, straddles the Soseaua Kiseleff, a wide avenue that serves as Bucharest's answer to the Champs Elysees. The arch was originally built of wood in 1922 to commemorate the Allied victory in World War I, but was reconstructed in stone in the 1930s and carved by some of Romania's finest sculptors of the time.

Reflecting a long and varied history of Turkish, French and Slavic influences, Bucharest has evolved into a European city that offers a distinctive blend of East and West.