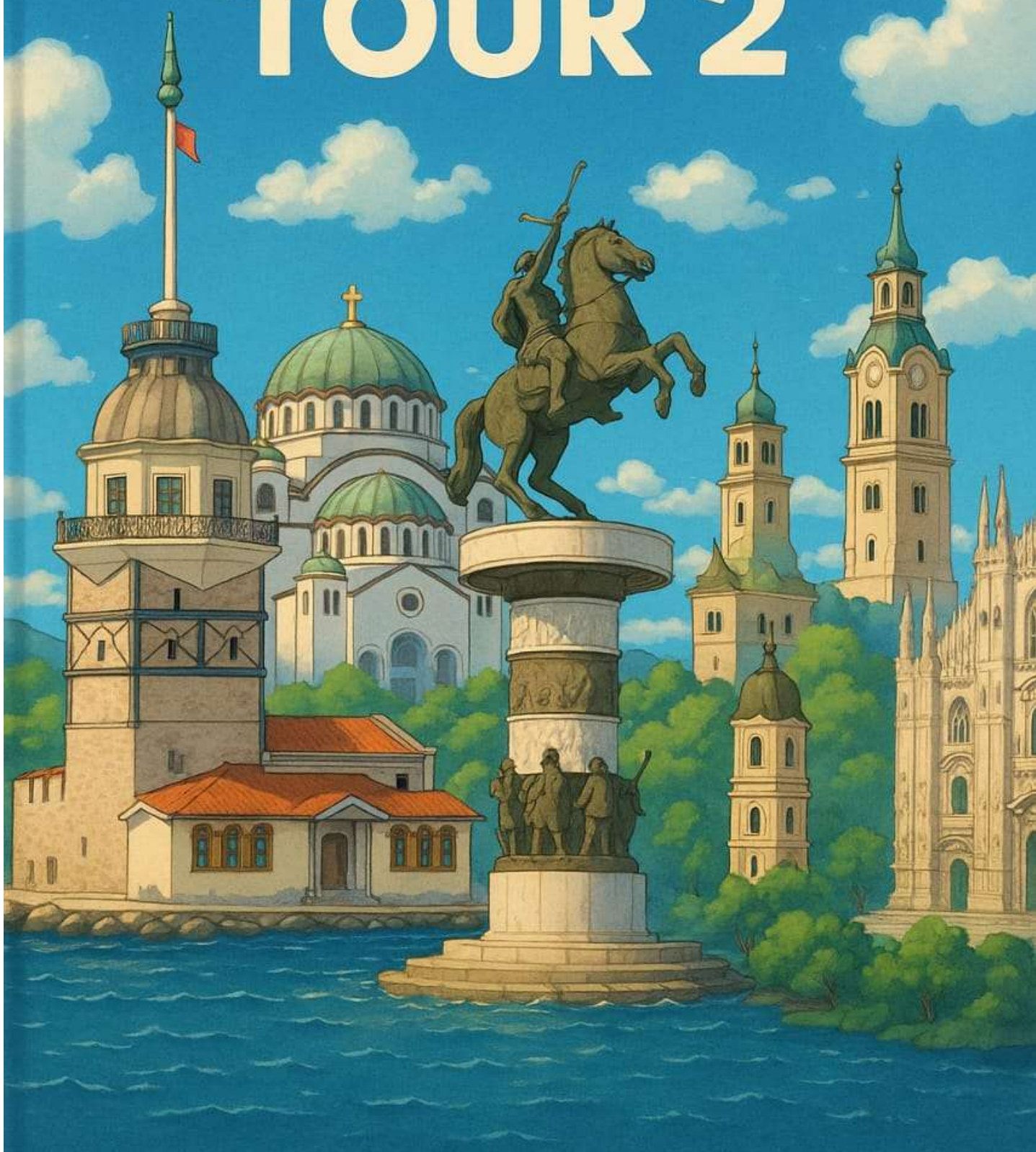


MAGICAL MYSTERY TOUR 2

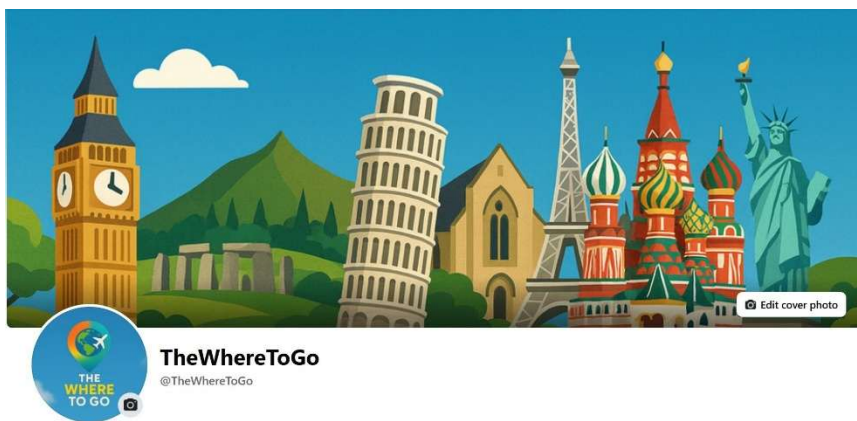




The Magical Mystery Tour 2 is just one of a series of documentary travel guides under 'The Where To Go' banner. You can also find curated videos of the many different places visited on this tour on my YouTube channel which can be found at www.youtube.com/@thewheretogo. Please feel free to like and subscribe.



You will also find up to date information about my worldwide travels on my dedicated Facebook page at www.facebook.com/TheWhereToGo.



CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 2: Istanbul

Chapter 3: Skopje

Chapter 4: Belgrade

Chapter 5: Bucharest

Chapter 6: Chişinău

Chapter 7: Milan

Chapter 8: Summary

Chapter 1: Magical Mystery Tour 2



Work was cancelled, and I suddenly had time on my hands. Welcome to my second magical mystery tour, where each destination is chosen purely on the basis of being the cheapest available. I don't intend to revisit any places from the first tour — Dublin, Madrid, Rome, Malta, Greece or Warsaw.

Just like last time, I'm avoiding visiting the same country twice or using the same airline twice. That should stop me circling the UK endlessly or being doomed to fly with Ryanair forever. I'm booking everything on Google Flights using "Anywhere" as the destination. Let's see where this takes me.

My first stop is Istanbul from Stansted — or "London Stansted," as my ticket insists on calling it, despite being 40 miles from central London. Still, at £33 the flight is cheaper than the train fare to the airport. As always, you're welcome to join me on this journey. Let's see where this adventure leads.

Chapter 2: Istanbul



Time	Destination	Flight	Remark	Gate
06:30	Bodrum	FR7056	Estimating 06:30	
06:40	Thessaloniki	FR2567	Estimating 06:40	
06:40	Turkmenbashi	FR909	Estimating 06:40	
06:50	Erzincan	FR2534	Estimating 06:50	
06:50	Genoa Catania	FR2842	Estimating 06:50	
06:55	Verona M. Polo	FR1792	Estimating 06:55	
07:05	Naglas	FR1013	Estimating 07:05	
07:05	Haga	FR1137	Estimating 07:05	
07:05	Berlin	FR146	Estimating 07:05	
07:05	Drobeta	FR003	Estimating 07:05	
07:40	Moskva	FR2828	Estimating 07:40	
07:50	Doha East Ind	EZY038	Estimating 07:50	
07:50	Palma Mallorca	FR327	Estimating 07:50	
07:50	Cologne	FR2362	Estimating 07:50	
07:55	Turkmenbashi	LS1461	Relax	
08:00	Milan Malpensa	FR2767	Estimating 08:00	
08:00	Stockholm	FR4993	Estimating 08:00	
08:05	Bilund	FR5184	Estimating 08:05	
08:05	Gdansk	FR833	Estimating 08:05	
08:15	Dublin	FR206	Estimating 08:15	
08:20	Copenhagen	FR2818	Estimating 08:20	
08:25	Malaga	FR1882	Estimating 08:25	
08:30	Roma Ciampino	FR2872	Estimating 08:30	

I have no idea what I have against Stansted Airport, and my own previous recollection of this place is flying to Dubai courtesy of Emirates which wasn't that bad. So today I changed my mind, and I don't do that very often as my friends will confirm.

The train journey from Liverpool Street London was fast and efficient. Stansted Express trains run every 15 minutes, and the journey takes 50 minutes which is comparable with getting out to Heathrow or Gatwick. Access to the airport and getting through departures is a lot quicker though.

I couldn't quite believe how quiet the place was, and I was through security before I knew it. I did not have to get out my laptop, phone, power bank or any of my liquids so that was a pleasant surprise. Airside is no different from anywhere else except it was all so much quieter and a hell of a lot more pleasant.

There are plenty of restaurants available and the staff on site are all pleasant, polite and helpful. If you are coming from central London or live close to Stansted then I suggest that like me, you make this your airport of choice next time. Time for my flight so I will post this on social media and add a few pictures. Anyway, my first stop is Istanbul.



My first stop is Istanbul, and I must admit I'm really looking forward to going back after such a long time. The place holds many happy memories from a long, long time ago.....the iconic Hagia Sophia, the beautiful Blue Mosque and sitting alongside the Bosphorus watching the ferries travel from one continent to another.

I loved the bustling bazaars, and the skyline dotted with minarets, the call to prayer early in the morning, the trams, the traffic and the absolute chaos of the place.....I just hope this trip is not going to be one big disappointment.

Galata Tower

The Galata Tower is a medieval stone tower which stands 220 feet (approximately 66 metres) high and offers panoramic views of the city. The tower was built in 1348 to serve as a watchtower and later a lighthouse. The tower features a distinctive cone shaped roof which is used extensively on Istanbul's tourist publicity. It is said that if you whisper a secret while standing in the tower it will echo back..... so probably best not to whisper anything incriminating



Topkapi Palace

Topkapi Palace was the primary residence of Ottoman sultans for nearly 400 years, from the 15th through to the 19th century. The palace was completed by Mehmed the Conqueror in in the late 15th century and overlooks Bosphorus and is next door to Guihane Park. The palace complex consists of four main courtyards with numerous. buildings, each serving different functions, from administrative offices to private living quarters including the treasury and a harem which I didn't get to see on this visit., but I guess when you have seen one, you have seen them all!!!



Not surprisingly, Topkapi Palace is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and was undergoing a major upgrade at the time of my visit. The inside pictures are not mine but added to give you an idea of what you are missing.



Guihane Park

Next door to Topkapi Palace is the beautifully kept Guihane Park. The park is a serene oasis in a bustling city and is the ideal spot for leisurely strolls and relaxation. The park was originally part of the imperial gardens of the Ottoman Empire. Visitors can enjoy scenic views of the nearby Bosphorus as well as some beautiful fountains dating back to the time when this was a royal garden. On the far side of the park, you'll find some Gothic pillars which date back to the 19th century and reflect the fascination with European architectural styles.

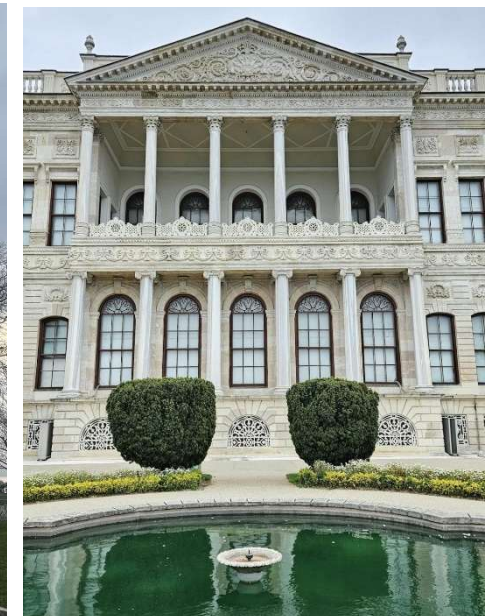




Dolmabahçe Palace

Dolmabahçe Palace was the main administrative centre of the Ottoman Empire from 1856 until its dissolution in 1922. Commissioned by Sultan Abdulmejid I, it was designed to symbolise the modernisation efforts of the Ottoman Empire blending Ottoman, Baroque, Rococo, and Neoclassical styles..... I read that.

The palace also served as the residence of the last Ottoman sultans and was the home of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey, during his visits to Istanbul. He passed away here in 1938. Nowadays the palace functions as a museum, allowing visitors a glimpse into the lavish lifestyle of the Ottoman court and Turkey's transition to a republic.





Surprisingly, Dolmabahçe Palace is not designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site unlike the Blue Mosque, Hagia Sophia, the Basilica Cistern and Topkapi Palace. The place was undergoing a major upgrade at the time of my visit. Please note that there are no inside pictures as I did not have time to explore the 285 rooms and 43 halls.

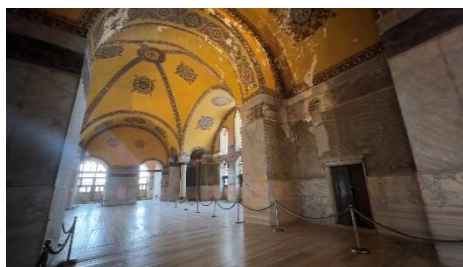
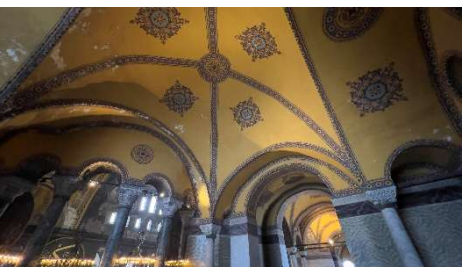


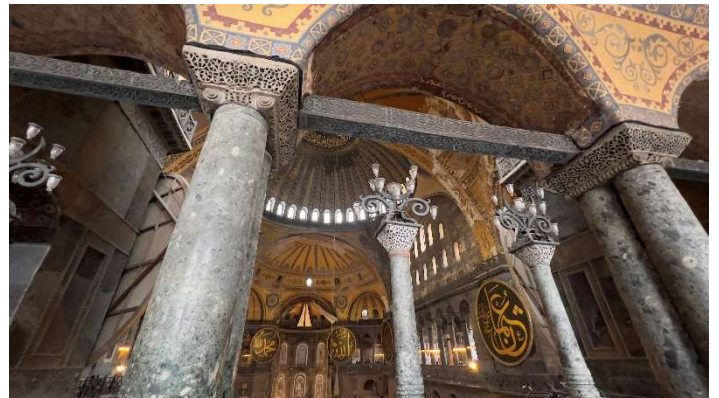
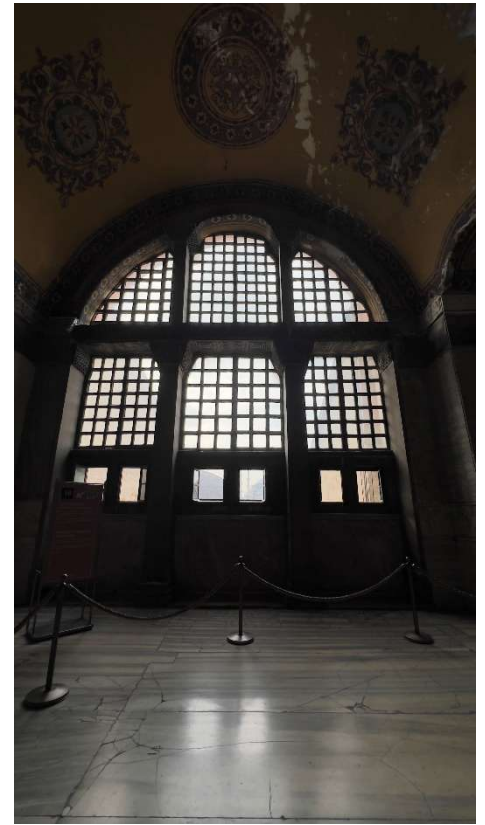
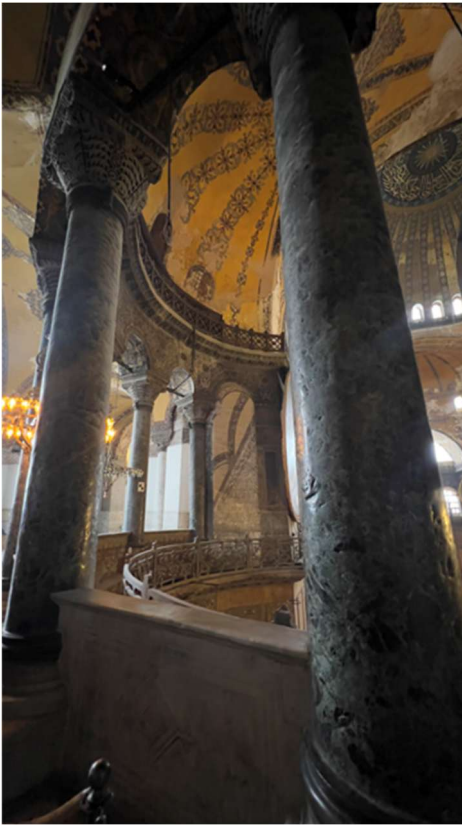
Hagia Sophia

Hagia Sophia was originally constructed as a cathedral in 537 CE under Emperor Justinian I. The cathedral served as the centre of Orthodox Christianity for nearly 1,000 years. It is also the largest cathedral in the world for many years cover an area of approximately 7960 m². Nowadays, the largest cathedral in the world is St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican City which was completed in 1626 and covered an area of approximately 15,160 m².

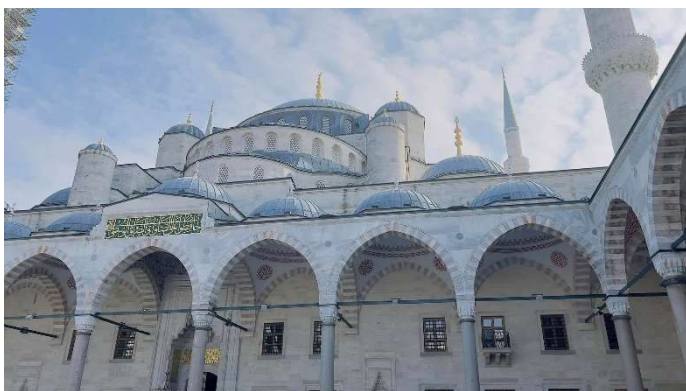
After the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453, Hagia Sophia was converted into a mosque with the addition of four minarets and the covering of the Christian mosaics and frescoes. In 1935, following the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, the mosque was transformed into a museum. In 2020, it was reconverted into a mosque reflecting Turkey's shifting approach to religion and an attempt to emphasise Turkey's Islamic identity.

Whilst Hagia Sophia has undergone various transformations, the upkeep of the building has left much to be desired, and the state of maintenance and preservation continues to be a topic of concern as you can see from my pictures.





Blue Mosque



The Blue Mosque officially known as the Sultan Ahmed Mosque is a noticeably short distance away from Hagia Sophia. The mosque was completed in 1616 under the reign of Sultan Ahmed I.

The mosque derives its name from the striking, blue-tiled interior which was designed by the architect Sedefkâr Mehmed Ağa and was intended to reflect Ottoman architecture and Byzantine influences drawing inspiration from the neighbouring Hagia Sophia.

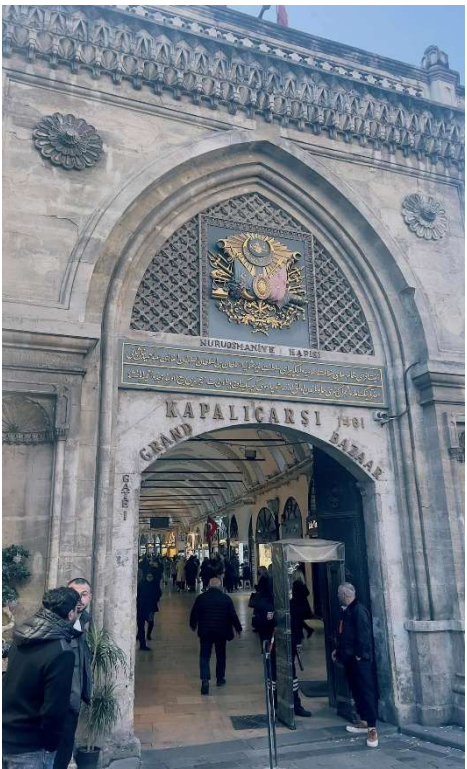
The Blue Mosque manages to serve the purpose of a place of worship and a major tourist attraction. It is impossible as a non-Muslim to gain entry to the inside during prayer times, so I am relying on some royalty free pictures to explain the name. I was fortunate to see inside on my last visit to Istanbul, and I can tell you that it is beautifully stunning.



In the meantime, it is prayer time and if you sit outside, you will notice that the call to prayer is synchronised between the mosques and well worth hanging around for since they offer an excellent example of how cooperation works better than competition.



Grand Bazaar



Tourist guidebooks are quite insistent that I absolutely must visit the Grand Bazaar although my maps suggest that there are many such places scattered right across Istanbul. I think I found the right one, but I am happy to stand corrected if I am wrong.

The Grand Bazaar dates back to 1461 and is one of the largest and oldest covered markets in the world. The market has more than 4000 shops and covers approximately 30,000 square metres which is roughly twice the size of the Hagia Sophia.

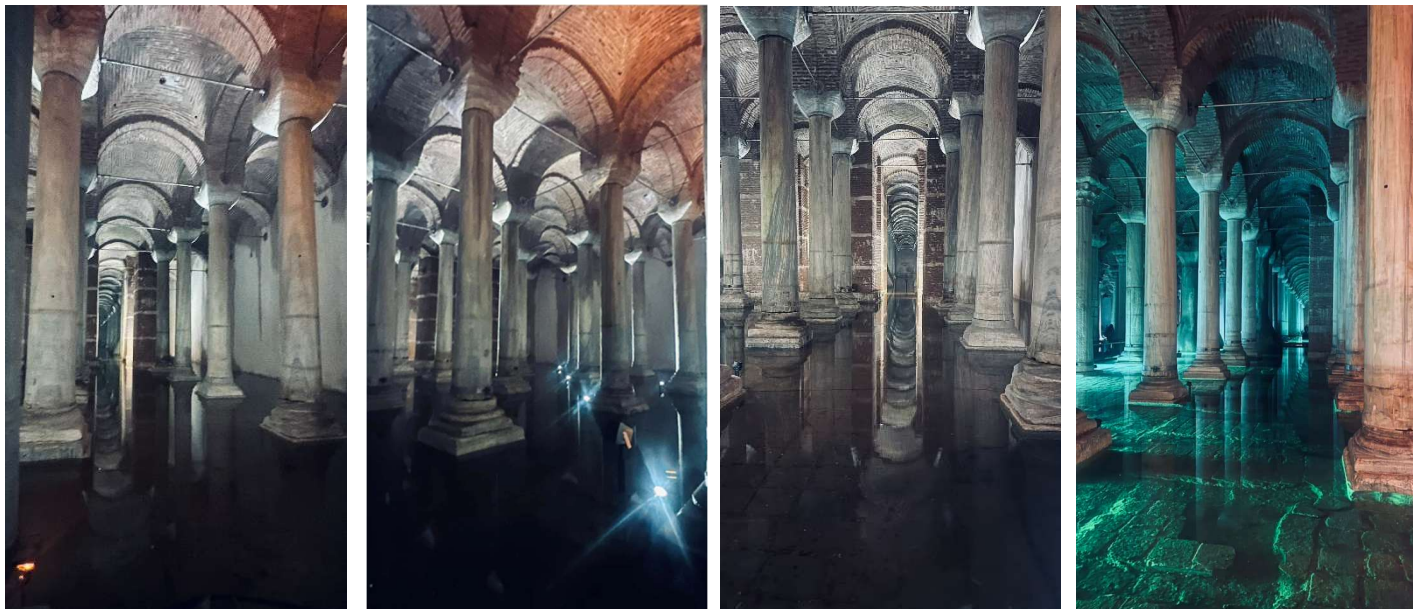
The market is an absolute maze of streets dedicated to different goods such as textiles, jewellery, spices, carpets, antiques, ceramics and shops selling Turkish Delight. You can even book a tour across the vaulted ceilings if you get fed up of haggling.



Basilica Cistern

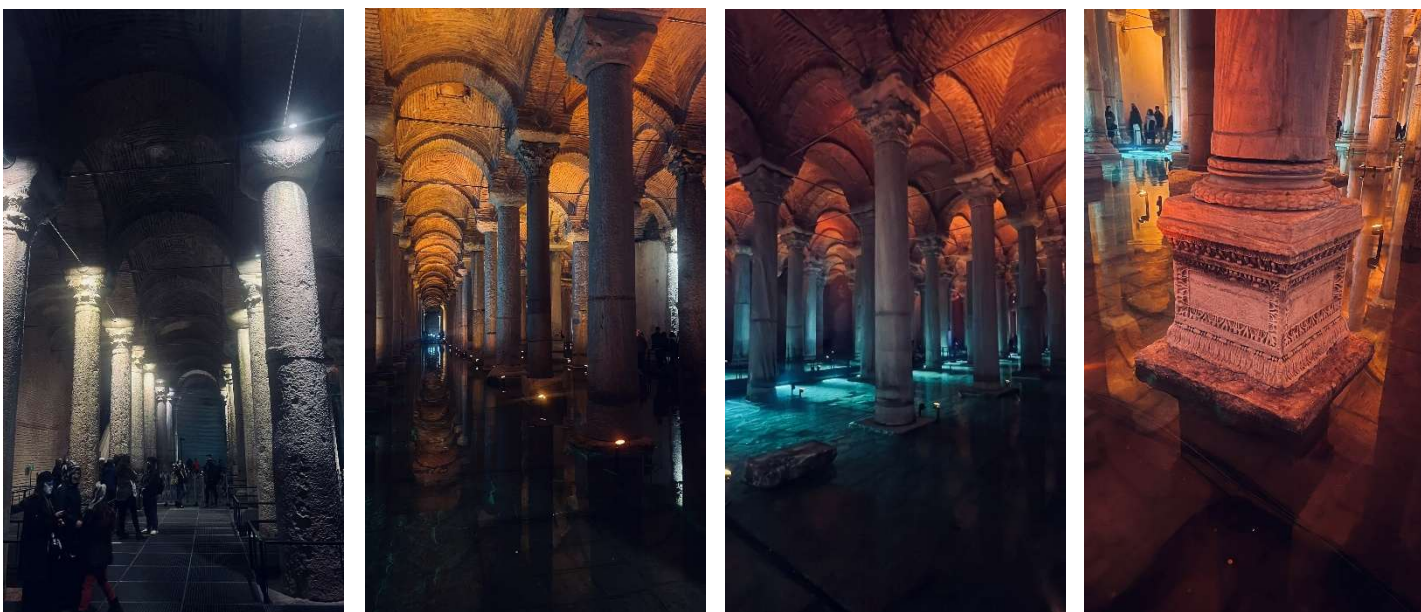
The Basilica Cistern (Yerebatan Sarnıcı) is one of Istanbul's most fascinating landmarks and the queues outside of this place suggest that it is probably one of the most popular. Whilst the word cistern might make you think of toilets and sewage, this place was designed to store water for the great palace and surrounding buildings.

The Basilica Cistern is located underneath the city's Sultanahmet district. It was built in the 6th century, during the reign of Emperor Justinian I, and is the largest (9800 square metres) of several hundred ancient cisterns existing beneath Istanbul.



This attraction certainly has the wow factor and consists of 336 columns made from marble although some columns have been repurposed from earlier Roman structures. The columns support the vaulted ceiling, creating an atmospheric ambience supported by subtle lighting (which is continually changing) and accentuated by the reflections of the columns on the water's surface.

Entry to the attraction is somewhat expensive but absolutely worth it. I recommend that you book this one online to allow you immediate access and no queues. I booked mine via Trip.com who are not paying me to give them a bit of free advertising.





Bosphorus

No trip to Istanbul is complete without taking advantage of the ferries which criss-cross the Bosphorus morning, noon and night. It is the end of the day, and my three-day travel card does allow me access to the ferries as well as trains, metro, trams and buses. So, who am I to end my day on the ferry from Eminonu to Kadıköy and back to Karaköy.



The Bosphorus is a natural strait dividing Istanbul into its European and Asian sides, connecting the Black Sea to the Sea of Marmara. The Bosphorus ferries are an iconic part of Istanbul life, and they are as busy today as they always were in spite of the fact that you can now go under the Bosphorus taking advantage of the extensive Istanbul Metro.



If you intend to repeat this adventure, then I strongly recommend that you check your travel insurance. I really don't think this boat is very safe and the significant numbers of commuters boarding and embarking on the same side of the boat means it leans over precariously towards the dock.

The view is wonderful, and the trip makes a fitting end to my Istanbul travels. I have checked where the life belts are and I'm sitting on the top deck just in case.



Chapter 3: Skopje



It's an early start this morning as my next flight is due to depart from Istanbul Sabiha Gökçen International Airport (SAW) which is fortunate because this was the airport I arrived at, so I am well-versed on public transport.

Important to note that Istanbul has three airports including this airport on Asian side and two on the European side: Istanbul Airport (IST) and Ataturk Airport (ISL) although the latter only manages freight so if you arrive there then you're probably a parcel.

Anyway, I guess you're excited to know where my next stop is, and I hope that you're a bit more excited than I was when I found that I was off to Skopje in North Macedonia..... I was hoping for somewhere a lot warmer. I must admit that don't know an awful lot about my destination although I have just found out that Skopje was the birthplace of Mother Teresa of Calcutta (or Calculators as my autocorrect insists). So that's my next stop and now they are calling my flight.....,



Skopje and North Macedonia

Skopje is the capital and largest city of North Macedonia which is a landlocked country in the Balkan Peninsula. The country is bordered by Kosovo to the northwest, Serbia to the northeast, Bulgaria to the east, Greece to the south, and Albania to the west. Skopje was originally part of the former Yugoslavia and became the capital of the People's (later Socialist) Republic of Macedonia in 1945.



In 1991, Skopje became the capital of the newly independent Republic of Macedonia, not to be confused with Macedonia which existed as a northern region of Greece encompassing the city of Thessaloniki. Needless to say, Greece was opposed to the use of the name Macedonia, and the United Nations subsequently coined the provisional name 'The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.'

The name dispute caused considerable diplomatic tensions with Greece blocking the country's efforts to join NATO and the European Union. The matter was eventually agreed in 2018 when the country officially changed its name to North Macedonia.

Following the agreement, North Macedonia was able to officially join NATO in 2020 and has made considerable progress towards seeking EU membership pursuing issues around democracy, human rights, minority protections, economic reforms and environmental standards, including judicial independence, anti-corruption efforts and freedom of the press.



Mother Teresa of Calcutta

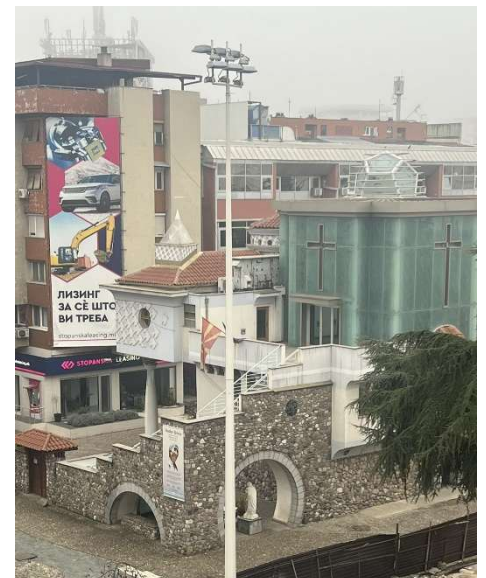


Mary Teresa Bojaxhiu was born on the 26th of August 1910 in Skopje which was then part of the Ottoman Empire. She was raised in a devoutly Catholic family and, at the age of 18, she moved to Ireland to join the Sisters of Loreto which was an order dedicated to education.

She was subsequently sent to India and taught at St Mary's High School in Calcutta from 1931 to 1948 but the suffering and poverty that she saw outside the convent walls made a deep impression on her. In 1948 she received permission from her superiors to leave the convent school and devote herself to working among the poorest of the poor in the slums of Calcutta.

She started an open-air school for slum children and was soon joined by voluntary helpers that allowed her to extend the scope of her work. In 1950 she received permission to start her own order called the 'Missionaries of Charity' whose primary task was to love and care for those people that nobody was prepared to look after.

Today, her life and work are commemorated at the Memorial House which is where I started my tour of Skopje.



The Stone Bridge

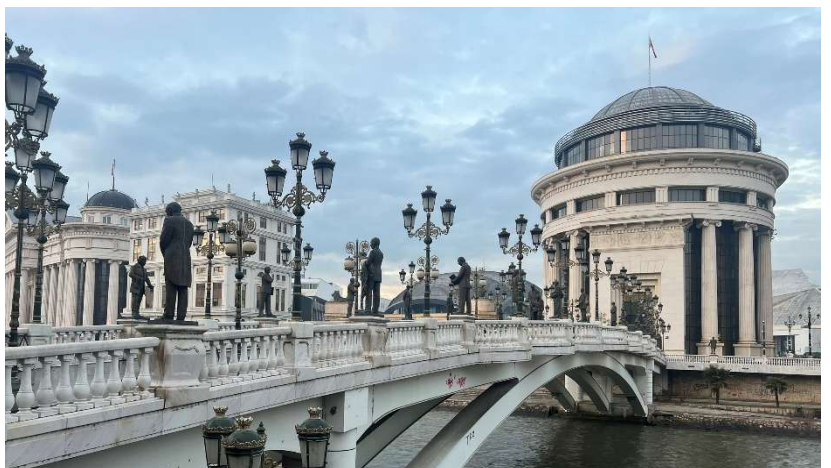
The Stone Bridge is an iconic symbol of Skopje and was built in the 15th century during the Ottoman Empire. The bridge spans the Vardar River and connects the old and new parts of the city. The bridge, which is entirely built of large stone blocks, is a symbol of Skopje's heritage and resilience.

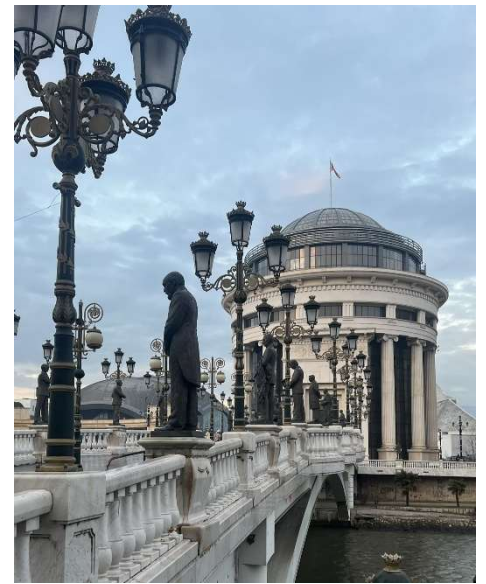


The Bridge of Art
Built in 2012, The Bridge of Art celebrates the recent Macedonian artistic history. This resplendent bridge is decorated with thirty-five statues of some of the most significant and distinguished educators, artists, writers, composers and actors from Macedonia, individuals who have had a deep influence on Macedonian art, leaving a treasury of works and cultural wealth that forms an invaluable part of the Macedonian cultural heritage.

The Bridge of Art

The Bridge of Art was completed in 2012 and spans the Vardar River connecting the old and new parts leading directly to the National Opera and Ballet building. The bridge features a series of artistic sculptures and installations that celebrate Macedonia's cultural heritage. The bridge is adorned with 29 bronze sculptures of notable historical figures, including poets, musicians, and revolutionaries, enhancing its artistic focus.





The Bridge of Civilisations In Macedonia

The Bridge of Civilisations In Macedonia was built in 2013. It symbolizes the civilizations that lived and developed on this territory. The statues erected on the bridge represent distinguished individuals from Macedonian and world history. Numerous significant and invaluable archaeological finds, dating from the time of their reign, have been discovered on the territory of the present-day Republic of Macedonia. Many of these artifacts, which represent the depth of Macedonian history and the spirit of the time when these individuals reigned, are displayed in the Archaeological Museum of Macedonia, which can be reached via this bridge.

The Bridge of Civilisations

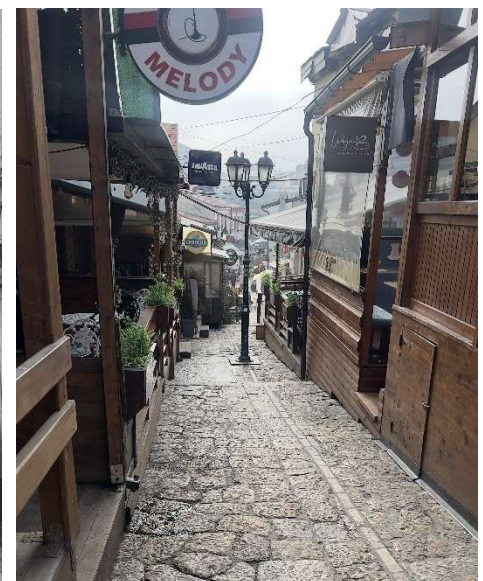
The Bridge of Civilisations was completed a year later in 2013 and crosses the Vardar River leading directly to the Archaeological Museum. The bridge's design combines contemporary aesthetics with influences from various historical periods. It also features 28 statues of significant figures in Macedonian history such as kings, warriors and priests. The intention is to celebrate the coexistence of distinct cultures, religions, and ethnicities in Macedonia.





The Old Bazaar

The Old Bazaar (Stara Čaršija) in Skopje is one of the oldest bazaars in the Balkans and dates back to around the 12th century. The area is well signposted and features narrow streets, traditional shops, historic mosques and a large (and busy) assortment of cafés and teahouses. The Old Bazaar is situated on the eastern bank of the Vardar River, and you will need to pass through it if you are making your way to the Fortress by foot.



Skopje Fortress (Kale Fortress)



Skopje Fortress (which is also known as the Kale from the Turkish word for fortress) is situated at the highest point of the city overlooking the Vardar River.

The site of the fortress dates back to at least the 6th century BC and underwent significant developments during the Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman eras.

With the decline of the Ottoman Empire, the fortress faced neglect but was partially restored in the 20th century and is now open to the public who can wander around and enjoy the stunning views of the cityscape, river and distant mountains.

On a clear day you can even see the Millennium Cross on top of Vodno Mountain. The cross was built to commemorate 2,000 years of Christianity in Macedonia. Unfortunately, today was not a clear day

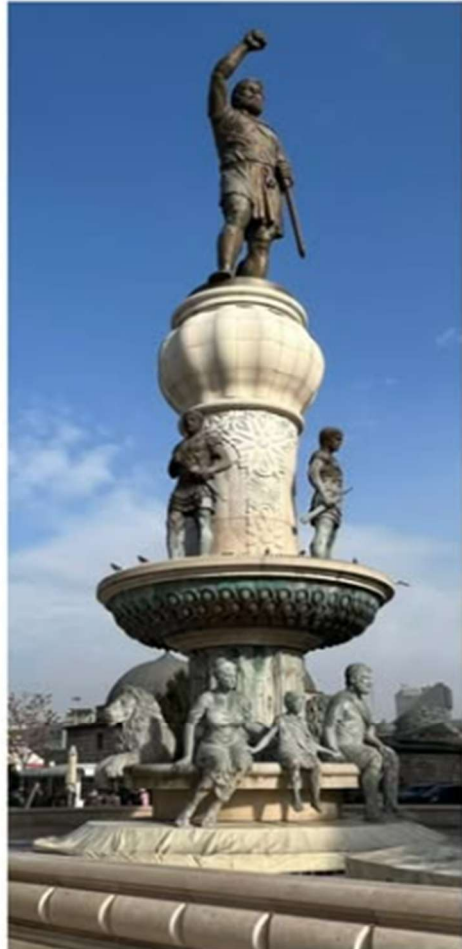




Macedonia Square

Macedonia Square is located at the centre of the city and is the biggest in North Macedonia covering an area of 18,500 square metres which is about four times the size of Piccadilly Circus in London..... I worked that out myself!!!

The square is also famously known for its impressive monuments including the massive statue of Alexander the Great, which serves as a focal point for visitors. In fact, statues are a big thing around Skopje, and you will find them at every turn.



Macedonia Gate

Macedonia Gate, also known as Porta Macedonia, is a triumphal arch in central Skopje. The arch is covered in marble reliefs depicting episodes and figures from Macedonian history. The arch was completed to mark 20 years of independence from Yugoslavia and to establish a visible symbol of statehood in the city centre. Inside the structure, there are stairways and an elevator leading to a platform offering good views across central Skopje.

The monument is quite controversial and faced strong criticism over cost, aesthetics and political sensitivity. Supporters saw it as an expression of national pride and a way of celebrating the country's cultural heritage while architects condemned its style as tacky and incoherent while others argued that its nationalist narrative marginalised the country's large Albanian minority who make up about 25% of the population.



Holocaust Memorial Centre



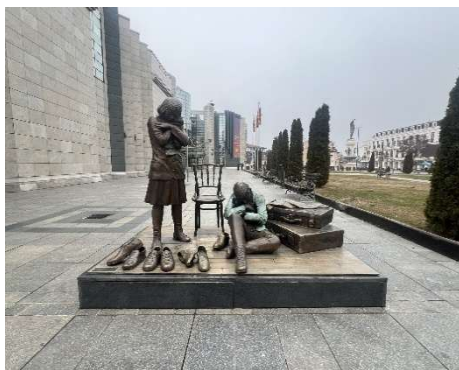
The Holocaust Memorial Centre for the Jews of Macedonia was officially opened in 2011. Its aims were to preserve the memory of the Jewish victims who perished during the Holocaust and educate the public about the history of the Jewish community in North Macedonia.

The centre tells the history of the sizable Jewish population who moved to the area following their expulsion from Spain in 1492. It ends by honouring the 7000 Jews from Skopje who were deported to the Nazi extermination camp in Treblinka in 1943.

The exhibition includes historical artefacts, photos and personal stories from survivors and victims alongside monuments and plaques paying tribute to the Macedonian Jewish community and the individuals who were lost during this time.

The centre is not widely publicised and does not appear under the heading of tourist attractions. However, this is one of the best Holocaust centres that I visited. It is educational, informing and extremely moving. It stands as a solemn reminder of the dangers of hatred, intolerance and discrimination.

If you ever happen to visit Skopje, then please add this to your list of places to visit.





Reflection

I cannot deny that I was a bit disappointed not to be heading for a sunny coast. However, Skopje has its own advantages in terms of beautiful countryside and the Vardar River with its amazing bridges. If sculptures and statues fascinate you then this is definitely the place to visit with a surprise around every corner.

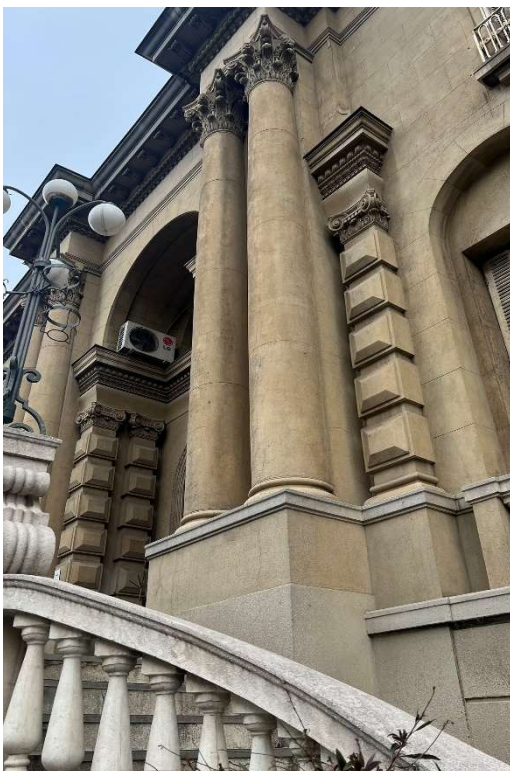
Skopje is very compact and the main tourist attractions are a short walk from the city centre. Some of the buildings are reminiscent of the days of communism but inside (like Warsaw) they are warm and inviting especially the restaurants, cafes and bars.

There is a good balance between the old and the new and much evidence of rebuilding supported through the EU and the country's desire for EU membership. Skopje has a thriving arts scene including a modern theatre and the National Opera and Ballet.

If you are new to exploring capital cities then this is probably not the first stop but if you're running out of places to go then you'll find a trip worthwhile, interesting and educational.

Chapter 4: Belgrade

The pictures below offer a clue to my next destination, and my airline ticket tells me that I will be flying into Belgrade Nikola Tesla Airport. I did check out the link between Nikola Tesla and Tesla Motors and there is no direct relationship between them other than the car company was named after the Serbian-American scientist.



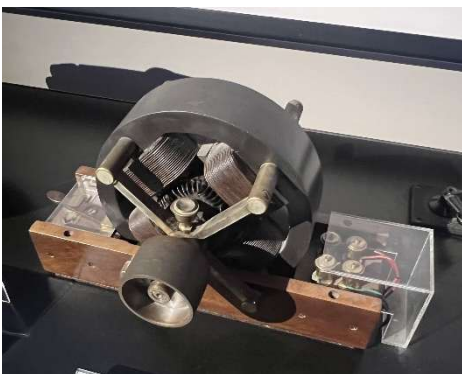
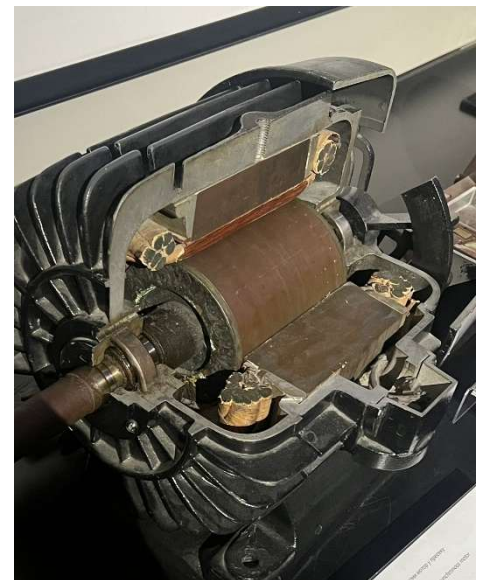
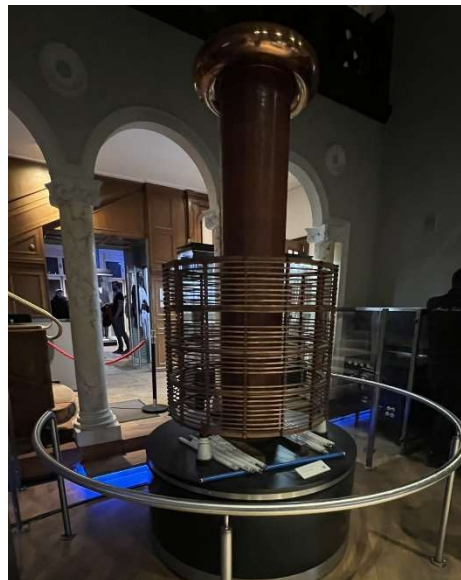
Nikola Tesla Museum

Nikola Tesla was an ethnic Serb born in the village of Smiljan, which was part of the Austrian Empire at the time of his birth in 1856. Today, Smiljan is located in Croatia, so his heritage is a topic of much discussion and argument between the two countries who both celebrate him for his contributions to science, engineering and electricity.

The Nikola Tesla Museum was established in Belgrade in 1952 and is dedicated to Tesla's life and work. The museum houses a significant collection of Tesla's original documents, patents, photographs and personal items, as well as various models and demonstrations of his inventions. One of its main attractions is the Tesla coil highlighting his work with high-voltage electricity.

In spite of the disagreement about his heritage, Nikola Tesla spent most of his life in the United States. He immigrated to the US in 1884, where he initially worked for Thomas Edison before going on to establish his own laboratory and develop his own inventions. Tesla died and was buried in the US in 1943 but subsequently cremated so his ashes might be returned home.

In 1957 his remains were returned to Belgrade at the request of his nephew. Today, his ashes are contained in an urn in the shape of a sphere housed in the museum although even that is the centre of much controversy as the Serbian Orthodox church wants his remains to be moved to the Temple of St Sava and reburied alongside other national heroes.



The Temple of St Sava



The Temple of Saint Sava, or Hram Svetog Save, is one of the largest Orthodox churches in the world especially by virtue of its volume as it accommodates approximately 10,000 worshippers. The temple is dedicated to Saint Sava, the founder of the Serbian Orthodox Church.

The construction of the temple began in 1935, and it was built on the site where the remains of Saint Sava were allegedly burned by the Ottomans in 1595. The church incorporates elements of Byzantine and Serbian medieval architecture.

The interior of the temple features the most beautiful mosaics and frescoes covering scenes from the life of Christ, saints, and the history of the Serbian Church. The temple is a popular tourist destination by virtue of its architectural beauty and historical significance as well as the fact that it dominates the city's skyline.



Saint Marks Orthodox Church

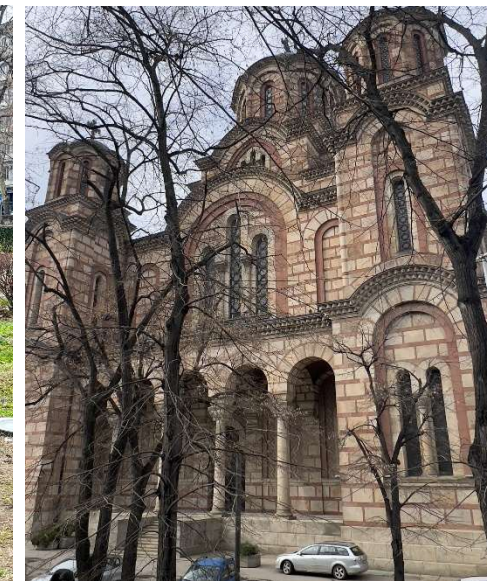


It was a shame that I had visited the Temple of Saint Sava first because this beautiful Orthodox Church somewhat paled in comparison. Saint Mark's Orthodox Church, or Crkva Svetog Marka, was built between 1931 and 1940, and is located in Tašmajdan Park next door the parliament buildings.

The church is dedicated to Saint Mark the Evangelist and has considerable historical significance since it was the site of many momentous events in Serbian history, including state funerals and religious ceremonies. Inside the atmosphere is serene and peaceful and a lot less busy than the one I previously described.

Immediately next door to the door to Saint Mark's is the much smaller Church of the Holy Trinity which is also called the Russian Church as it was associated with refugees from Soviet Russia who arrived in Serbia from 1920 following the defeat of the White Army in the Russian Civil War.

Tašmajdan Park is less of a tourist spot and more of an area for locals to get together and enjoy the peace and quiet of a beautiful park. The park was once the city's main graveyard but back in Roman times it was a quarry famous for its white Tašmajdan limestone. It was these white stones that led to the name Beligrad or 'White City.'



Public transport in Belgrade

Public transport in Belgrade, including buses, trolley buses and trams, was free of charge at the time of my visit but may have changed since then, so please check as I don't want to get sued for spreading incorrect information.

Fortunately, the vast majority of the transport which I used was not in such a bad state of repair as this particular tram.



PS Belgrade was not the first city in Europe to offer free public transport as you will know if you visit Luxembourg. I understand that Estonia has now stopped free public transport when they realised that it did not result in a decrease in traffic congestion. ...but please check on arrival rather than take my word.



The Old Palace

The Old Palace, known as the Stari Dvor in Serbian, is a historic building which served as the royal residence for the Obrenović dynasty in the 19th century. Built between 1882 and 1884, the Old Palace showcases a neo-Renaissance style and features ornate decorative elements, including elaborate stone carvings and beautiful stained glass.

The Old Palace is situated next door to the New Court which was originally intended as the residence of the Royal family. The building underwent major renovations and presently houses the administration for the president of the Republic of Serbia. The neighbouring Old Palace houses various government offices and cultural institutions.

The Royal Palace (which was closed when I visited) is situated out of town next door to the American Embassy. It is still used for official state functions and ceremonies.



Belgrade Fortress

Belgrade Fortress, known as Kalemegdan in Serbian, is a historic fortress located next to the River Danube. It is a popular tourist attraction, and I'm not surprised when I get there because there is plenty to see and plenty to do..... including watching the sun go down over New Belgrade

The fortress dates back to ancient times, with its origins traced to the Celtic and Roman periods. Over the centuries, it has been rebuilt and expanded by various empires, including the Byzantine, Ottoman, and Austrian-Hungarian empires. The fortress features a mix of different architectural styles reflecting its long and complex history.

Kalemegdan Park is located inside the fortress along with such other landmarks such as the Royal Gate, Sahat (meaning Clock) Tower and the Victor Monument commemorating the Serbian victories in the Balkan Wars and World War I..... although it did endure losses in the Yugoslav Wars, particularly in conflicts with Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo.

Entrance to the fort is completely free and this is a beautiful place to relax and watch the sunset on your last day in Belgrade.



Cathedral Church of Saint Michael



The Cathedral Church of Saint Michael the Archangel, known as the Saborna Crkva, serves as the cathedral for the Serbian Orthodox Church's Archdiocese of Belgrade-Karlovci. Construction of the cathedral began in 1837 and was completed in 1840, although it was not officially consecrated until 1845.

The church is notable for its bell tower, which rises prominently above the city and was what originally attracted me to go and investigate as it was not on my list of attractions. Anyway, I was glad that I did. I was not disappointed with my close-up view of this beautiful cathedral and would definitely recommend a visit if you're anywhere near the Fortress.



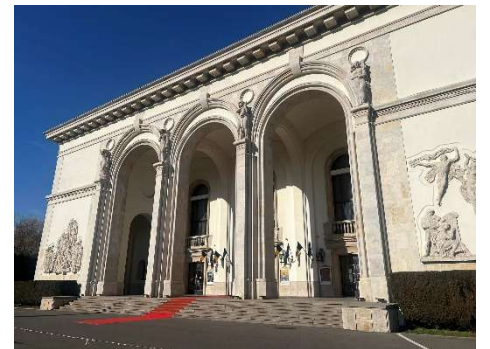
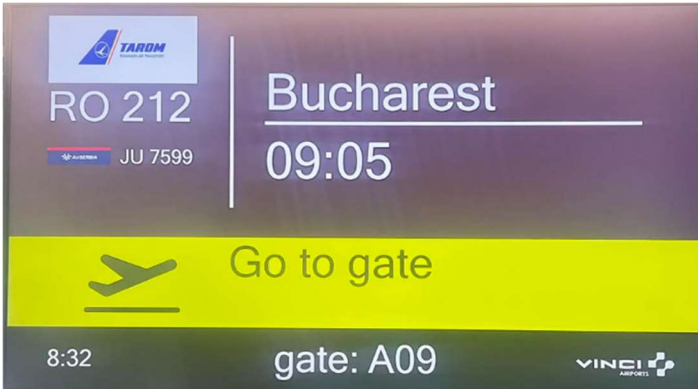
Reflection

Well Belgrade has been an interesting stopover with a lot more to see than I had originally thought. I enjoyed my visit to the Nikola Tesla Museum, loved Saint Sava Temple and thought Belgrade fortress was an excellent way to end my time here.

Public transport allowed me to get around the city quite easily. You do need to know that this city is not a great fan of credit cards so unless you've got cash (and you don't need a lot of it) then you can be really stuck at times.

Chapter 5: Bucharest

I'm just about to board my next flight which is headed for Bucharest in Romania. The last time I visited this city was in 1973 when I was interrailing around Europe. The only thing I can honestly remember was all the bullet marks in the walls so I'm hoping this experience might prove to be better. We will see.



The Palace of the Parliament



First stop is the Palace of the Parliament which is a gigantic and imposing building, often considered to be one of the largest administrative buildings in the world. This massive building was designed to accommodate the government institutions of Romania.

The building is big and brash and not untypical of others constructed under the regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu intending to demonstrate the power and grandeur of his regime. The construction of the palace began in 1984, and it took almost 13 years to complete and resulted in the demolition of many historic buildings in the city centre. The building has over 1100 rooms spread over 10 floors accounting for 365,000 square meters or 3.7 million square feet!!!

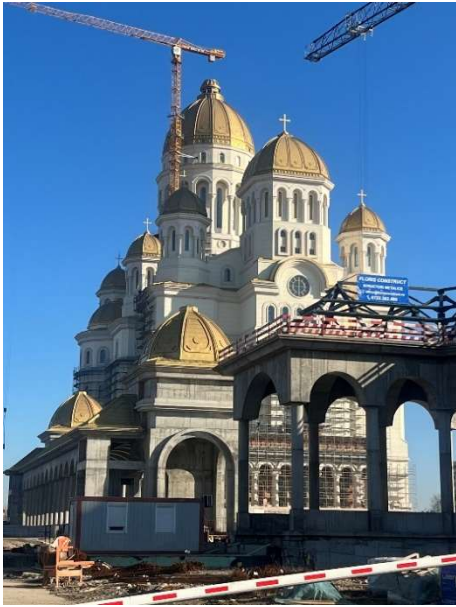


While the building is an architectural marvel, its construction came at a great cost to the people of Romania. The Ceaușescu regime diverted resources from the country's citizens to fund this massive project, contributing to significant shortages of food, energy, and housing.

The structure itself is seen by many as a symbol of the excesses and authoritarianism of the communist regime.



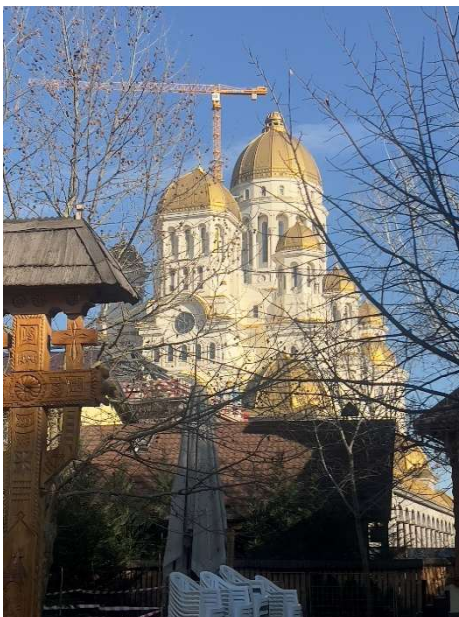
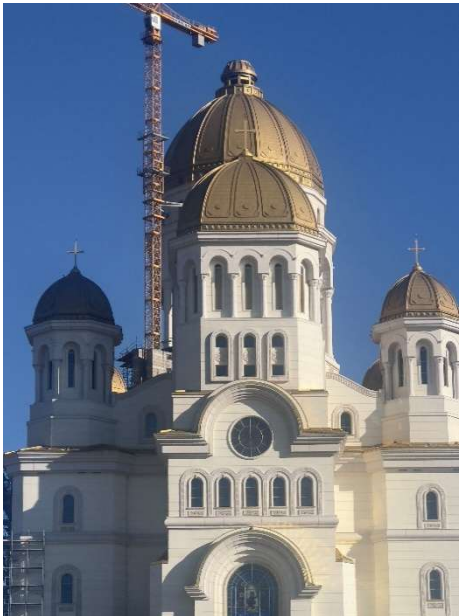
People's Salvation Cathedral



The People's Salvation Cathedral (Catedrala Mântuirii Neamului) is situated next door to the Palace of the Parliament. This Orthodox cathedral has been designed to be the largest religious building in Romania with a planned height of 120 meters (about 394 feet) and a surface area of around 13,000 square meters (approximately 140,000 square feet). the area of St. Paul's Cathedral is 59,700 square feet.

The project was initiated by the Romanian Orthodox Church and the state, with the aim of providing a grand spiritual centre for the Romanian Orthodox community. The construction of the People's Salvation Cathedral started in 2010 with no exact date set for its completion.

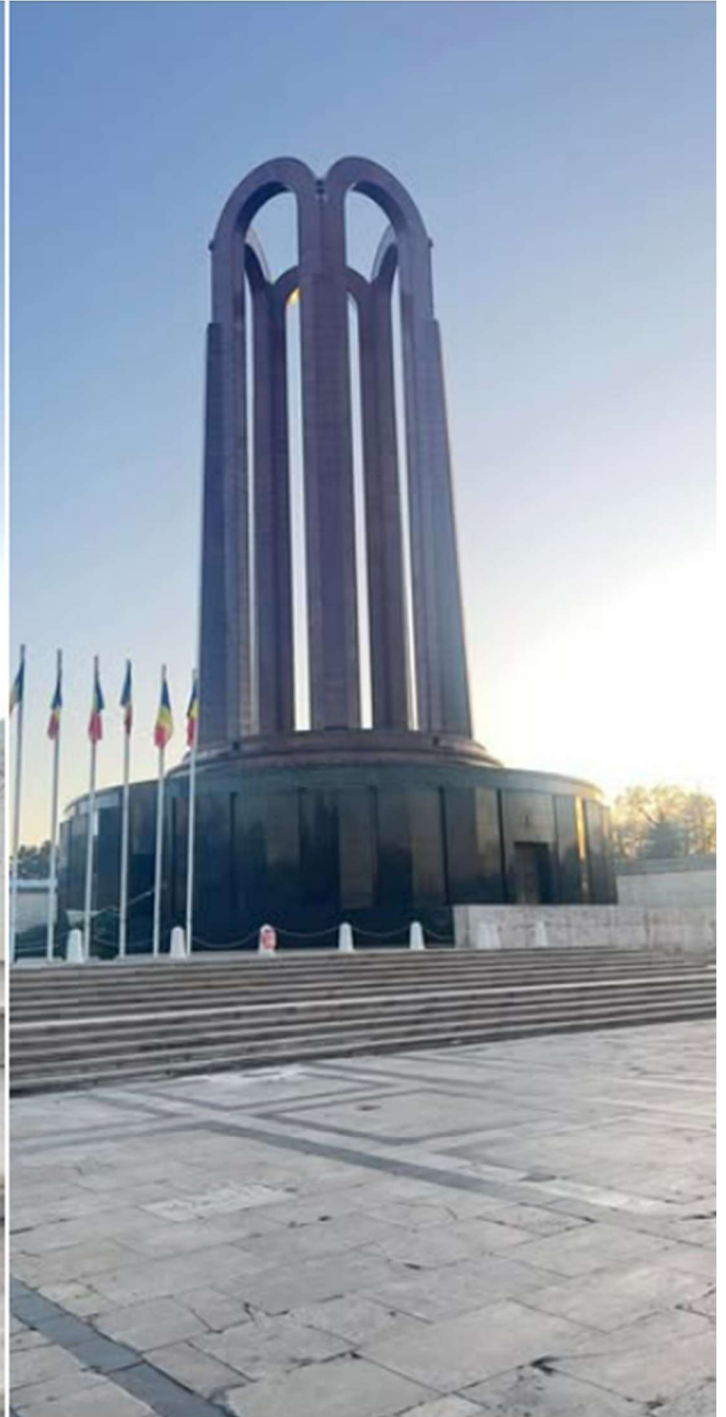
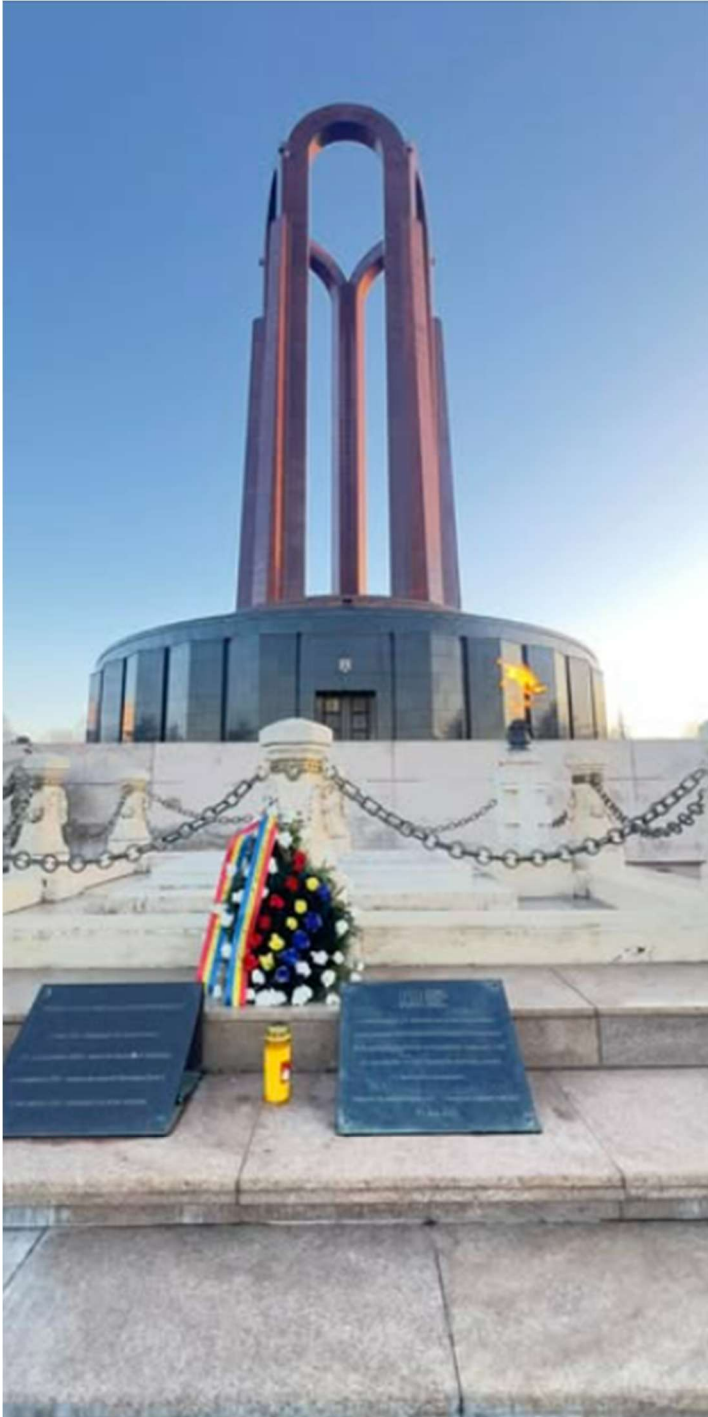
The construction of the People's Salvation Cathedral has been met with mixed reactions. While it is seen by some as a symbol of national pride and faith, others have raised concerns about the cost of the project (partially subsidised by the government) especially in a country where there are still issues with poverty and public services.



The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier

The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Bucharest is a solemn and moving site dedicated to honouring the memory of Romanian soldiers who died in battle during World War I, World War II, and other conflicts, without their identities ever being known.

The monument was unveiled on October 30, 1923, and was initially built to honour the Romanian soldiers who fell in World War I. The tomb itself is simple but sufficiently symbolises the sacrifice made by countless soldiers as well as serving as a reminder of the futility and the cost of war.



Former Ceaușescu Residence

Nicolae Ceaușescu (1918–1989) was a Romanian communist politician and dictator who led Romania from 1965 until his overthrow and execution in 1989. His rule was marked by increasing authoritarianism, entrenched corruption, economic mismanagement and human rights abuses.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Ceaușescu implemented disastrous economic policies leading to severe shortages of food, fuel, and basic necessities, while he invested heavily in grandiose projects like the Palace of the Parliament** (Casa Poporului) and lived in absolute luxury with his wife and three children.

By the late 1980s, discontent with Ceaușescu's regime had reached a boiling point, highlighted by the fall of other communist regimes across Eastern Europe. In December 1989, Ceaușescu and his wife attempted to flee but were captured by the military and executed for crimes including corruption, genocide and abuse of power.

Ceaușescu and his wife Elena lived in multiple residences during their rule, but the Ceaușescu family's official residence was located in a lavish villa built for them in the 1960s. The villa is an extravagant display of Ceaușescu's wealth and his total disregard for the struggles of ordinary Romanians.



The inside of the villa is a veritable treasure trove of high-end living. The furnishings, the fabrics, the wall decorations and the carpets are unbelievably exquisite and it's hard to appreciate that you're walking around the house of a communist leader. Everything is exactly how it was when they left.

The villa is the very height of opulence with an extensive reception, balconied bedrooms and more cupboard space than I have seen in a lifetime. Elena's wardrobe space is full to capacity with clothes, shoes and handbags ranging from Dior to Chanel and everything in between.



The residence had a variety of lavish rooms with high-end materials like marble, gold-plated fixtures and rare wood panels. The swimming pool is exquisite with its extensive mosaic containing over one million pieces. There was also a helicopter pad and other amenities showcasing their extravagant lifestyle.

Photography inside the building is forbidden, but I've collected some royalty free photographs so I can get an idea of exactly what it was like to live in such splendour.



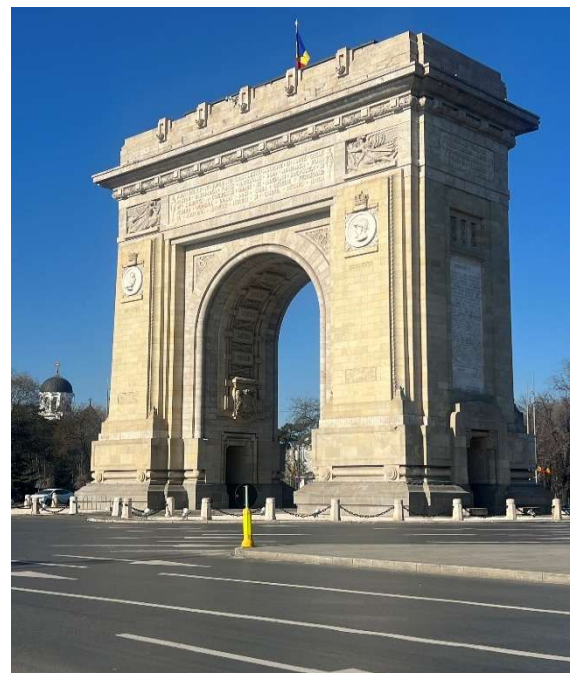


The Triumphal Arch

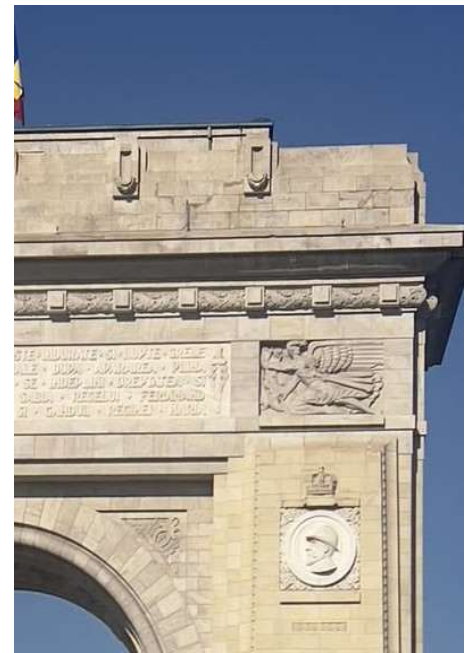
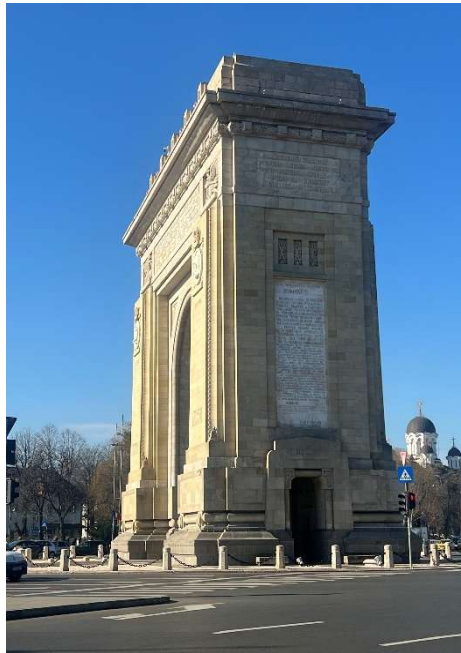
The Triumphal Arch (Arcul de Triumf) is an iconic monument commemorating Romania's victories especially those of World War I. The first version of the Arch was erected in 1922 it was only intended as a temporary structure. However, it proved to be popular and significant, so the decision was made to build a more permanent structure.

The current stone arch was built between 1935 and 1936 and designed by architect Petre Antonescu. It is made from reinforced concrete and covered with granite and stone, giving it the majestic, durable appearance that stands today. It features four large pillars adorned with sculptures depicting important moments from Romania's military history.

The Triumphal Arch also serves as the site of military parades and national celebrations, particularly on Romania's National Day (December 1st), when large military processions pass under the arch. It is also a place for reflection as you wait for the next 205 bus.



Triumphal arches are common symbols of victory and national pride, and many countries have built them to commemorate military victories, significant leaders, or important historical events. Unfortunately, the internet cannot tell me exactly how many but don't forget the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, the Arch of Constantine in Rome, and the India Gate in New Delhi.....to name but a few.....plus, of course, our very own Marble Arch in London.

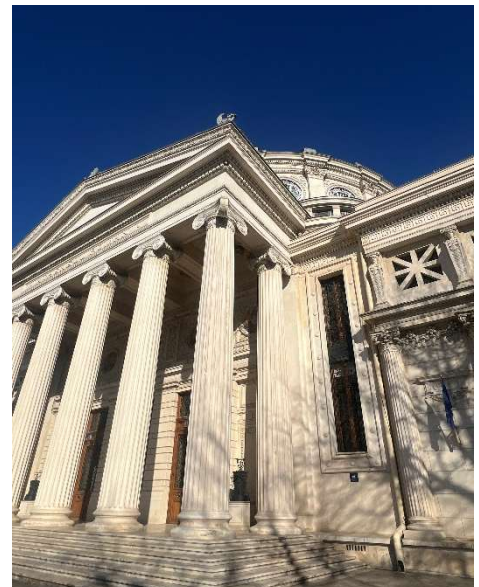


Romanian Athenaeum

The impressive and spectacular Romanian Athenaeum (Ateneul Român) was started in 1886 and finally finished in 1888. The building was originally intended to be a Greek-style temple dedicated to the goddess Athena, symbolizing the importance of culture and education.

The Athenaeum was funded entirely through donations provided, for the most part, by Romanian people. Today, the building is the home of the George Enescu Philharmonic Orchestra, named after Romania's most famous composer and conductor.

The exterior of the building is characterised by sculptures representing figures from Romanian history. I read that the interior is just as impressive with a concert hall seating 800 people although I can confirm none of thisbecause the place was closed at the time of my visit.



Revolution Square



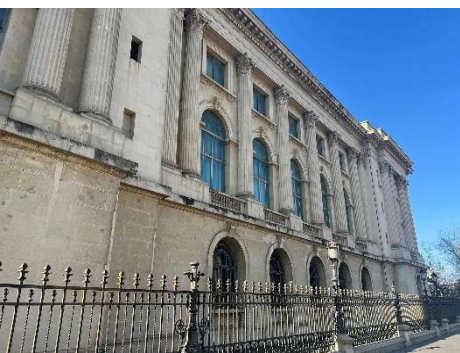
Revolution Square (Piața Revoluției) is a historically significant public square located in the heart of the city. The square includes the Romanian Athenaeum, the Central University Library and the controversial Memorial of Rebirth which was erected in 2005 to commemorate the 1058 victims of the 1989 revolution.

The square was originally called Palace Square (Piața Palatului) during the communist era and was the site of Nicolae Ceaușescu's final speech on December 21, 1989. His speech was met with widespread protests, marking the beginning of the Romanian Revolution culminating in Ceaușescu's overthrow and execution.

Nicolae Ceaușescu and Elena Ceaușescu, were executed on December 25, 1989, following a swift trial conducted by a hastily assembled military tribunal. The trial lasted only a couple of hours. The couple was charged with genocide (for the deaths of protesters) as well as economic mismanagement and illegally gathering wealth.

After being found guilty, the Ceaușescus were taken to an outside courtyard, tied to a wall and shot by a firing squad. The entire event was filmed, and the footage was later broadcast on Romanian television and internationally to confirm their deaths and symbolise the end of their regime.

The last few pictures show the former Communist Party Headquarters and the balcony where Ceaușescu delivered his final speech in a desperate attempt to reinstate his authority.



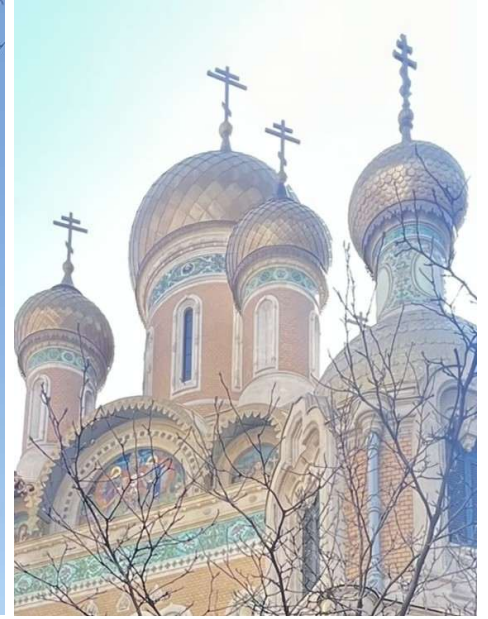
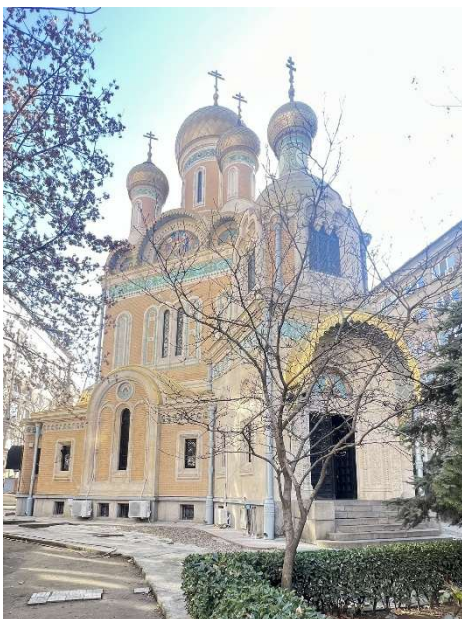


Russian Church

Close to where I was staying in the city, I came across the Church of St. Nicholas, commonly known as the Russian Church. It is one of Bucharest's most distinctive landmarks located on Strada Ion Ghica near University Square. The church was built between 1905 and 1909 by the Russian Imperial Court to serve the city's Russian community and the staff of the Russian Embassy.

The church is a fine example of the Russian Revival style, characterized by its seven gilded onion domes topped with Orthodox crosses, which make it instantly recognizable in the heart of Bucharest. The building's exterior features intricate brickwork and decorative details inspired by medieval Russian architecture, while the interior is richly adorned with frescoes, icons, and an ornate iconostasis.

Although originally constructed for the Russian Orthodox Church, it was later transferred to the Romanian Orthodox Church, which continues to maintain and use it today. Despite its modest size, the Russian Church stands as a vivid reminder of the historical and cultural links between Romania and Russia, and remains a peaceful, atmospheric spot amid the bustle of central Bucharest.





Church of the "Stavropoleos" Monastery

The Church of the "Stavropoleos" Monastery (Biserica Mănăstirii Stavropoleos) is a beautiful Eastern Orthodox church located in the Old Town area of Bucharest. It is one of the city's most architecturally significant religious sites and is renowned for its rich history and spiritual importance.

The church was built in 1724 and was originally part of a larger monastery complex. The name 'Stavropoleo' derives from the Greek words stauros (cross) and polis (city) meaning 'The City of the Cross.'

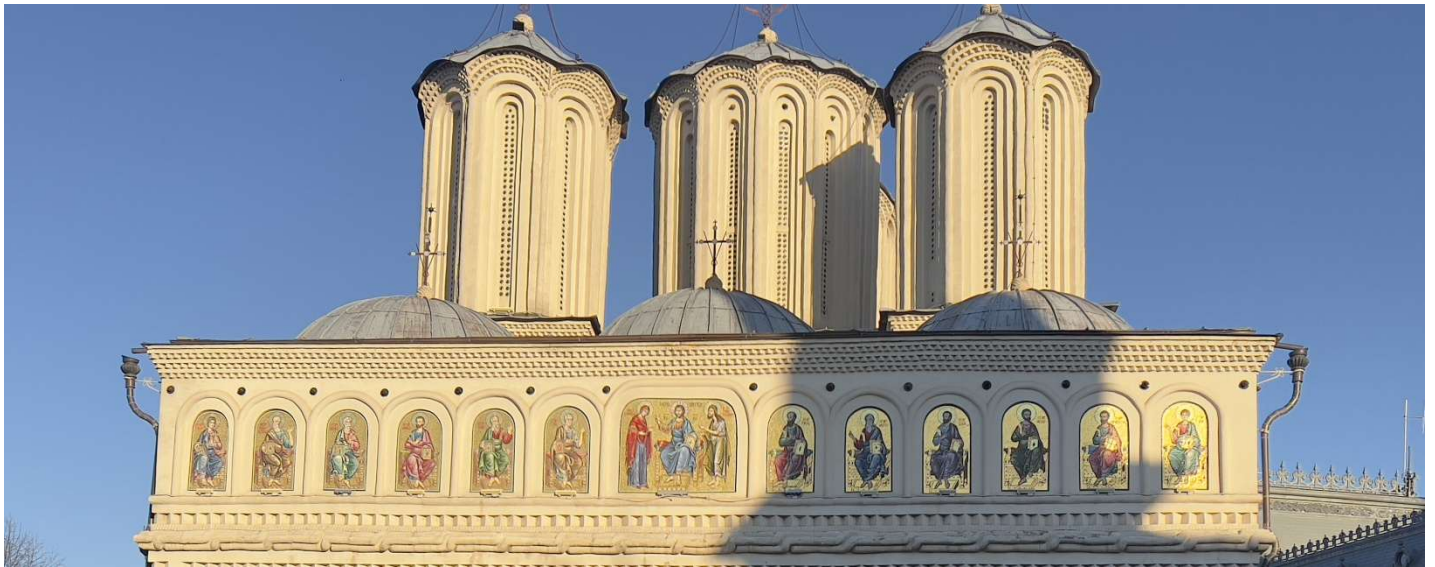
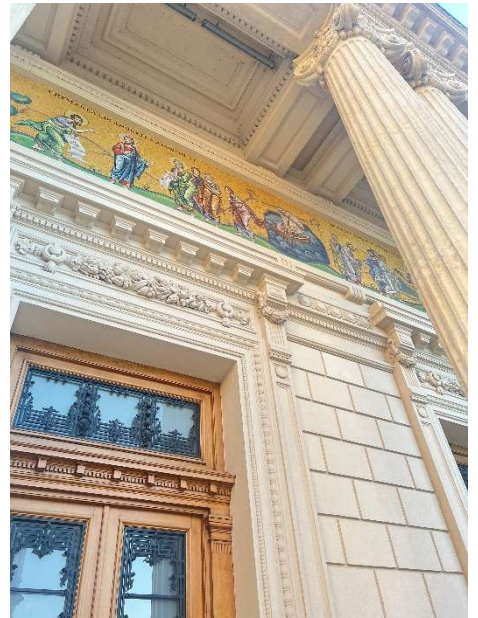
The exterior is adorned with intricate floral and geometric patterns, while the interior is richly decorated with iconography and frescoes depicting various biblical scenes. The church is still an active monastery, with a small community of nuns who maintain the site and participate in daily religious services.



Patriarchal Cathedral:

The Patriarchal Cathedral is located on a hill in the Dealul Mitropoliei area of Bucharest. The cathedral was originally constructed in 1655 but has undergone multiple renovations and expansions since then. The cathedral is the seat of the Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church and a major destination for pilgrims, especially during major religious holidays like Easter and Christmas.

Although the People's Salvation Cathedral will eventually surpass it in size once completed, the Patriarchal Cathedral remains a central religious and cultural symbol in Bucharest.



Farewell and the 385 bus

Describing Bucharest is a bit like defining an enigma. The city is a veritable potpourri mixing elegant, fashionable and sophisticated with dowdy, derelict and concrete. I can fully understand why they call this little Paris as I would probably say the same about that city. Regardless there is plenty to see and plenty to learn about.

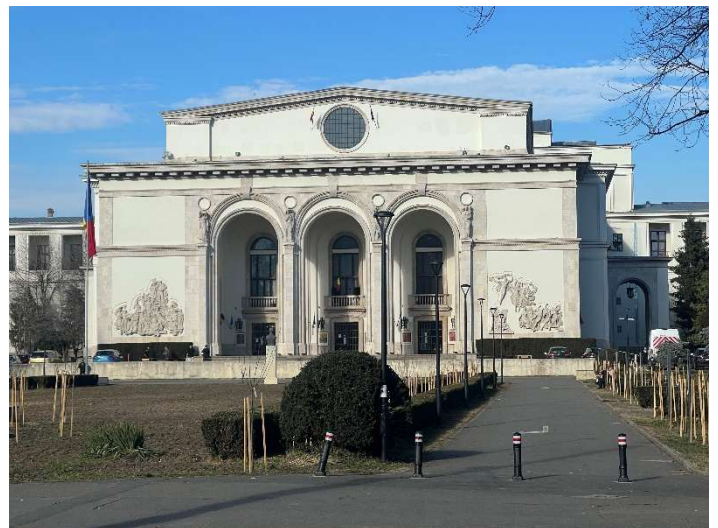
It is evident that Bucharest is a university city..... nothing much happening before midday and all hell let loose until 2 o'clock in the morning. The city is host to over 32000 students and a growing number of international students. I quite enjoyed my stay here and would certainly visit again..... if I am not banned from the place for my Facebook comments.

Unfortunately, my stopover in Bucharest was somewhat marred by the fact that I nearly got arrested for fare evasion (or fare aversion as my autocorrect insists on calling it). As my bank account will testify, I have been using my Visa card regularly when using public transport. Unfortunately, on one 385 bus, my card was declined and so was the rest of my collection of other cards.

I moved to the back of the bus where there was another validating machine and tried again but to no avail. While I was trying to access my Apple Pay account, I was approached by an officious little man with the word control emblazoned on his clothing. He tried my Visa card and, when it didn't work, he said I could pay a fine or he could call the police.

I didn't think I was ready to take on the Romanian police force, and he was in no mood to listen to any explanation, so I paid the fine and he gave me a ticket which he said I could use for the rest of the day. Interesting to note that my Visa card worked perfectly on his machine, although he would not accept that the problem might be with the machines on the bus.

The fine cost me £14.05 which doesn't seem an awful lot until you consider the fact that a single ticket anywhere would only cost me £0.53. I got my money's worth by travelling around on the buses for the rest of the evening, and I promise to keep you informed about the email I sent to the Societatea de Transport București public transport system and copied to the tourist office.



I nearly forgot to tell you my next stop is Chișinău in Moldova..... I have absolutely no idea what I'm letting myself in for here.

Chapter 6: Chişinău

Well, I have arrived in Chişinău (pronounced kee-shee-now) which is the capital of Moldova. The flight from Romania only took 50 minutes courtesy of HiFly which is a charter airline based in Portugal. Never heard of this airline and I'm not sure why a Portuguese airline would be flying back-and-forth between Romania and Moldova..... regardless, and in spite of the poor reviews, this airline was not so bad, and the seats were most comfortable.

The problem with Chişinău is that it is not much of a tourist destination, although it does have a tourist office. Regardless my research was hard-pushed to find any top 10 recommendations, and I really have to work hard to find 10! Anyway, I have my list organised although I'm not sure I'm going to say much about the destinations because there's not much said. My first stop is the Nativity Cathedral which is just across the road from where I'm staying.



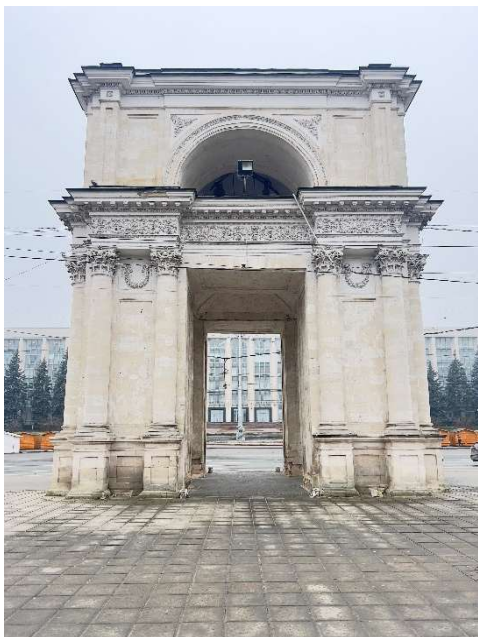
The Nativity Cathedral and Bell Tower

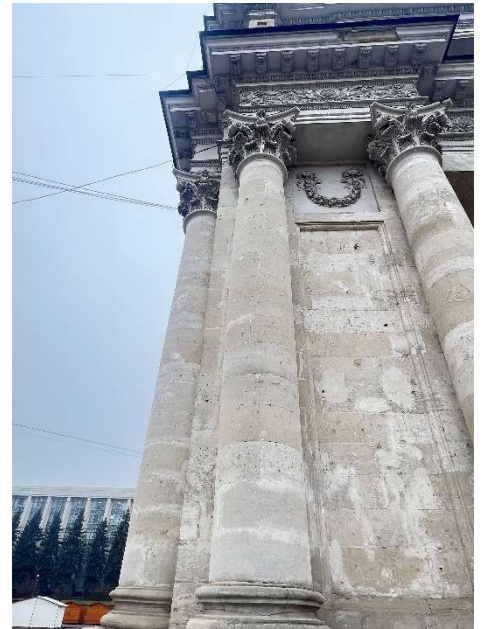
The Nativity Cathedral or the Catedrala Nașterea Domnului is located in Cathedral Park. The church was built between 1830 and 1836 and dedicated to the Nativity of Christ. The church reflects the rich artistic heritage of the Orthodox Church. The Bell Tower of this cathedral stands separately and was constructed between 1835 and 1840. It originally housed several bells, which were used to call the faithful to worship.



Triumphal Arch

The Triumphal Arch is situated close to the Nativity Cathedral in Cathedral Park. It was built between 1840 and 1843, to commemorate the victory of the Russian Empire in the Russo-Turkish War (1828-1829). This particular arch is much smaller than the one I spoke about in Bucharest. It is made of white stone with a simple, yet elegant design incorporating columns and reliefs celebrating military achievements. The arch even includes a clock adding a functional aspect to the design.

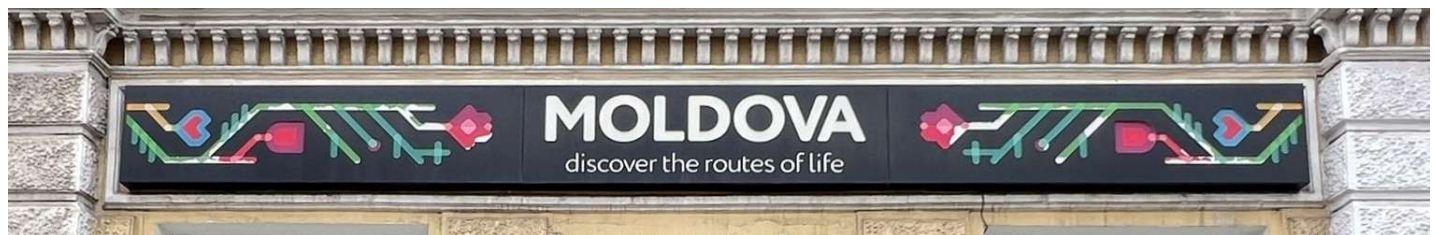
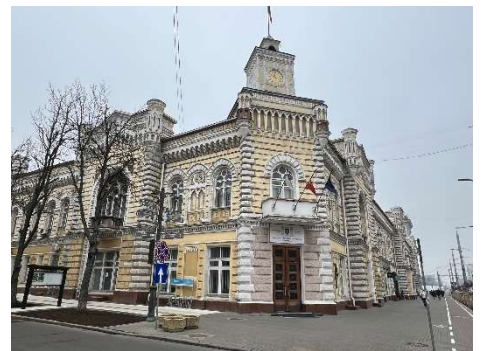




Chişinău City Hall



Chişinău City Hall is a historical and architectural monument built in the Italian Gothic style and located in the centre of Chişinău. The building was designed by Alexander Bernardazzi and originally constructed in 1901 but destroyed by retreating Soviet troops in 1941. The building was rebuilt in 1944 but months later the building was severely damaged in World War II. It was rebuilt again making use of surviving images and construction plans. The building additionally houses the Tourist Information Office although I never saw anyone making use of it while I was there.



Stephen the Great Monument

The Stephen the Great Monument is dedicated to Stephen the Great (Ștefan cel Mare) who ruled as the Voivode (Prince) of Moldavia from 1457 to 1504. He is celebrated for successfully defending the principality against external threats, particularly from the Ottoman Empire. His reign is often regarded as a golden age for Moldova, marked by cultural and economic growth.

The monument is located across the road from Cathedral Park in front of a park which also carries his name. The monument was unveiled in 1928 and features a bronze statue of Stephen the Great in a noble and commanding stance.....but definitely not on horseback as my tourist information insists. The monument stands as a powerful reminder of Moldova's history and one of Moldova's (many) national heroes.



National institutions.....

The National Library of Moldova, the National Museum of Art of Moldova (also known as the National Museum of Fine Arts), the National Museum of History of Moldova, and the National Palace are four distinct institutions representing Moldova's cultural infrastructure. They are situated in close proximity to one another and represent 'complementary dimensions of cultures and heritage; the library for texts, the museums for art and history and the palace for live culture and public events. Elsewhere (although I didn't find it on my travels), there is a third national museum identified as the National Museum of Ethnography & Natural History.

The National Library of Moldova

The National Library of Moldova, as its name suggests, is the main state library for Moldova and is the repository for the country's written and printed cultural heritage which includes books, manuscripts, publications, etc. The library's origins go back to 1832, when it was founded as the Gubernatorial Public Library of Bessarabia under the Russian Empire.

The building was constructed in the late 19th century and has survived occupation and political reorganisation. The library houses millions of items including rare manuscripts, early Moldovan publications, newspapers, maps, photographs, and an extensive foreign-language collection that reflects Moldova's long, hybrid cultural history.



National Museum of Art of Moldova (National Museum of Fine Arts)



The National Museum of Fine Arts of Moldova is also known by various other names using the words National, Art, Museum and Moldova in any particular order with or without the word Fine..... sorry I digress but it is rather confusing if everyone, including the tourist board, calls the same building by a totally different name.

Anyway, the National Museum of Fine Arts of Moldova was founded in 1939 and is located in three neighbouring buildings dating back to the end of the 19th century. The Kligman House, Hertza House and the Dadiani Headquarters (from left to right) have had something of a chequered history and were in an advanced state of decay when they were taken over by the museum.



National Museum of History of Moldova

The National Museum of History of Moldova (Muzeul Național de Istorie a Moldovei) is a cultural anchor telling the story of the land from prehistory to modern times. The museum was previously known as the Republican Museum of Military Glory and the State Museum of History and Regional Studies. It has carried its present name since 1991. Today the museum holds an extensive collection of around 350,000 objects.

The current building occupies the site of the former Chișinău Boys' Gymnasium No. 1 and was later a Polytechnic Institute. In 1977, an earthquake caused irreparable damage and between 1980 and 1987 a new 2-storey building was built with twelve exhibition halls. In the museum's courtyard stands a replica of the famous Capitoline Wolf, symbolically linking Moldova's capital to the broader European heritage.



National Palace



This building was not mentioned in the tourist guidebook, but when you see a signpost which points towards the National Palace, you might wonder whether you're missing out on something. I was convinced that my satnav was playing me up when I was confronted with this building which I can only describe as a concrete monstrosity.

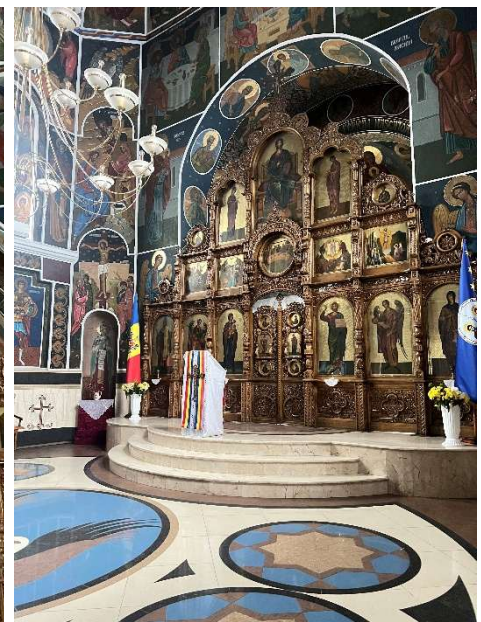
This 'National Palace' opened in 1974 on the 50th anniversary of the Communist Party of the Moldavian USSR. It was originally named the 'Octombrie Concert Hall' and was initially built as a miniature version of the Grand Kremlin Palace in Moscow. At the end of the Soviet era, the building was renamed in honour of the famous Moldavian folk singer called Nicolae Sulac.

The inside of the building had large windows, parquet flooring and marble everywhere with an auditorium of 2000 seats. The outside well, you can judge for yourself. I hope you enjoy my pictures of the National Palace in Chişinău.



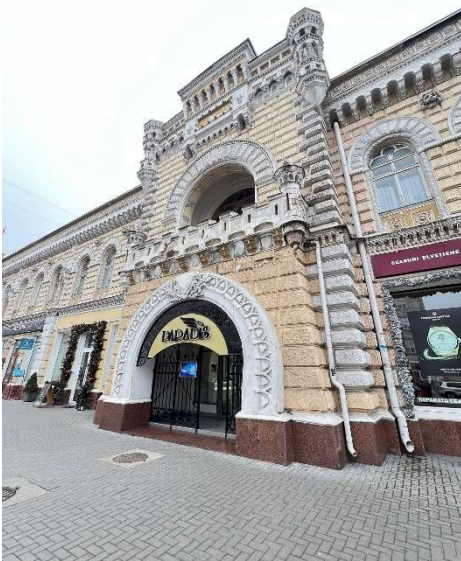
Saint Theodora of Sihla's Church

I stumbled across Saint Theodora of Sihla's Church completely by accident and I would definitely include this on the list of places to go and see. Saint Theodora of Sihla's Church is an eastern orthodox church and a former girl's school chapel which was built in 1895. The outside is beautiful and inside the walls are tastefully decorated. place. The architect of the church was Alexander Bernardazzi who was also responsible for Chişinău City Hall. At the time of my visit, the church was undergoing repairs to the dome on the roof.



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Central Market (Piaţa Centrală)

The largest market in the city is the Central Market (Piaţa Centrală), and if you are into shopping, then this is definitely the place for you to be. The market dates back to 1825 and the original wooden building was replaced by something more fireproof in 1887 following a municipal order. In 1941, in response to the likely occupation by the Nazis, the retreating Soviet troops blasted the whole place to stop it falling into enemy hands. After the war, the market was restored along with most of the rest of the city.



Water tower

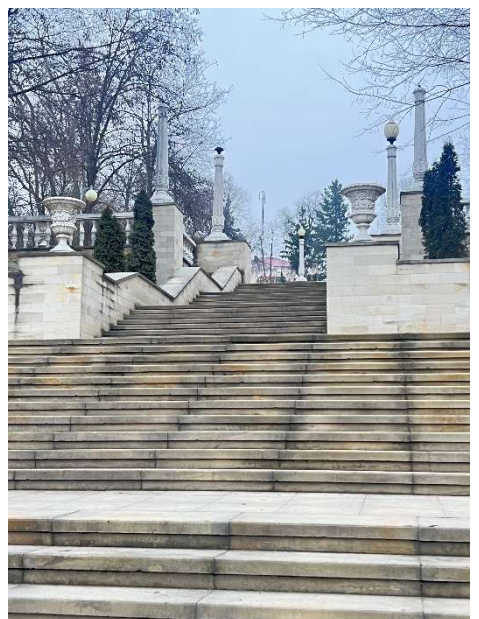
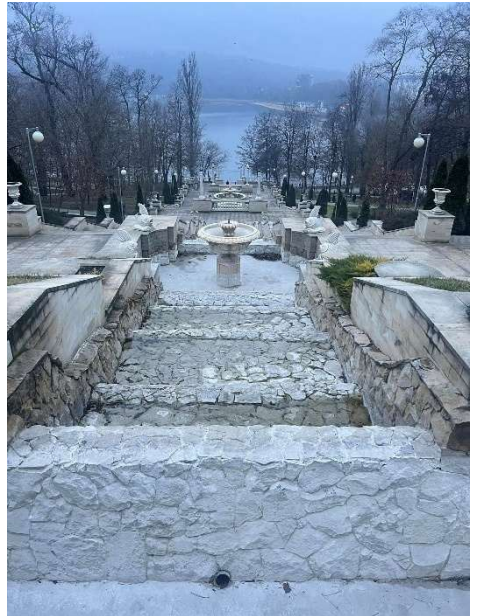
The Chişinău Water Tower (Turnul de apă din Chişinău) is another offering from architect Alexander Bernardazzi and was built towards the end of the 19th century. The tower was originally used to supply water to the city and consists of four floors which were originally accessed by an iron staircase but now by a lift. The upper level, which was made of wood, was destroyed in an earthquake and rebuilt between 1980 and 1983. The tower currently hosts Chişinău City Museum, and the upper level is a space for exhibitions and cultural events.



Cascades Staircase

The Cascades Staircase, also known as the Waterfall Staircase, is located in the Valley of the Mills Park and was built in 1925 and reconstructed in 1954. Following the collapse of the USSR, the staircase fell into disrepair and remained neglected until 2016 when it was restored relying on the limited pictures and sketches available in the archives.

There are 218 stairs to save you the bother of counting with numerous sculptures along the way to capture your interest. The area is peaceful and the views across the lake are stunning. This is definitely the place to take your loved one or anyone else with whom you are romantically involved. I would suggest a walk around the park and then up the stairs rather than the other way round.



Botanical Gardens (Grădina Botanică)

Winter is not the absolute best time to fully appreciate the botanical gardens here in Chișinău, but I thought it would be nice to find out more about this tourist attraction. The Chisinau Botanical Garden of the Academy of Sciences of Moldova is situated on the outskirts of Chisinau and can be reached by bus for the ticket price of 25 pence.

The gardens were established in 1950 by the Russian Academy of Science and relocated to the current location in 1964. The garden is spread over a vast area, with various sectors dedicated to distinct types of flora and fauna. Visitors can enjoy several beautifully landscaped areas including a rock garden and a rose garden as well as the four artificial lakes. The garden is home to several types of birds including 'wild ducks, blackbirds, and pigeons' according to my internet research.



Eternity Memorial Complex

Although I'm flying off to my next destination, I really wanted to see this place so managed to get myself up early and take a few photographs but apologies because the morning was quite foggy which only added to the atmosphere.

The memorial complex is situated a short bus ride away from the city centre. In Soviet times the complex was known as the Victory Memorial and was designed to honour the Soviet soldiers who died in the Great Patriotic War..... a term used to describe the conflict along the Eastern Front in World War II.

Central to the complex is the 25-meter-high pyramid, consisting of five bayonets, surrounding the eternal flame of memory, which has been burning continuously for several decades.



Chişinău in Moldova

I suspect that Chişinău will go down as one of my greatest surprises on this tour. I was a bit surprised when it came up on my list, but I had every intention of following the rules. I guess that I was somewhat prepared by my time in Skopje, Belgrade and Bucharest, but this place felt definitely different which I might best describe as Russia with a French accent.

The country makes use of the Roman alphabet which is adopted in 1989 to replace the existing Cyrillic alphabet. The use of English is not widespread but at least you can make some sense of some of the writing. Outside my window is a beautiful café called the Bonjour Cafe which serves delightful coffee and plays French music from morning to night.

The city has a tourist information board, and it has made some attempts to provide a website highlighting some of the city's tourist attractions. Signposts around the city highlight other destinations but tourism is not promoted or aligned. There is no overarching response to tourism and even Wikipedia misses too many things out.

I only hope that my contribution might be helpful should you decide to take the opportunity to visit.

Travelling by public transport is extremely cheap and there are some amazing shops, cafes, restaurants and bars. Food and drink, including alcoholic drink is cheap.... unbelievably cheap. The parks are beautiful and peaceful and (with the exception of the botanical gardens) completely free. Admissions to the majority of attractions are free or minimal..... you just have to find the places first and I am worried that I might have missed some of the best ones.

I would definitely come again to this place and next time hope to explore a bit more of the countryside. I am headed to the airport, and my next destination is Milanat least I am going in the right direction to get home!!!!



Chapter 7: Milan

Just arrived at Milan Malpensa Airport and was directed to this line when I offered my UK passport. As we are no longer in the EU or the EEA and my passport is not Swiss, then I guess I am now considered to be a third country national?



It's been a while since I was last in Milan...working. This place is renowned as the global capital of fashion and design; Milan blends timeless artistry with modern ambition. Milan thrives as a hub of creativity with futuristic skyscrapers and historic gems not to mention Milan Cathedral, the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II and La Scala opera house. It is so nice to be back.



Teatro alla Scala

Saturday morning and I'm off to the opera..... well not quite the opera but an opportunity to look round La Scala Opera House (Teatro alla Scala) which is reputed to be one of the world's most prestigious opera venues, renowned for its rich history, architectural grandeur and cultural significance.



The Opera house opened on August 3, 1778, replacing the Teatro Regio Ducale, which burned down. The name derives from the former Santa Maria alla Scala church which originally stood on the site. The Opera house was bombed in 1943 and was rebuilt and reopened in 1946 with a concert led by Arturo Toscanini.

The opera house has approximately 2,000 seats and is renowned as much for its patrons as it is for its performances. On the day of my visit, the staff were getting ready for a production of Falstaff which was taking place that evening. Needless to say, it was a full house, and the cheapest seats were £200.

TEATRO ALLA SCALA
(ENTE AUTONOMO)
STAGIONE 1925-26

DOMENICA 22 FEBBRAIO 1925 - alle ore 20,30 precise
PRIMA RAPPRESENTAZIONE
DI
AIDA

Musica di **GIUSEPPE VERDI**

ETTORE PANIZZA
Regista del Teatro: **VITTORIO VENIZIANI**
Regista della Scala: **VITTORIO VENIZIANI**
Regista della Scala: **VITTORIO VENIZIANI**
Regista della Scala: **VITTORIO VENIZIANI**

GIACCHINO FORZANO - **CARAMBA**
VITTORIO VENIZIANI
GIACCHINO FORZANO - **CARAMBA**
VITTORIO VENIZIANI
GIACCHINO FORZANO - **CARAMBA**

GIOVANNI PERICLE ANSALDO

PREZZI

TEATRO ALLA SCALA
(ENTE AUTONOMO)
STAGIONE 1925-26

GIOVEDÌ 6 DICEMBRE 1925 - alle ore 21 precise
PRIMA RAPPRESENTAZIONE
DI
TOSCA

Musica di **GIACOMO PUCCINI**

GABRIELE SANTINI
Regista del Teatro: **VITTORIO VENIZIANI**
Regista della Scala: **VITTORIO VENIZIANI**
Regista della Scala: **VITTORIO VENIZIANI**

GIACCHINO FORZANO - **CARAMBA**
VITTORIO VENIZIANI
GIACCHINO FORZANO - **CARAMBA**
VITTORIO VENIZIANI
GIACCHINO FORZANO - **CARAMBA**

GIOVANNI PERICLE ANSALDO

PREZZI

TEATRO ALLA SCALA
(ENTE AUTONOMO)
STAGIONE 1925-26

GIOVEDÌ 15 NOVEMBRE 1925 - alle ore 21 precise
PRIMA RAPPRESENTAZIONE
DI
OTELLO

Musica di **GIUSEPPE VERDI**

ARTURO TOSCANINI
Regista del Teatro: **VITTORIO VENIZIANI**
Regista della Scala: **VITTORIO VENIZIANI**
Regista della Scala: **VITTORIO VENIZIANI**

GIACCHINO FORZANO - **CARAMBA**
VITTORIO VENIZIANI
GIACCHINO FORZANO - **CARAMBA**
VITTORIO VENIZIANI
GIACCHINO FORZANO - **CARAMBA**

GIOVANNI PERICLE ANSALDO

PREZZI

TEATRO ALLA SCALA
(ENTE AUTONOMO)
STAGIONE 1925-26

SABATO 17 GENNAIO 1925 - alle ore 21 precise
PRIMA RAPPRESENTAZIONE
DI
LA TRAVIATA

Musica di **GIUSEPPE VERDI**

ARTURO TOSCANINI
Regista del Teatro: **VITTORIO VENIZIANI**
Regista della Scala: **VITTORIO VENIZIANI**
Regista della Scala: **VITTORIO VENIZIANI**

GIACCHINO FORZANO - **CARAMBA**
VITTORIO VENIZIANI
GIACCHINO FORZANO - **CARAMBA**
VITTORIO VENIZIANI
GIACCHINO FORZANO - **CARAMBA**

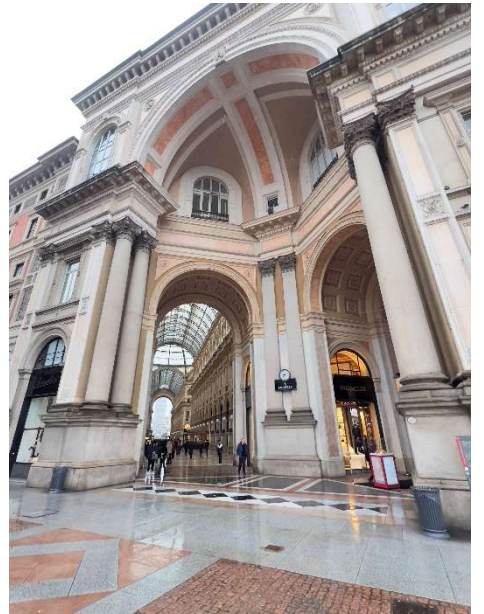
GIOVANNI PERICLE ANSALDO

PREZZI

Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II

The Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II shopping arcade runs from the Teatro alla Scala to the Duomo of Milan and is the most famous shopping gallery in Italy. The vision of high-end shops such as Dior, Gucci, Chanel, Prada and Louis Vuitton is only slightly spoiled by the view of a McDonalds as you look from the opera house.

The arcade was built between 1865 and 1877 and named after Vittorio Emanuele II who was the first king of unified Italy. The building was designed by Giuseppe Mengoni who tragically died in a fall from the structure just days before its completion. Like most places, the building was partially damaged in 1943 bombings but meticulously restored.



The World of Leonardo da Vinci Museum

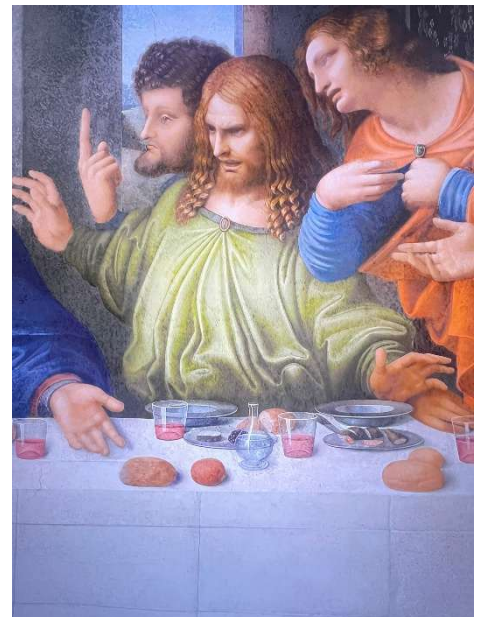
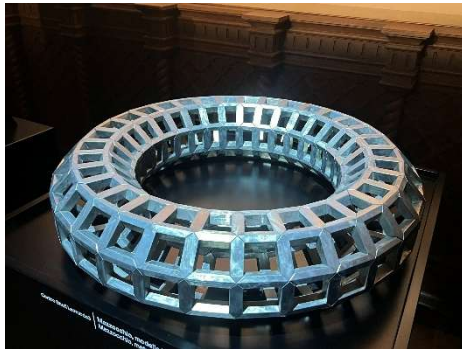


Those of you who know me well will appreciate my fascination for Leonardo da Vinci, which is the reason I decided to name my hotel after this famous Renaissance Master. Leonardo da Vinci spent a sizeable portion of his career in Milan: working under the patronage of the city's ruling Sforza family from 1482 until 1499 and focusing on scientific research at the invitation of the French Governor from 1506 to 1513.

Milan is the home of his masterpiece called 'The Last Supper' which he painted in the refractory of the Basilica di Santa Maria delle Grazie between 1495 to 1498. He also painted two versions of the 'Virgin of the Rocks' for the Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception in Milan.....one of them is now in the Louvre in Paris and the other is in the National Gallery in London

Anyway, 'The World of Leonardo da Vinci' (not to be confused with 'Leonardo da Vinci Museum of Science and Technology' which is also in Milan) is a traveling exhibition about the Renaissance Master, which was something of an eye-opener, even to me. The exhibition includes life-size and scale machine models of his various flying machines as well as his musical instruments, advanced weaponry and mechanical lion.

There is also a digitally restored representation of his painting of 'The Last Supper' showing in much more detail (and a lot better colour) what his painting would originally have looked like. Of course, it was a shame not to see the decaying and faded original (or what is left of the original), but this version offers a lot more detail and it was nice to see how the original looked and marvel at those strikingly vibrant colours.



Milan Cathedral (Duomo di Milan)

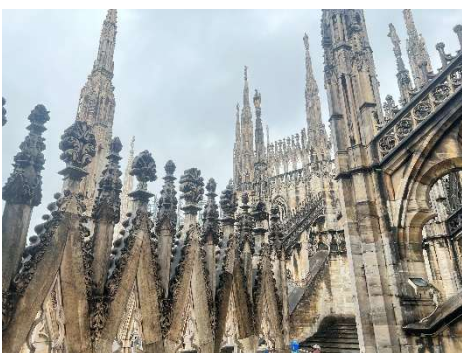
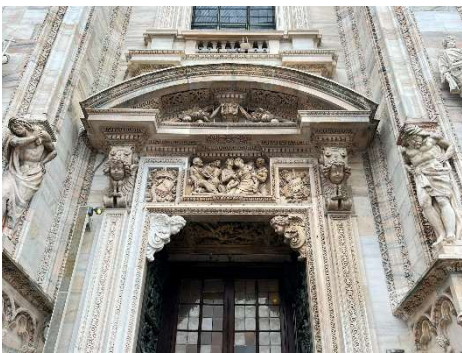


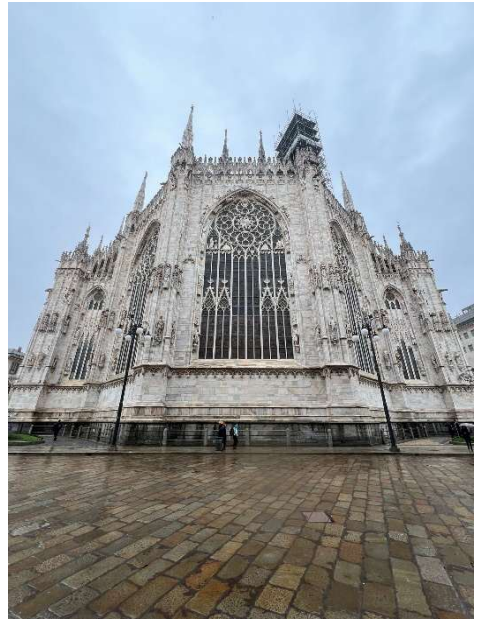
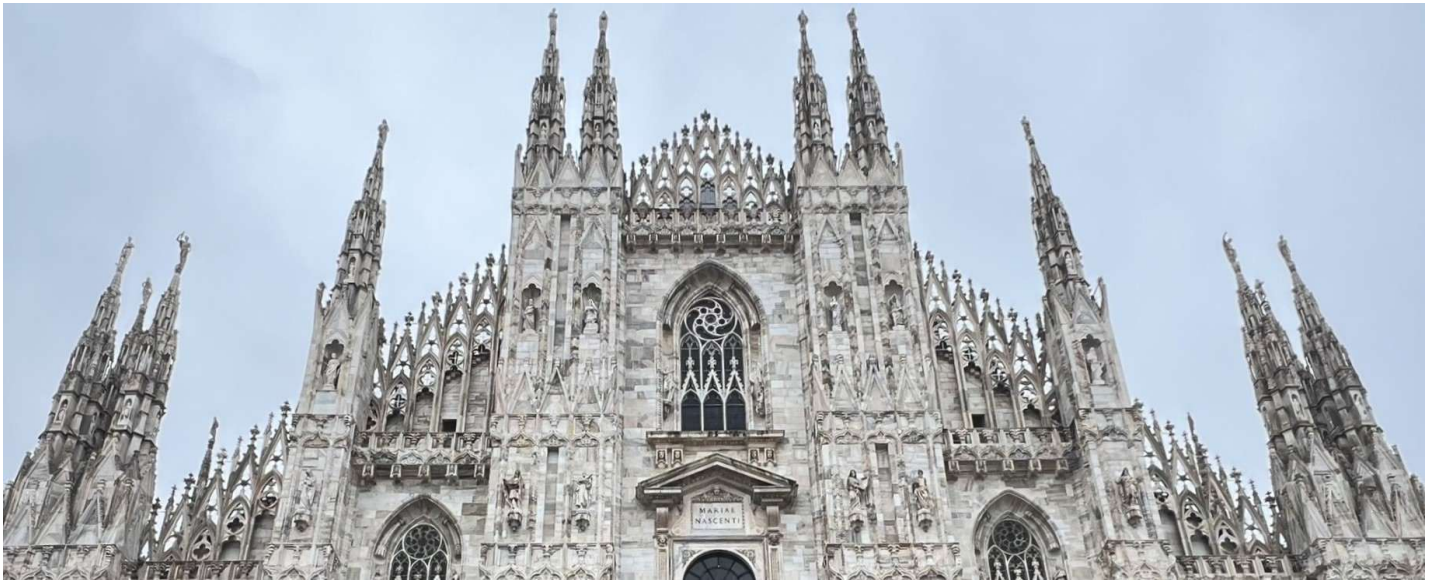
Milan Cathedral, also known as Duomo di Milano, is a stunning example of Gothic architecture and one of the largest churches in the world. The cathedral is located in the beautiful Piazza del Duomo and next door to the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II shopping arcade. The cathedral was started in 1386 under Gian Galeazzo Visconti, Duke of Milan, and completed in 1965..... yes that's 576 years!!!!

Napoleon Bonaparte had an interesting connection with the cathedral and was partially responsible for the completion of the cathedral's façade, which had been under construction for far too long. The intention was that the work would be completed in time for his coronation which took place in 1805. The facade itself is an absolute delight with over 3,400 statues adorning the spires and façades, including saints, gargoyles, and secular figures.

If you want to visit the cathedral, then I suggest that you book in advance which is exactly what I did. I have always had a soft spot for this particular cathedral, so I decided to book the terrace and museum option with the promise of a lift to get me there. In fact, the terrace turned out to be the roof of the cathedral and here I am standing on top of the world looking down onand now I have the lyrics of a Carpenter song going round in my head.

Actually, the lift was a clever idea and the view from up there is just magnificent especially across the city and its many landmarks. I seem to have walked for an eternity in the pouring rain, but no one told me that the lift was a one-way trip, and it was a narrow winding staircase all the way down. The roof itself was worth all the money I paid but now I have the inside of the cathedral to visit as well.

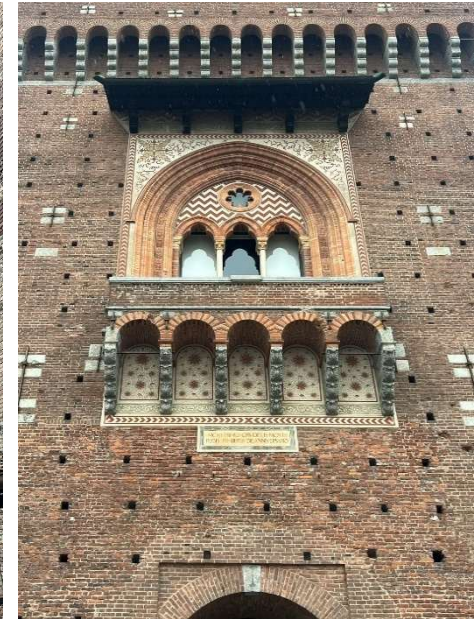




Sforza Castle (Castello Sforzesco)

Castello Sforzesco (Sforza Castle) is a grand fortress which was built in the 15th century between 1450 and 1499 by Francesco Sforza who was the Duke of Milan. The fortress was designed as a defensive stronghold and a symbol of Sforza's power. It later became a luxurious residence under Ludovico Sforza who commissioned Leonardo da Vinci to decorate its interior.

After centuries of neglect and damage (caused by the Napoleonic occupation and World War II bombings), a major restoration took place from the late 19th to the early 20th century in order to revive its Renaissance splendour.

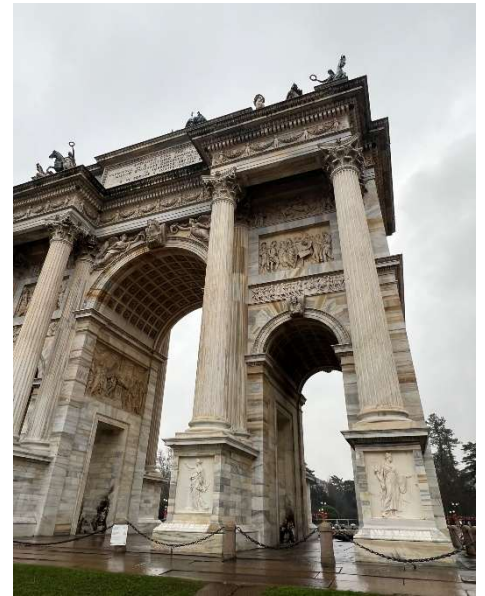


Immediately outside of the fortress is the Piazza Castello Fountain which certainly adds to the charm of the area and deserves some status as a tourist attraction. The fountain itself is characterized by its elegant design, featuring multiple tiers and water jets that create a visually appealing display. Other than that, I could find absolutely nothing else about the fountain so let me know if you do.



Arco di Porta Romana

I need to be careful now because people will start thinking that I have a thing for triumphant arches especially as I now seem to be seeking them out in every city I visit.... and here in Milan I was not disappointed. The Arco di Porta Romana is a significant historical monument which was built between 1807 and 1813. Napoleon Bonaparte commissioned the arch to celebrate the city's entrance and the victories of the French army. The arch is designed in the neoclassical style and features a large central arch flanked by smaller arches on either side. It is adorned with various sculptures and reliefs that depict scenes of victory and peace. This is my favourite so far....



Conclusion

My previous visits to Milan have always been work related so it's nice to be here as a tourist and admire the city from a unique perspective. The trams are a real delight and so old-fashionedat least they allow you to pay with a Visa card.

Milan always seems to play a secondary role to other cities in Italy. It is known for fashion and has a lot of buildings including the opera house and the Milan cathedral which I enjoyed immensely. In fact, I spent far too much time there and didn't get to see everything I wanted.

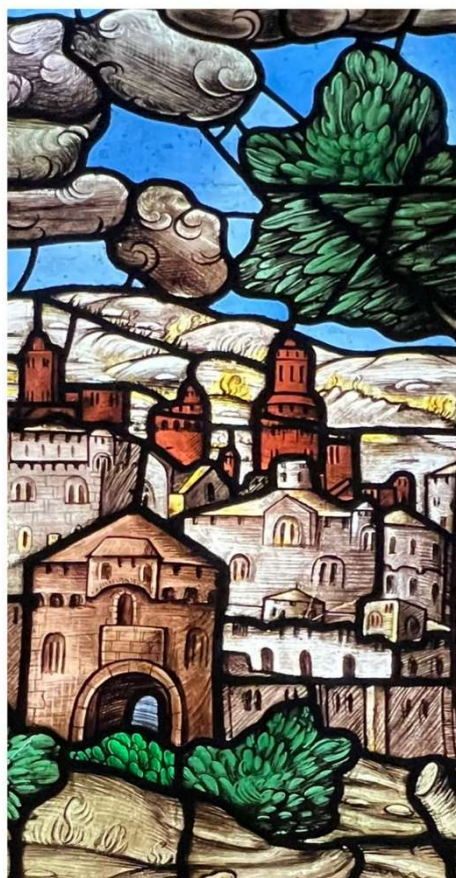
The Arco di Porta Romana may not have the popularity of the Arc de Triomphe, but it gives Paris a good run for its money. Even in the rain, I have enjoyed my stopover here and reckon I need to come back and see some more. Milan just captures the essence of Italy so well.

But now it's time to go home and the last part of my jigsaw it looks like being one of the most challenging..... flying with Ryanair. Most times this is not the cheapest airline by the time you factor in the extras, but on this occasion it was.

Perhaps I should have factored in the 36-mile journey to Milan Bergamo Airport also known as Orio al Serio International Airport or Il Caravaggio International Airport (after Michaelangelo Caravaggio who was born nearby).

A taxi will cost just under £100 but I managed to get a bus from Milan central Station which cost £10 and got me there in 50 minutes. Next stop is London Stansted which is 42 miles from London so who am I to complain.....and don't forget London Southend which is 52 miles away!!!

Well, that's the end of another one of my magical mystery tours. Thank you for staying with me on the journey and I really enjoyed your company. I need to start thinking about my next magical mystery tour, but I am fast running out of countries and airlines. Let me have a think.



Chapter 8: Summary

This whirlwind “Magical Mystery Tour 2” spanned seven cities across Europe’s less-trodden paths, blending history, culture and spontaneity. Starting in Istanbul, the journey marvelled at architectural icons like the Hagia Sophia and Dolmabahçe Palace, while ferries zigzagged the Bosphorus between continents.

Skopje surprised with its statue-filled bridges and Mother Teresa’s humble origins, juxtaposed against the poignant Holocaust Memorial. In Belgrade, free public transport eased exploration of Nikola Tesla’s legacy, the towering Saint Sava Temple and Kalemegdan Fortress’s sunset vistas over the Danube.

Bucharest confronted Romania’s communist past through Ceaușescu’s grotesquely lavish villa and the colossal Palace of the Parliament, while the Botanical Gardens and Stavropoleos Monastery offered quieter beauty.

Chișinău, Moldova’s unassuming capital, charmed with Soviet-era relics, cascading staircases, and leafy parks, defying its “hidden gem” status. The tour closed in Milan, where Gothic splendour (the Duomo’s spires) met Renaissance genius (da Vinci’s exhibits) and fashion flair (Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II).

Threading through these destinations were budget triumphs and memorable moments such as nearly being arrested in Bucharest, foggy dawns at Chișinău’s Eternity Memorial and rooftop views atop Milan’s cathedral. From Ottoman grandeur to Soviet starkness, the trip revealed Europe’s layered identities, proving that curiosity trumps itinerary—even when you end up having to fly with Ryanair.



The outside cover if you enjoyed this guide.....



The Magical Mystery Tour 2 is just one of a growing series of documentary travel guides collated under 'The Where to Go' banner. The following titles are presently available or coming really soon.....

