

Moldova – Somewhere between Russia and Romania

In October of 2003, I travelled to Moscow to attend the annual Russian User Conference and teach a GIS training class for the Russian Geological Survey. Following the conclusion of the training class in Moscow, I was invited to teach another GIS training class in Moldova for the country's Land Survey Department.



The trip to Chisinau, the capital of Moldova, began with my driver Sasha taking me to Vnukovo International airport south of Moscow. It is one of four major airports around Moscow. Sasha drove at a fast pace through the morning rush hour traffic and got me to the airport with over two hours to spare before the departure of the flight to Chisinau. It was a long walk to the terminal from the parking lot, and as I walked up the ramp to the entrance, two policemen stood in my way. But they didn't stop me from walking around them! As I entered the terminal building, I was confronted by an incredibly dark, dreary Soviet era departure hall. It looked as if nothing had changed since the time of Stalin. When I looked up at the departure monitor, I quickly discovered that I wouldn't be allowed to check in for the flight for another hour and a half! (So why did Sasha get me to the airport with over two hours to spare?) However, I wasn't the only passenger having to wait – the departure hall was crowded, but there were no shops or facilities to be seen anywhere, save for a tiny snack bar in one corner, with no where to sit! So, I ended up standing in a corner, next to the arrivals area, watching dozens of meetings of families and friends.

As I looked around the huge hall, I spotted a large sign on the wall above me – an advertisement for new high-rise apartments in Moscow and St. Petersburg, with prices starting at \$1060 per square meter! (I found it interesting that the prices were listed in US dollars) During my "confinement" in the drab departure hall, I began observing the young men and women around me. The majority of the young women wore high heel boots with very "pointy" toes, while the young men preferred long black leather jackets! Meanwhile, those Russians over 50 were dressed in the style of the old Soviet era – basically a drab dull brown color. After an hour and a half had passed, I was finally permitted to pass through Customs and Immigration, which took a surprisingly short time. Remarkably, I was the first person to check in for the one and only Air Moldova flight to Chisinau. The check in procedure was conducted solely by checking my paper ticket to a paper passenger list – no computers were to be seen! After my name was crossed off the list, I received a boarding pass, but there was no seat assignment, just a "generic" boarding document that was given to all passengers, despite the fact I had a business class ticket. As I made my way toward the security check, I spotted a small café/bar. I debated whether to

stop for a beer and something to eat or wait until after passing through security. (bad decision!) As I proceeded through security, my passport was checked for the third time and I was directed to a “dismal” holding area where there were absolutely NO facilities! (Obviously the Russians hadn’t thought of capitalizing on a market of “captive” passengers!)

At last the time came to board the bus that would take us to the plane, an old Russian TU-134 aircraft that had seen better days. I took a seat up front in the small business class cabin, and one of the flight attendants asked if I had a business class ticket, although she never asked to see it. As I looked around, there was only one other person seated in business class. Throughout the two-hour flight, the attendants were very nice and quite friendly. However, there were some rather “odd” things I observed about the old TU-134 aircraft, among them being (1) round portholes for windows with “curtains” rather than shades,

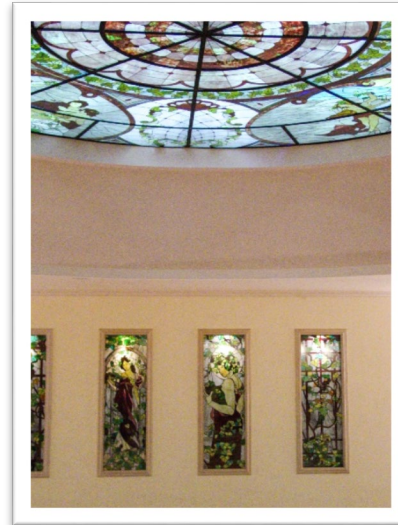


(2) a “skylight” in the toilet, but no light fixture, and (3) no compartment above my seat for emergency oxygen! (By the way, there was no mention of it during the “safety” demo prior to takeoff!) But the flight was very smooth, and a wonderful lunch of Chicken Kiev was served, along with a glass of traditional Moldovan white wine.

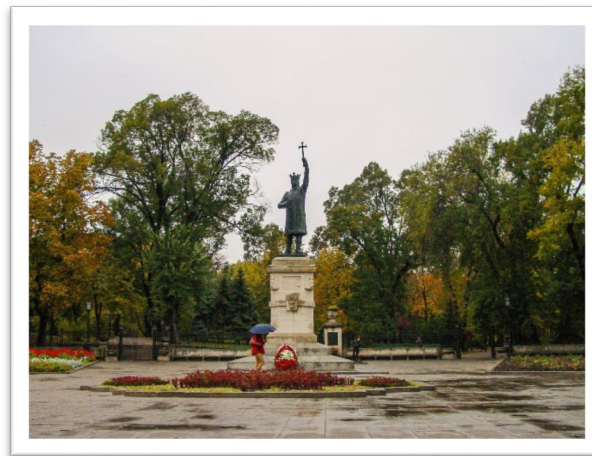
In contrast to the dark grey cloudy skies in Moscow, we arrived in Chisinau to find beautiful, warm sunny weather. As we passed over the countryside, I saw a landscape of extensive plateaus cut by deep river valleys.



There were lots of areas devoted to farming, grazing, orchards, and vineyards – a strong contrast to the early winter landscape around Moscow. Upon arrival at the airport, I was met by a family whose teenage daughter was the only one who spoke English. They drove me to the Cordu Hotel near downtown Chisinau, overlooking the city's Central Park.



After checking into the hotel, I took a long walk through the park in the warm late afternoon sunshine. In the center of the park I came upon the statue of King Stephan I, who was renowned for his long resistance to the Ottoman Turks during the 15th Century. He ascended to the throne of Moldavia in 1457 with the help of the Walachian prince Vlad III the Impaler.



It wasn't long before I began seeing several wedding parties having their photos taken under the beautiful golden foliage of autumn. At one point during my walk in the park, I came to a large area where artists were displaying their work.



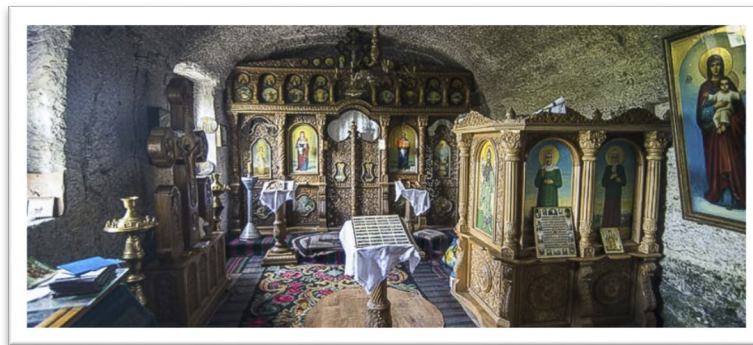
As the afternoon slowly made its way toward evening, I headed back to the hotel. On the way I passed a lot of currency exchanges surrounding a new shopping center called “Sun City”. That evening, Maria and Elena met me at the hotel and invited me to dinner at “Café English” in Central Park.



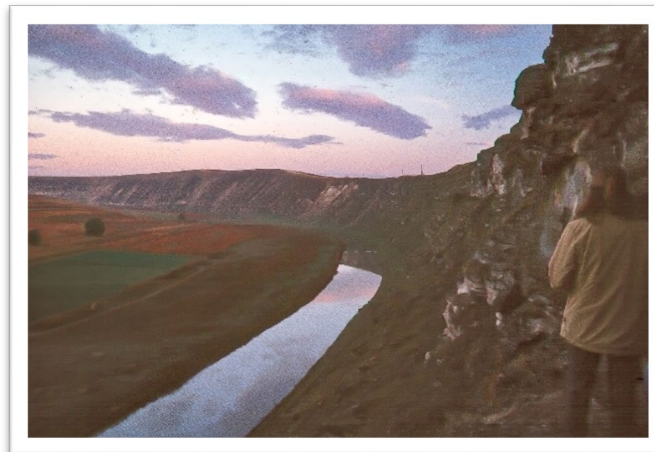
We shared a delicious meal of traditional Moldovan cuisine, which I would describe as a combination of Greek and Turkish food – all of which was superb. And of course, they insisted upon sampling several local wines. (vineyards in Moldova date back to early Roman times) At the end of the evening, I was struck by the strong cultural and language connections between Moldova and its neighbor to the west, Romania – even though many people in Moldova still speak Russian as their second language. The next morning, Elena picked me up at the hotel and took me to the State Land Cadastre building near the center of the city. As we entered the old building, my first impression was that we had stepped back in time to the old Soviet Union. The building was dilapidated and in serious need of repair. The elevators didn’t work (they were shut with duct tape!), so we took the stairs up to the third floor where the classroom was located. In contrast to the drab and dreary appearance of the rest of the building, the

classroom was bright and cheery, with new computers on every table. Throughout the day, the students were very excited about learning to use the GIS software. At the end of the day, Maria brought in a bottle of Moldovan brandy and a large tray of cookies to celebrate the beginning of the class! That evening I was once again invited to share dinner with Maria and Elena at a very traditional Moldovan restaurant. We began dinner with a delicious appetizer of thin Arabic flat bread stuffed with fresh scallions and homemade feta cheese, which was then baked – very tasty! Throughout the restaurant were old photos of Chisinau on the walls and lots of antiques and folk art. It was clear that the family who owned the place were proud of their cultural heritage. For the main dish, Elena insisted that I try a very special Moldovan dish of beef stewed in red wine and cream, along with “smoked” prunes stuffed with walnuts. It was served in a traditional clay pot, and it was absolutely delicious! We had a wonderful time during dinner as Maria and Elena shared some of the history of Moldova (Moldavia) that dates back to early Roman times. Then we walked back to the hotel along quiet, tree covered streets. It was a memorable evening of Moldovan hospitality.

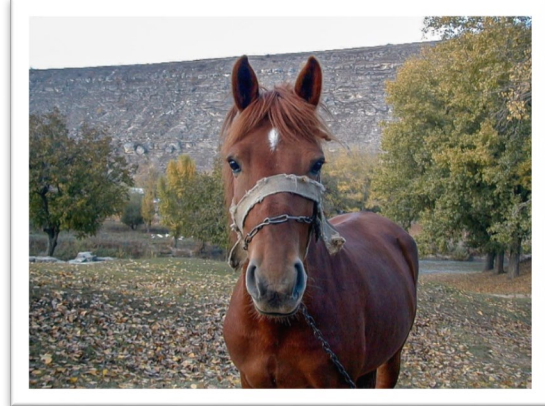
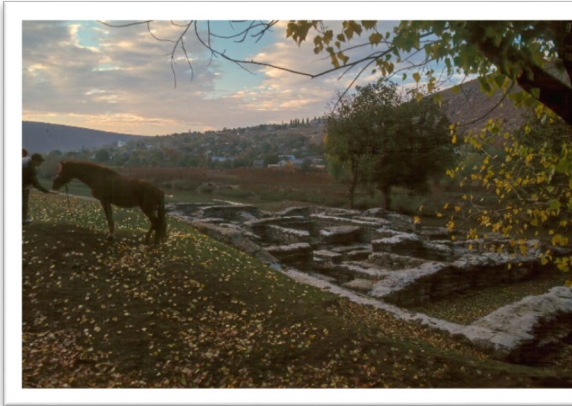
The next morning, I decided to walk to the State Land Cadastre building. Once again, I found a class of eager students, and the day went by quickly. Maria insisted that we end the class a bit early so that she could show me a famous historical site a few kilometers southwest of the city. It was a 30-minute drive to the very old Orheiul Vechi Monastery that dated back to the early 1200’s. When we arrived, I was totally amazed to see it had been carved into the solid rock wall high above the Dniestri River near the small village of Butuceni.



It had been founded by Orthodox monks and remained inhabited until the 18th century. In 1996 a handful of monks returned to the secluded monastery and restored it to its original condition. We were greeted by an old monk who was the last surviving resident of the ancient monastery. He led us on a short tour of the cave, and when we came to a large room overlooking the river valley below, the view at sunset was gorgeous!



Near the monastery were the remains of an ancient Turkish bath, and several horses grazed in the field surrounding it as the sun was setting beyond the horizon.



It was a beautiful scene to behold.



Back in the city that evening, we had dinner at the “Museum Café”. Maria recommended the local Pike fish from the river, fried in butter and served in a delicate mustard sauce with pasta. Once again it a delicious meal.

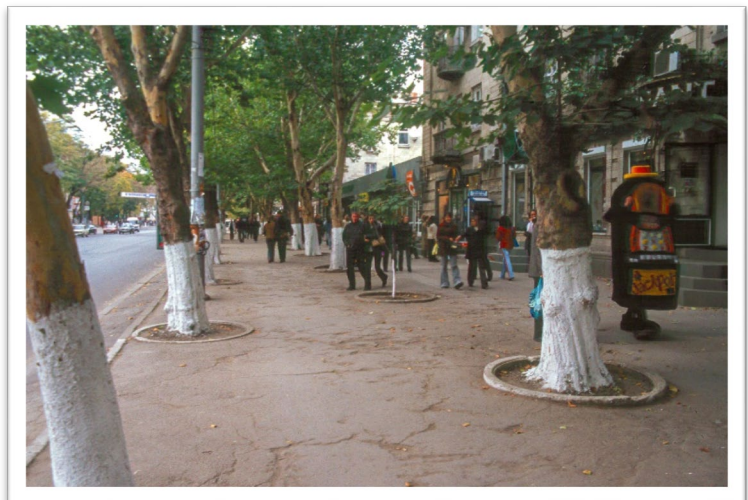
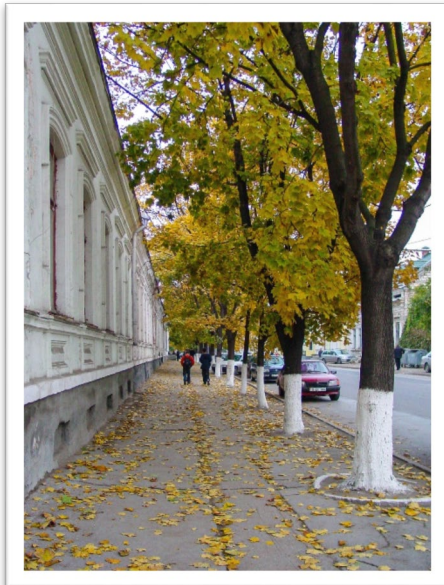


The next morning, I awoke early and took a long stroll through Central Park in the morning sunshine. The brilliant yellow and orange fall colors made it a beautiful start to the day.



(But by late afternoon, a heavy dark overcast had replaced the sunshine) Late in the afternoon I was asked to attend a meeting with the staff from the Information Technology department. Since the meeting was conducted in Moldovan or Russian, with only brief summaries in English, I really had little idea of what the meeting was about or why I was included! But one thing was for sure – it was a “tense” atmosphere with a lot of local politics at play!

When I returned to the hotel that evening, I encountered a lot of police stationed around the building. Just then, a police convoy escorting a large bus pulled up to the front of the hotel. (Later on, I was told that the President of Poland was staying at the hotel.) Before sunset, I walked downtown to the “Sun City” shopping center to look for some slide film, but it was to no avail.

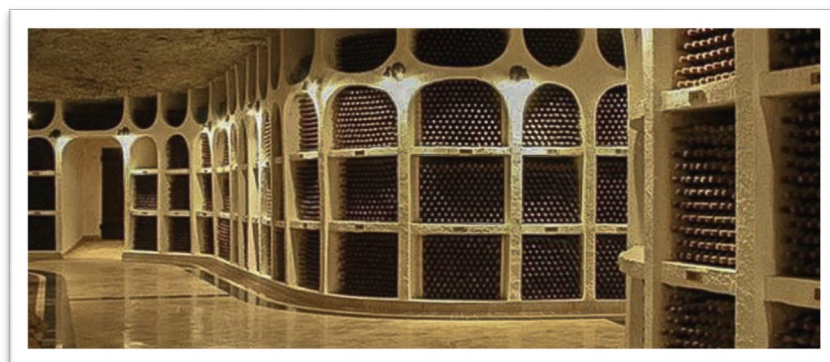


On the way back to the hotel, I stopped at “Apty’s Bar” in the lobby of the Dedeman Hotel, Chisinau’s premier new hotel. The bar was designed and decorated in a style straight out of the “Roaring 20’s”. As I sampled some of the local Moldovan beer named “ARC” beer, a pianist was playing some lovely classical music – very relaxing!

Class the next day was very interesting when Maria showed up at the end of the day with several large pizzas and two bottles of Russian vodka! Needless to say, the entire class had a great time! (Somehow, I doubted this was a Moldovan “tradition” in every training class) When I returned to the Codru Hotel, the “Balkan Congress” was in session, led by the Polish President. The police presence was everywhere, and I was required to show them my passport and hotel key. Meanwhile, the weather had turned cold and wet as most of Europe was enveloped in heavy rain and snow. That evening, Elena and her husband invited me for dinner at the Dedeman Hotel. We began by sharing an appetizer called “Pelmeni”, a traditional Russian meat-filled dumpling, followed by a main dish of pork tenderloin stuffed with steamed broccoli and roasted hazelnuts. It was delicious and a unique take on traditional style pork tenderloin. Dinner included a couple of glasses of Moldovan red wine, as well as a cup of espresso at the end. All of this came to a total expense of around \$7.00 per person, which was incredibly cheap for me, but quite expensive for the average Moldovan. On another note, the price of local Moldovan beer was typically 6 – 8 Lei, or about 50 – 70 US cents!



The following day was the last day of class, and before the class came to conclusion, there was a short “graduation” ceremony where I signed each student’s training certificate. Suddenly, Maria and Elena brought in a large bag filled with several bottles of Moldovan brandy and wine, as well as a large box of chocolates filled with brandy. One of the bottles of brandy was in the shape of a small sword, which at first glance looked like a folded umbrella! As I graciously accepted the gifts, I wondered how in the world I was going to pack all of the bottles in my luggage – and what about Customs? Before returning to the hotel, Maria and Elena took me on a short tour of Chisinau in a brand new Kia 4wd SUV driven by Ivan. They told me there were over 120 km (75 miles) of wine cellars carved deep into the rock under the city. Some of the cellars were as wide as city streets, and all of them had their own street names – fascinating!

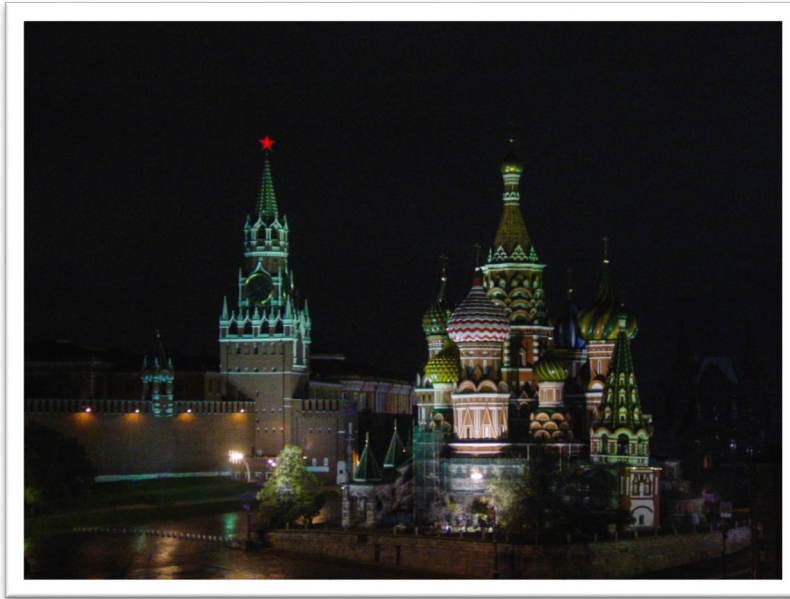


Moldova has been a wine producing region for many centuries, but during the Soviet Union “Perestroika”, Gorbachev ordered 80% of the country’s vineyards ripped out. Within less than a year, vineyards in Moldova went from 1,550,000 hectares to less than 120,000 hectares! It was an act from

the central government in Moscow that was despised by Moldovans throughout the country, particularly since they are very proud of their wine, having cultivated grapes for centuries. All too soon, it was time to return to the hotel, pack my bags, and head for the airport for the flight back to Moscow. After checking in for the Air Moldova flight, I searched among the half dozen airport duty free shops for some postcards, but to no avail. However, I managed to buy some beautiful stamps.



While waiting for the boarding announcement, I had a local “ARC” beer in the one and only airport bar. Meanwhile, as light rain began to fall outside, loud pop music blared away from a cheap “boombox” at the end of the bar, essentially drowning out the unintelligible airport announcements! The Chisinau airport was very new, with clean and modern facilities – much in contrast to the dreary, dilapidated old Vnukovo airport in Moscow! Finally, boarding was called, and once again there were no seat assignments. But as I selected a seat in the business class cabin, a very friendly flight attendant offered me a chilled glass of Moldovan champagne. The flight to Moscow was smooth and relaxing. However, once again, I couldn’t help but notice the lack of emergency oxygen on the old Russian TU-134 aircraft! Upon arrival in Moscow, it was snowing and 27 degrees – quite a big change from the beautiful autumn weather in Moldova. After passing through Russian customs and immigration, I stepped outside the terminal building and waited for Sasha as light snow fell around me. After what seemed like more than half an hour, I began to wonder if Sasha had been given my arrival information. At that point I thought I might have to figure out how to arrange for a taxi to the Russiya Hotel. But just then, Sasha suddenly appeared out of the snow and darkness! On our way to the hotel, the driver’s side windshield wiper broke! Somehow, Sasha was able to see through the snow that was rapidly accumulating on the windshield. Later in the evening, Nina and her husband picked me up at the hotel and took me to a lovely Georgian restaurant, their favorite. We shared a large plate of grilled chicken marinated in a thick savory sauce of garlic, onions, and pomegranate – it was incredibly delicious, and the Georgian wine went with it very well. Back at the hotel, I sat beside the large bay window in my room with a glass of wine and gazed upon the Kremlin and St. Basil’s Cathedral, beautifully lighted in the gently falling snow of the dark night!



Early the following morning, Sasha drove me to Sheremetyevo International Airport to catch the Delta Airlines flight to New York and on to Los Angeles. Along the way to the airport, we passed a very important historical monument marking the place where the Soviet army stopped the Nazi invasion in WWII, just a few kilometers west of the city. As I proceeded through immigration, a young officer in training looked me over several times trying to reconcile my 10-year old passport photo of long hair and a beard with my “clean shaven” appearance now! But soon I was sitting in the First Class lounge, sharing a table with a young Russian family whose little girl had just opened her birthday gift – inside the box was her new Barbie doll! Her excitement was contagious and shared by everyone around us! It wasn’t long before boarding was called for the New York flight and I enjoyed another relaxing trip in Business Class. (There are definitely some great benefits of being a frequent flyer)

So ended my first trip to Moldova and another wonderful experience discovering a new and exotic destination in the world! (I hope you enjoy the trip!)

PHOTO GALLERY

