



TRANSDNIESTR: EUROPE'S LAST KID ON THE BLOC

SHOESTRING 17



Travelling under Lenin's watchful eye

Travelling to the world's youngest communist state is a curious, challenging and utterly unique backpacking experience. Best of all, it's just a stone's throw away.

The year 1989 was a watershed moment for Europe. It was the year when Poland, after 44 years of stringent Soviet rule, finally turned its back on the communist ideal.

This act of defiance was the spark that lit the fire of revolution across Eastern Europe, and within the next three years East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Romania and more than a dozen other socialist states - including Russia itself - had overthrown their respective governments and entered a new era of capitalist democracy. Communism in Europe was dead and buried.

Well, almost buried. For as the world watched Poland and co. march towards a bright new dawn, no-one seemed to notice that one tiny piece of the

Eastern Bloc had been left behind.

SOLE USSR SURVIVOR

The bus creaked as I stepped on board. It was old. Old, cramped and charmless: a remnant of a communist age gone by... and a fitting mode of transport for my journey back in time. For one day only, I was going to leave behind the comfortable consumerism of Europe and venture into the breakaway socialist republic of Transdniestr: the sole survivor of the USSR.

My first challenge came before I had even set foot in the country. As I arrived at the (technically non-existent) Moldova-Transdniestr border, one of the most stringently controlled in Europe, I was ushered off the bus and into a

dark, windowless coffin of a room. Two border guards sat me down and began asking me questions in Russian, to which I replied in English.

This language exchange lasted over an hour, and was punctuated with many attempts to empty my pockets of cash. Luckily, I had prepared for such a scenario and kept the bulk of my funds hidden, offering an "entry visa fee" of 100 Moldovan leu (around £5).

Although the meagre sum was far from gratefully received, I eventually convinced them a fiver was better than nothing, and was permitted to rejoin my fellow passengers. I was in.

LENIN STATUES

The moment I stepped off the bus in Tiraspol - Transdniestr's capital or

Moldova's second city, depending on your viewpoint, and the most Sovietistic metropolis left in Europe - I was struck by one thing. The silence. Tiraspol, I thought, may be the quietest city in the world.

I spent the first part of my day seeing the 'tourist sights' - as much as you can use such a term in the least-visited city in Europe. First of all I went to the stoically socialist Heroes' Cemetery memorial, where an eternal flame burns for all those who died in the 1992 conflict with Moldova (in which Transdniestr cemented its self-proclaimed independence).

I then nipped over the road to the Presidential Palace, from which long-time communist president Igor Smirnov oversees his half - a - million - or - so subjects.



Writer Profile



Name: Joseph Reaney
Age: 25
 A scriptwriter and journalist who caught the travel bug at the age of sixteen and has yet to discover an antidote.

Finally I took a trip to the once-widely-renowned Kvint factory, which has been producing some of Europe's finest brandies for more than a century.

But I soon came to the conclusion that Tiraspol is a city to be enjoyed not for its individual attractions but for its overall impressions: from the brash and bold isolationist overtures to the minute Marxist details.

Walking around Tiraspol is akin to wandering around Leningrad in its heyday, with stunning spectacles of a Cold War era on every corner. From severe-looking statues of Lenin and haphazardly-parked Soviet tanks to anti-imperialist graffiti and home-owned hammer and sickle flags; this is a city that is proud to be keeping the socialist end up. As one local man, Viku, put it: "We are happy to be from Transdnistr. Here is it the true communism."

So, having come to the conclusion that the city is best seen at an unhurried pace, that's precisely what I aimed to achieve. After a leisurely lunch on the banks of the divisive Dniestr river, I spent my afternoon shopping in the clothes market, ambling through the leafy Culture Park and sipping coffee in closed-off cafés.

'Transdnistr is not for everybody'

I investigated the alleyways, the back streets and the residential areas. I chatted to the hesitant locals. I explored; taking in the minutiae of this oddest of capitals at every turn. I even took a trip to the small satellite city of Bender - a short hop over the river and another bastion of socialist being.

In the evening I tried and failed to find a restaurant, and then tried and failed to find a pub. Finally, sadly, I had to admit my day was at an end. It was time to return to the 21st century: to iPhones and space tourism; democracy and capitalism. So I hopped back on that old, cramped and charmless bus to Chişinău stuffing what was left of my money into my socks.

Let me clear this up now: Transdnistr is not for everybody. It is not a country renowned for its sweeping landscapes, gourmet food, romantic restaurants or pulsating nightlife. It is, in a



Above: An orthodox church in Tiraspol (JoLe); Below: a well in rural Transdnistr (WeHa)



very real sense, a challenging travel destination. The UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office advises caution to travellers as "British consular services may be limited in their ability to help," while many visitors recount feeling as though they were under constant surveillance. I personally found that speaking English was often met with a frosty reception and that taking photos on the street is a major faux pas. In short, travelling in Transdnistr is no picnic.

In fact, it is something far rarer and far more wonderful than that: an utterly unique travel experience. Where else on the continent can you see heavily-armoured tanks parked on streets and anti-imperialist murals daubed on walls? Which

other European nation must you bribe your way in and out of? A trip to the world's youngest communist state is the closest that young backpackers like me will ever get to a journey behind the Iron Curtain. It's our sole chance to experience a little of how life once was for hundreds of millions of Europeans.

Since 1989 communist states across the world have corrupted or crumbled into ubiquitous capitalist societies, where Ronald McDonald - not Vladimir Lenin - rules the roost.

But not Transdnistr. Transdnistr has survived; a frozen socialist bubble at the centre of an ever-changing political landscape. A true continental oddity and a truly unique travel adventure.

TRANSDNIESTR

- A BREAK - AWAY COMMUNIST REPUBLIC THAT DECLARED INDEPENDENCE FROM THE MOLDOVAN SSR IN 1990. INDEPENDENCE IS NOT RECOGNISED BY THE UN OR THE EU.

- LOCATED ON THE DNIESTR RIVER BETWEEN THE EAST OF MOLDOVA AND THE SOUTHWEST OF THE UKRAINE.

- HAS ITS OWN FLAG, NATIONAL ANTHEM, PARLIAMENT, CONSTITUTION, CURRENCY, POLICE FORCE AND MILITARY

- CAPITAL - TIRASPOL; LANGUAGE - RUSSIAN; CURRENCY - ROUBLE (£1 = TR12); ALSO CALLED TRANSDNISTR

- GET THERE BY BUS FROM BĂLŢI AND CHIŞINĂU IN MOLDOVA OR FROM ODESSA AND KIEV IN THE UKRAINE