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CHISINAU “IN YOUR SPORRAN”

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About this guide

This series of downloadable NATA Mini “In Your Sporran” Guides has been designed specifically to save the hassle of printing out reams of NATA web pages in order to make sure you don’t miss something whilst wandering the back streets of your chosen destination.

This guide has been compiled almost exclusively by me (Paul Allison), and is based entirely on personal experiences and opinions. Please do not prejudice anything on my say so – not only am I quite warped, but many places were only visited once, and therefore may have been having a particularly good or bad day.

This guide is not intended to replace more traditional sources of information, such as the excellent Lonely Planet guide books or the indispensable “In Your Pocket” guides available local in many Eastern European cities (as well as the downloadable versions from www.inyourpocket.com, which have inspired this very guide). Instead, the idea is to supplement these more detailed, better researched and more balanced guides with my own ramblings.

These guides originally came about as people were forever asking for pub tips and the like for places I’ve been to – I soon grew tired of typing out the same emails every few weeks and opted instead to keep the information on the web on the NATA Online site.

All opinions expressed in this guide are those of the author, and not necessarily those of the Netley Abbey Tartan Army.

- For more information about NATA (the Netley Abbey Tartan Army), including photos and diary accounts of many trips abroad with Scotland, as well as much more travel information and guides), please visit www.netleyabbeytartanarmy.com
- For more information on me, please visit www.paulallison.co.uk



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Moldova Introduction

Moldova has a reputation as being an ex-Soviet backwater and is one of (if not the) poorest country in Europe. What most people may not know is that it is also responsible for some of the best wines in Europe. Although the country faces a national identity dilemma, with two autonomous regions – Gagauzia in the south and Transdnierster in the east – and two languages (street signs in Moldovan/Romanian, yet more people speak Russian), the place is very welcoming and friendly.

I have to say that, despite the all too apparent faults, I really enjoyed my 6 nights in Moldova and would go again in a flash (although relaxed visa arrangements and better flight connections would make a lot less painful!). What's not so good is the standards of accommodation (supposed 3* hotels without hot water or usable toilets), and in particular, the extremely unhelpful and corrupt police force. Whether or not the corruption is the result of low wages, this is something that needs to be stamped out before Moldova can expect any significant foreign tourism or investment. Anyway, enough of the political preaching, and onto the pubs...

Chisinau Introduction

Chisinau's a funny wee place, with a logical grid-like centre and wide, clean, pot-holed streets. Unfortunately, only around six of those streets are actually lit at night, making those pot-holes even more interesting! Thankfully, the old habit of gangs stealing and melting down manhole covers seems to have died off (either that, or the council had just taken delivery of a new job lot right before we were there!). The city's streets may not be paved with gold (or paved at all, in some cases), but they are a damn sight cleaner and safer than Bucharest's.

The road in from the compact and modern airport affords a stunning view (in daylight hours only) of the "Gates of Chisinau", a fancy name for a twin set of triangular apartment blocks marking the edge of the urban sprawl. Once in town, pick your hotel carefully – places like the Cosmos or the National are big (with lots of room) and cheap, but are equivalents of a bad one-star western hotel. On the other hand, the Jolly Alon or the Grand Dedeman (where we had splashed out to stay)



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boast all the modern facilities (plus round-the-clock hot water!) of a western four-star.

Just about all of central Chisinau hangs off the main street – the wide and long B-dul Stefan cel Mare ("Stephen the Great", cousin of Vlad the Impaler and a Romanian and Moldovan folk hero). It's pretty easy to get around, and cabs are plentiful – just try to avoid being ripped off by some of the more unscrupulous ones (the taxis in front of the Dedeman were reliable each time we used them).

Things to see and do

Chisinau does not boast a full list of must-see attractions, although notable sights in the city include the white cathedral and bell tower, the ornate fountain in the Stefan cel Mare park and the architecture of the iconic Hotel Chisinau (stand in front of the Hotel National and look to your left). We missed the open-air military exhibition and the bustling market (well, Chris didn't – his hostel was in the thick of it), but they are also reputedly worth a look.

Most probably, you will find yourself looking outwith the city boundaries in search of sights to see. Car hire is a relatively new phenomenon in Moldova, and given the state of the roads and the local drivers, I'd give it a miss (apart from the fact I can't drive, that is!). Instead, use one of the local tour agencies – the Soleil Tours agency has a stall in the foyer of the Dedeman, yet we got the same tour for half the price from Moldova Tur, based in a small office in the back left corner of the Hotel National (behind the bar counter on the right hand side).

- **Wine trip** – this is an absolute essential, but is probably worth booking with as much notice as you can, as they may require minimum numbers to satisfy the vineyard. We travelled to the excellent Milestii Mici on a trip pre-arranged for around 30 guys by a Reeky Sporrán. Included was a minibus tour of the vast cellars (70km of the 200km of tunnels are in use), a walk around some of the cellars themselves, and a sit down three course meal with around a bottle of wine each worth of different tastings. There are a host of other vineyards and cellars offering tours, most notably the iconic Cricova cellars, a source of great national pride and the home of the only red "champagne" in the world.



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- **Orhei Vechi** – this old cave monastery set in an idyllic valley is another national treasure, and is still in active use. The tour included a stop at a small museum, a look in a nineteenth century rural Moldovan house, and a climb up to the rocky summit where the small Orthodox monastery is set into the hill itself.
- The one trip some of us wanted to do, but didn't, was to visit the autonomous breakaway republic of **Transdnierster**, which steadfastly and single-handedly refuses to recognise the end of the Soviet system. Buses and trains between Chisinau and Tiraspol are pretty cheap and frequent (subject to separatists not blocking the tracks!), although a visa (available on the border) is required for non-Moldovan visitors. The situation changes frequently (you may need to register if staying more than a few hours), so make sure you check before you go!).

Places to drink

One thing Chisinau is not short of is places to drink – the excellent locally brewed Vitanta and the Russian mainstay Baltika are widely available, often bottled (and often out of date!), and great local wine is widely available and incredibly cheap. Don't be afraid of the draught wine – it's just as good.

- **Apty's Pub**, in Hotel Dedeman Grand – okay, so it's a hotel pub. And an "Irish" pub at that (although the carpet and the waitresses' skirts are tartan). And probably the most expensive place in the town. But it is very safe, and offers regular bouzouki music!
- Unnamed **Wine Bar**, corner of Str Sfatul Tarii and 31st August 1989 – a fantastic wee wine bar, 50 yards down the street from the Dacia Hotel, that knocks out bottled beer for 30p or so, and wine by the glass or the chamber pot – 75p a litre. Popular with the local jakey brigade, but a great wee find.
- **Vitanta Pub** (upstairs), corner of Str Sfatul Tarii and Str Bucuresti – looks a wee bit soulless, with high ceilings and little net curtains, but is actually owned by the Vitanta Brewery itself, so is a pretty safe bet for fresh, in date (!) beer. Meeting place for the Chisinau branch of the Spartak Moscow supporters club.



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- **Vitanta Pub** (downstairs), Str Sfatul Tarii – complete change of ambience for the intimate downstairs part of the Vitanta pub, accessed from the street. Very reminiscent of a Polish pub (especially Pub Medyk in Bydgoszcz), in that it had meandering subterranean levels with no visible means of escape in a fire. Don't let that put you off!
- **Madrigal Bar** – small underground bar off Bul Stefan Cel Mare next to the Cathedral Park – you'll spot the big neon "PUB" sign a mile off. Not a bad wee place, with a decent range of bottled beer.
- **Beer House**, B-dul Negruzzi – Probably the biggest pub in the country, and certainly one of the more expensive! The Beer House boasts it's own lager (filtered and unfiltered), dark beer and red beer, all of which are very palatable: try them all on a "Beginners Tray", then get a three-litre "giraffe" of the one you like the most. Also does food.
- **laloveni**, Bul Stefan Cel Mare – This is a weird one: a fantastic, atmospheric pub in the basement of a sherry shop (of the same name – the bar keeps the same hours, so is always shut by 8pm). The downside: they only sell sherry (in 250 ml measures!), and it tastes a little salty. But it is a great place to mix with local "characters" as they serenade you with bouzouki music and try and buy your girlfriend more sherry. Not recommended on an empty stomach! And watch out for the armed guard on the door.
- **Café Kito**, Str Vlaicu Pircalab – Opposite the International University, at first glance, Kito is definitely a café (of the self-service, BHS department store type), however wander deeper and you'll find yourself in a circular room staffed by young girls sporting Thunderbirds uniforms. Popular with students.
- **Robin Pub**, Str Alexandru cel Bun – a "British" theme pub, and recipient of the coveted Sporrans Legion "Best Pub of the Trip" certificate (it's on the wall, along from the toilet door), the Robin is not a bad wee boozier, if (a) you can forgive the Union Jacks fluttering by the bar, and (b) you're prepared to wait 2 hours for your meal if anyone else has ordered food before you.



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- **Cactus Saloon**, Str Armeneasca – More of a food place than a straightforward boozier, this small place on the corner of Str Armeneasca and 31st August 1989 has an extensive menu, including loads of veggie options. Lots of Americana adorns the walls (and the waiters).
- **Nail Bar**, Str 31st August 1989 – Walked in. Was told “no beer”. Walked out, passing fridge full of bottles by the door! Not worth a special trip, but seemed a wee bit weird (well, we were only in there for 30 seconds!)
- **123 Bar**, Str Mitropolit Varlaam – Similar to the Nail Bar, but much more friendly! A few yards along from the Dedeman, and right opposite Sun City shopping centre, this is a strip-lit local boozier the way it should be.
- **New York Bowling**, Str Vlaicu Pircalab – a very plush Bowling centre and restaurant opposite the International University, and a big hit with the men in the money (going by the large cars and bodyguards hanging around when we left!). The security are dressed up as NY police – hang a left into the huge and atmospheric restaurant (complete with live “muzak” at weekends) and take your pick from the impressive menu and beer list.
- **Abba Bar**, Str Mihai Eminescu – we just had to go here for the sheer kitsch value. We’d been told by the Milingavie boys it was a gay bar, and they weren’t wrong! The only connection with Abba is the large framed poster, otherwise it’s just a small cellar bar – you’re better off with 123.
- **Time Out**, Str Dacia (sports bar in Botanica) – a local pub in the bottom floor of a block of estate flats on the main road between the airport and the city. Dead handy for Zimbru Stadium (we’d just seen the FC Dacia game there), this wee bar may only have a handful of scarves and flags (mostly German), but it has a decent selection of Moldovan/Russian beer and a massive pull-down screen that picks up English Premier League games. The wee red shed in the corner is the bookies’ office.



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- **Orasul Vechi** (restaurant), Str Armeneasca – A superb place to head for a Moldovan meal at a decent price. Try and head to the more atmospheric dining room on the right hand side.
- Also (take someone else’s word for it):
- **City Nightclub** – Rich went here twice. Handy for the city centre, but not recommended by our Moldovan correspondent. A straightforward western style nightclub (i.e. disco without strippers)
 - **Black Elephant** – Another that Rich graced with his presence. He describes it as like a pub that plays loud music.
 - **Yellow Submarine** – owned by the original Black Elephant people, but suffers from isolation at the far end of town where no-one ever goes. A bit like a local Hard Rock Cafe.
 - **Soho** – A nightclub/strip club down near the National hotel.
 - **Dublin Pub** – Chisinau’s main Irish pub, and very handy for the Republican Stadium. Not been there, but heard (a) it’s very small, and (b) it’s notorious for charging arbitrarily for drinks.

Was this guide useful? Please let me know:
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