

"25 Quirky Facts About Europe's Least Touristy Country"

To mark 26 years since Moldova declared independence from the Soviet Union, here are a few things you probably didn't know about the country.

1. It's the least visited country in Europe

If you do venture to Moldova for your holidays, you won't be jostling for space with other tourists: only 121,000 foreigners are reported to have entered the country in 2016 (so says the UN World Tourism Organisation), making it the least visited in Europe. On a global scale only Bangladesh and Guinea are less touristy destinations (taking into account number of visitors per resident), according to PricewaterhouseCoopers.

2. It keeps a fine cellar

The venerable folk at Guinness World Records recognise the Mileştii Mici wine cellar in Moldova is the world's largest with nearly two million bottles of plonk in its darkened vaults. In case you're wondering, the most valuable tipples in its collection sell for a reported €480 each.

3. Its wine is banned in Russia

Traditionally Moldova's biggest export market was Russia, which consumed up to 90 per cent of its wine. However, a diplomatic dispute in 2006 resulted in a Russian ban on Moldovan and Georgian produce, which has been devastating for its economy. Nevertheless, it remains the 20th largest wine-producing nation on Earth (as of 2014).

4. There are some magnificent monasteries

Moldova's most important (and, arguably, most beautiful) historical site, Orheiul Vechi is a crumbling open-air monastic complex that dates back more than 2,000 years. The rambling ruins feature ancient fortifications, baths and monasteries, which you'll have largely to yourself.

5. It went nearly three years without a president

In 2012, after nearly three years of political deadlock, Moldova elected the veteran judge, Nicolae Timofti, as president – for the first time in 917 days, the country had a leader.

6. Most Moldovans are bi- or tri-lingual

Moldovans speak either Romanian, which is the native language, Russian or Gagauz. Some speak all three.

7. It has a critically endangered language

However, Moldova's second language, Gagauz, is in danger of dying out. Spoken in the Autonomous Region of Gagauz, the Turkic language is classed as critically endangered by Unesco.

8. It's poor

Moldova has the dubious distinction of being the poorest country in Europe with a per capita GDP of just \$5,327, according to the IMF. The second lowest is Ukraine's, at \$8,305 (Moldova's neighbour's is \$20,326, while the UK's is \$42,480).

9. It's home to Europe's most unlikely tourist attraction

Despite being surrounded by poverty, rich residents in the town of Soroca have taken to flaunting their wealth by building flamboyant homes inspired by landmarks such as St Peter's Basilica and the Bolshoi theatre.

Consequently, the town, dubbed Gypsy Hill, has become something of a tourist attraction, with people coming to admire the madcap architecture.

10. The capital was destroyed in 1940

Having been invaded by the Red Army in June 1940, Chisinau suffered a deadly earthquake in October of that year which measured 7.3 on the Richter scale and destroyed much of the city. As if that wasn't enough, the following year the Luftwaffe arrived and blew what was left of the city to smithereens.

11. It has a breakaway territory

The region known as Transnistria declared independence from Moldova in 1990, precipitating the War of Transnistria which secured a de facto independence for the territory. However, the region, which has its own currency and border controls, is not officially recognised by any member of the United Nations.

12. It's the second booziest nation on Earth

According to the World Health Organisation, only Belarus tucks away more alcohol than Moldova, with each inhabitant drinking an average of 16.8 litres of booze per year (excluding under 15s).

13. It's landlocked

Well, technically. In a bid to gain access to the Black Sea, Moldova did in fact make a territorial exchange with Ukraine in 2005, giving the country access to a 600m stretch of the River Danube, which flows into the Black Sea.

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14. There's a beach

Despite having no access to the sea, Moldova does have a slither of sand to speak of on Chisinau Lake, which is located in the capital, Chisinau. Okay, so it's a man-made beach and it's in a city, but if you close your eyes you could almost be on the coast. Sort of.

15. It's great for twitchers

Moldova is home to an impressive array of birds, with roughly 300 different species calling it home. Some are year-round residents, some come to breed, some simply pass through en route to warmer climes, and others come to escape harsh winters further north. All of which is good news for birders.

16. The national animal is a big cow

Or an auroch, to be precise. These beefy bovines are now extinct, but have been immortalised on Moldova's flag, which features the head of an auroch mounted on a shield (probably why they're extinct, if they kept mounting them on shields). Zimbru Stadium, the country's main football stadium, takes its name from the Romanian word for bison.

17. It debuted at Eurovision in 2005

Which remains Moldova's most successful year with Zdob și Zdub finishing sixth.

18. It's super cheap

A one-way ticket on Chișinău's tramway costs 2MDL – a mere 7 pence. A monthly pass will set you back £7 – that's for a whole 30 days of unlimited travel. Take note, TfL.

19. The national dish is porridge

Ubiquitous on Moldovan dinner tables, Mămăligă is a porridge made out of yellow maize flour and often considered the country's national dish. It's traditionally served as an accompaniment to stews and meat dishes, and is commonly garnished with cottage cheese, sour cream or pork rind.

20. It has a whole day dedicated to wine

Actually, it's more of a two-day event. Wine producers open up their homes and vineyards to the masses on October 3-4 for National Wine Day, in a country-wide celebration of local hooch. Wine tastings are cheap, and there's even a free bus to shuttle you between wineries.

21. Its history stretches back for millenia

Ancient tools dating back 1.2 million years have been found in some of Moldova's key archeological sites. The flint relics were added to the national hoard of Paleolithic and Neolithic artefacts that includes jewellery, weapons and cooking utensils.

22. It likes to make a song and dance

As with its languages, Moldovan music is greatly influenced by Romania. Miorița, a traditional Romanian ballad about sheep, is a Moldovan favourite – so much so, that the first two verses are printed on its banknotes.

23. They're strong

Nicolae Birliba is a world champion weightlifter, nine times over. In 2011, aged 49, he rased a 16kg kettlebell 2,575 times. Here he is, in action.

24. You'll have to take your shoes off

When you're entering someone's home, it's considered impolite to leave your shoes on. Leave them at the door. The house rule applies in most formerly Soviet countries, for hygiene reasons. Guests are almost always provided with slippers.

25. It loves Christmas

Moldova celebrates Christmas from December 24 to 26, unlike its Russian-Orthodox neighbors (their main event is in January). Traditional preparations start in November, with the baking of cakes and the slaughtering of pigs, and culminate in three days of feasting, parties and gift-giving. The Russian Father Frost fairytale was banned after Moldova gained independence: these days, children's presents are delivered by Mos Craciun – who looks remarkably like our Santa Claus.

Source: *Telegraph* (London), 27 August 2017

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/europe/articles/amazing-facts-about-moldova>, accessed ## May 2018