

TRAVEL	UNBEATEN PATHS	
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## For a different look at Bucharest, try the Interesting Times Bureau —Unbeaten Paths

**Just a few blocks** from his downtown office, 34-year-old Doru Raduta surveys the scene at Piața Revoluției, a large square in the heart of Romania’s capital, Bucharest. It was here that the world’s first “televised revolution” was sparked, back in 1989.

Looking skyward, Doru points out a massive metal sculpture, skewered by a 25-meter marble pillar. Referred to locally as “the potato” (and a number of other unflattering nicknames), the sculpture was originally commissioned to represent the country’s ‘re-birth’ from decades spent under a particularly repressive communist regime. It has instead become a reminder of rampant corruption and mismanagement.

The memorial, which was unveiled in 2005, reportedly cost around 1.5 million euros (USD 1.9 million) to build. Doru explains that the government chose the sculptor to design the potato simply “for his connections”—a common practice in Romania, both during and after communist rule. In retaliation against the corrupt selection process, a local activist soon splashed the sculpture with blood-red

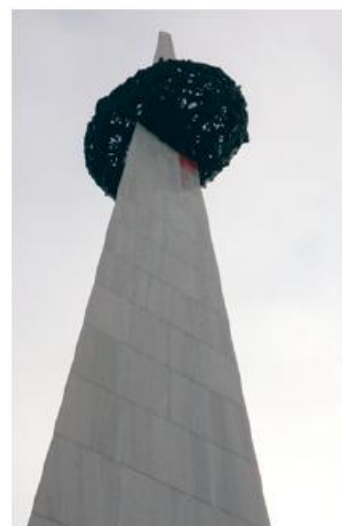
paint, which dripped down the marble column, leaving a still-visible stain, Doru recounts. The monument has remained a magnet for local criticism—and vandalism—ever since.

Thus begins one of Doru’s most popular tours at the Interesting Times Bureau, a name that seems to hold a foot in the syntax of the past. A half-day journey heads into the history of Bucharest’s ‘blackest period’, the 24 years under the rule of Communist dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu. The tour starts at the end, so to speak, at the site where the revolution that ended Ceaușescu’s rule kicked off. Doru takes guests on an intimate ride through his city, pointing out the monolithic construction projects that wiped out centuries-old neighborhoods and sharing some of the daily rituals that marked the era.

“It was a time when people ratted out their neighbors, their friends,” Doru explains. “Even information like, ‘Last Tuesday, Mrs. X next door complained about the government providing only two hours of hot water per day’—this all went into a file the government kept on you.” And with widespread water and power shortag-



Doru (left) schemes from a local cafe about his tours, which will take interested visitors past the back-alley graffiti of new artists (top) and 'the potato' of old artists (bottom).



es, people would eagerly trade such information for basic items like eggs or bread, just to feed their families, Doru says.

"Under communism, it was truly a black market, a barter economy," he adds. "People even traded jobs! For example, 'I will get your grandmother a job at my factory because I know you work at a meat shop. That way, I have the connection that, from time to time, I will get some meat.'"

Doru's interest in tourism was sparked by a curiosity of the past and the hidden gems sprinkled throughout the present. In the trillion-dollar industry that global tourism has become, companies fight to package trips that make would-be pilgrims feel like pioneers, offering the requisite photo ops and 'been there's' so important to many travelers. Romanian tours, in Doru's eyes, only offered regurgitation.

"For 10 years, I worked at a distribution company," Doru recalls. "When I used to go for lunch, I saw backpackers, with their maps in their hands, completely bewildered. And I was thinking, if you only knew that 20 meters behind you there is this such great place that you should see...But there's nobody here to show it to you."

For many Romanians, there remains a strongly held tendency to only want to show off the best, most perfect front for any visitors, especially those traveling from abroad. But all the operators focused on the exact same things. "The Peasant Museum, the Athenaeum, and the People's Palace—you know, the classic sites," he says. "And how *boring* is that?"

Uninterested in showcasing only Bucharest's classic side, Doru began to envision a different type of tour, one that prioritized "interesting" over "pretty" and embraced the city's alterna-

tive sites, its lively underground art and music scenes, and its eclectic old neighborhoods filled with beauty, as well as decay. New stops away from the well-worn paths tourists are generally convinced to follow.

Since spring, the Interesting Times Bureau has hosted over 140 guests, mainly from online word of mouth. Keeping each tour group small (two to six people, tops), the tour guides thrive on mobility and flexible bookings; they've been known to operate tours with only two hours' notice. The company prides itself on offering "slow tourism". They encourage visitors to take their time and interact with the Romanian people they meet along the way, be that up-and-coming creatives practicing their skills at a DIY inventor's lab or fellow night owls at one of the city's favorite dingy-hip party venues.

Of course, not everyone agrees with Doru's definition of an "interesting time".

Doru recalls a guard outside an abandoned building, completely bewildered. "He came over to me saying, 'What are they doing? Can't they see that this is a rundown building? That there's nothing of value here?'"

While some might be confused, Doru is not. Smiling, he replied, it really just depends on "how you look at stuff" ☺

Doru's tours range USD 24–44, with a portion supporting the artistic community [interestingtimes.ro](http://interestingtimes.ro)