

## **Things To Do in Chişinău!** *Find Hidden Beauty In Moldova's Capital*

Chişinău, a tantalizing city-in-flux, filled with hidden beauty, hipster hangouts, passionate locals and delicious, delicious wine!

Fought over for centuries by Ottomans, Russians and Romanians, Moldova (formally Bessarabia) had an already tough history before WW-II when it was first occupied and annexed from Romania by the Soviet Union, then captured by Romania and Nazi Germany and then subsequently lost again. The resulting fighting – plus two devastating earthquakes in 1940 – destroyed almost all of Chişinău's historic buildings leaving it today an eclectic mix of buildings and soviet apartments.

Don't however let any of this put you off – As any good traveler knows, every destination has something worthwhile seeing and Chişinău has plenty of top attractions, you just need to know where to look.

It's small, compact size means getting anywhere is a breeze and given all the embassies and government buildings in central Chişinău there is plenty of security and I never once felt uncomfortable, even walking around in the middle of the night. Even better (for tourists) is Moldova is a very cheap destination by Western European standards – There are not many tourists here and locals will happily chat with you and practice their English whenever they get the chance, and you can happily wander around without being hassled on every corner. Yes, it's fair to say that Europe's least known capital has grown on me....and dare I say with the spate of new dining options and renovated attractions opening in Chişinău, aimed at drawing in more international tourists and business, this unknown capitol city might yet transform into a beautiful swan!

### **1. Valea Morilor Park**

Only a ten minute walk from Chişinău City Centre – yet a world apart – you will find the much loved Valea Morilor Park, easily one of the most beautiful places in Moldova. Perfect for escaping the city and getting a breath of fresh air. You can see plenty of locals running, kayaking, fishing, feeding ducks and just generally hanging out. The cascading water feature on the hill is the perfect place for a romantic sunset, and during the summer there are plenty of people swimming from the sandy beach (however I cannot vouch for it's cleanliness) and even a small amusement park. Be sure to make at least one lap of the lake, and go slow like the locals!

### **2. Cricova Winery Underground Wine Cellar**

Did you know Moldova produced two-thirds of all wine consumed in the Soviet Union? Neither did I – but yes, Moldova has a long history of wine-consumption and production and one of the best places to see this is through a tour of the wine cellars of Cricova. These are the second largest wine cellars in the world (after the Mileşti Mici Winery – coming up soon!). With a history dating back to the 15th Century, there is over 120 kilometres of caves and tunnels here which is used for wine storage production and sampling. An entire wine city underground, you just have to see this to believe it – We organised a fantastic tour and tasting through a small local company Top Tours Moldova who offered us a great price, over-delivered and customized everything to our interest's. Oleg the owner even gave us a mini-city tour on the way and his passion for his town and country is truly infectious. A visit to the Cricova Underground Wine Cellar should be the number one thing every tourist sees in Chişinău!

Oh...and when you're in the wine storage look out for Putin and Angela Merkel's private wine collections!

### **3. Nativity Cathedral Chişinău**

The Cathedral of Christ's Nativity in the heart of Chişinău is the main cathedral of the Moldovan Orthodox Church and was built in neoclassical design in the 1830's. Bombed during World War Two and then desecrated by communists, the Nativity Cathedral Chişinău was lovingly restored in 1997 after Soviet restrictions on worship had been lifted and today it is truly the centre of faith in Moldova. Pop your head in and you will often see everything from quiet moments of spirituality to fall-blown sermons with live television crew and a crowd packed in tighter than sardines in a can!

### **4. National Museum of History of Moldova**

With over 165,000 items relating to national heritage, the National Museum of History found in the historical centre of Chişinău, is the premier museum in Moldova which you just have to see. While the entire building could do with a make-over, the exhibits themselves are intriguing, thought-provoking and provide a glimpse into all the important events in Moldova's history from independence all the way back to ancient times. Their medieval collection is particular impressive, as is the historic halls and the WW2 diorama. Weather you're a giant history buff – or have literally no idea how or why Moldova exists – there is something new for you to discover here at the National Museum of History of Moldova

### **5. Parliament of the Republic of Moldova**

While there are no tours and you're not allowed inside, you have to see what is most likely the world's ugliest parliament building – and wander the eerily quiet grounds. Wondering where all the politicians are? We were too, and all we saw here was one surprised security guard who could not for the life of himself figure out why a tourist would want to see the parliament here. The building is actually the former meeting place of the Central Committee of the Moldovan branch of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and was badly damaged during riots in 2009. More interesting after a chat with Moldovan's about the fractured state of politics here...but then again, where isn't these days!

### **6. Tucano Coffee**

You are not going to find a Starbucks in Moldova – but the locals don't seem to care since Tucano Coffee opened its doors here in 2011. Inspired by peace, love and coffee this delightfully hip coffee chain has rapidly spread abroad and can now be found in Romania, United Arab Emirates, Russia and Kyrgyzstan of all places – But no one here will let you forget Chişinău is the original! A new concept in coffee, you can relax here all day with fast WiFi and laid-back vibes, and be sure to try the cannabis coffee or delicious cheesecakes. Both are worth a visit to Chişinău alone to try!

### **7. National Museum of Fine Arts Chişinău**

Recently renovated, the National Museum of Fine Arts in Chişinău, is one of the best hidden gems in all of Moldova and you can spend hours wandering the gorgeously white galleries here filled with colourful works spanning all genres and ages. Even if you are not a big art lover, the interior fit-out here is truly worth seeing and offers a glimpse of things to come in Chişinău (along with the Zentrum Aparthotel) where locals are embracing their roots, taking pride in their past and trying to bring something new and invigorating to the local scene. One of my favourite museums in the world, you really cannot miss the chance to visit their stunning heritage building in Moldova.

### **8. Traditional Moldovan Food**

Moldova's fertile soil is well known for the quality of grapes it produces, but from the earth here also comes plenty of fruit, vegetables, grain and meat which you can find in most Moldavian national dishes. Heavily influenced by Romanian cuisine, with inspiration from Greek, Polish, Ukrainian and Ottoman – it would be a mistake to dismiss Moldovan food out-of-hand. Ask your waiter for his personal recommendations but you should also look out for mămăligă (a cornmeal / polenta-like accompaniment), brânză (a brined cheese) and ghiveci (a lamb or goat stew). Of course there is also delicious wine to try, and beer which is traditionally

served with small meat pie. The chain La Placinte is a great place for good Moldavian food in Chisnau, but we also loved the Propaganda Restaurant and it's weird Soviet theme!

### **9. Mileștii Mici Winery and Underground Wine Cellar**

The biggest winer cellars in the world, and the biggest wine collection in the world – If you are a true wine fan you really can't go past a visit to Mileștii Mici Winery. We had a truly surreal experience here of driving through underground caves in a new Mercedes Benz with Top Tours Moldova but I have to say it is just not as well done as Cricova... Though this could be entirely down to the guide. If you have the time it is really worth going both, especially in the summer when the outside wine fountain is working – but if you're short on time Cricova is your best bet. In saying that, Mileștii Mici did give much more wine during the tasting, and had some very, very cool hidden rooms to explore....

### **10. Soviet Architecture in Chișinău**

Chișinău residents live among Soviet architecture and there truly are some gems to be found here as most of the city was rebuilt entirely after WW-II in Soviet-style. Just wandering around the streets of Chișinău can lead you to stumble upon a great many gems so keep an eye out, but if you have the time I highly recommend going on a Free Walking Tour of Chișinău to get an idea of the city and it's history, or following this highly-detailed step-by-step soviet-era walking tour of Chișinău which takes approximately 4 hours. And I don't care what the local says, you just cannot miss the Chișinău Circus building which is truly one-of-a-kind!

### **11. Chișinău Water Tower**

The Chișinău Water Tower is a stand-out monument in the city and is kind of hard to miss. Home to the History Museum of Chișinău (which is not at all worth seeing if you cannot read Romanian), the real reason to visit the Chișinău Water Tower is actually for the stunning view out over the city and lake – and is especially romantic at sunset. There is an elevator for most of the journey to the top and a nice art-gallery to look at if you are waiting for a break in the weather. The building was actually part of Chișinău original water supply system, and was one of the few historical buildings faithfully restored after the 1940 earthquake.

### **12. Chișinău Nightlife**

One of the biggest surprises I found in Chișinău was the thriving nightlife scene and most clubs and bars were conveniently located just a few blocks from the Zentrum Aparthotel where we stayed making it all the more appealing to pop out for a quick drink...or two! With low alcohol prices and plenty of venues to choose from Chișinău nightlife offers something for everyone with sophisticated wine bars like Invino Enoteca and Carpe Diem Wine Triumphal Arch Chișinău

Probably the most iconic symbol of Chișinău, no list of things to do in Chișinău would be complete without a visit to the Triumphal Arch – though it's position on the main boulevard would make it rather hard to miss! Built in 1840 to commemorate the victory of the Russian Empire over the Ottoman Empire, it was fully restored during communist times and serves as a reminder for the foreign interests that have frequently gone to war over Moldova – and the continuing struggle to forge a national identity distinct from that of both Romania and Russia. And of course it does make a beautiful photo as well!

### **13. Day Trips From Chișinău**

While Chișinău has plenty of things to do, you would be remiss not to take advantage of the small size of Moldova and the array of day trips that can easily be completed using Chișinău as a base. – there are actually plenty more but sadly there is not that much information online. Thanks to Oleg at Top Tours Moldova however, I am inspired to head back as soon as possible to Moldova and have a few trips in mind including visiting:

- **Orheiul Vechi** The medieval town of,
- **The Rudi Monastery** and nearby Struve Geodetic Arc
- **The Curchi Monastery**. a tentative UNESCO Site

- **Transnistria** for real Sovietophiles take a trip to the break-away region of Tiraspol and?
- **Soroca**, a city filled with rich history and culture, a castle and the home of Gypsy kings.
- There are still more plenty of other vineyards and smaller towns , to explore at your leisure

You are unlikely to run out of things to do in Moldova even two weeks or more on your hands!  
There are 5 localities with municipality status: Bălți, Chișinău, Comrat, Bender (Tighina), and Tiraspol. The other 61 have city status. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_cities\\_and\\_towns\\_in\\_Moldova](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_cities_and_towns_in_Moldova))

So there you have it! Many things to do in Chișinău and Moldova to see the hidden beauty of Europe's least known capital. Don't let first impressions scare you off – Beneath the surface Chișinău has as much going on as any Eastern Europe City, you just have to look a bit harder. Slowly but surely, this city is waking up to it's tourist potential and in the next few years I can imagine more and more 'hip & cool' cafes, restaurants and hotels opening up... and prices skyrocketing. Summer or winter, foodie or culture vulture – now is the time to be heading to Chișinău for a completely different experience, where you have to search to find beauty and are rewarded with experiences and discoveries that are unique to you.

Source: blog by New Zealand travel writer: <https://inspiredbymaps.com/things-to-do-in-chisinau/>, accessed 14 May 2018