

Go off the rails in Moldova

A sleeper train to Europe's least visited country involves an unusual middle-of-the-night awakening, as **Anttoni James Numminen** found

"I'm not Arnold Schwarzenegger," the Moldovan railway engineer chuckled as he asked me to switch bunks so that he could lift mine up to access the depths of the train carriage.

This was standard practice, he assured me as the whole train was lifted steadily from the ground. He explained: "Romania and Moldova have different-sized tracks, so we have to switch the undercarriage".

It felt far from normal, but at 4am, I was not going to start interrogating the history of track gauges. At least I'd had the foresight to pack pyjamas. Within minutes, the train was back down on its new wheels, ready for the broader track.

I had boarded the *Prietenia* (Friendship) sleeper train at 6.50pm in Bucharest for a 250-mile (400km) journey that would take me past the eastern Carpathian Mountains and fertile vineyards and over winding rivers, to Chisinau (pronounced "kee-shee-now"), capital of Moldova.

The daily service between Romania and Moldova has been run-

ning for decades and symbolises the historically close ties of the two countries, which formed the medieval Principality of Moldavia and share traditions and folklore.

Many Moldovans hold dual Romanian citizenship and regularly travel by train across the borderline River Prut for work and to visit their families.

At Bucharest's imposing Gara de Nord, I felt as though I'd stepped back in time when I boarded what is billed as one of Europe's last Soviet-era sleeper trains for the 13-hour journey. It is certainly a relic of a bygone age, with brown carpeted floors, shiny laminate walls and curtained windows.

After a cursory ticket check, I quickly found my second-class compartment at the end of the train, which pulled out of the station for an on-time departure at 7.10pm.

It was surprisingly comfortable, with a bunk on both sides. First-class accommodation guarantees sole occupancy; third-class cabins have four bunks.

Tickets start at £20 – just 5p per kilometre – but because I'd booked a few days before departure, I'd paid £35. When



Anttoni's second-class compartment was 'surprisingly comfortable'

compared to fares on most European sleeper trains, which are still often more expensive than flying, this felt like a real bargain.

Despite my limited expectations, I was impressed by the clean and spacious faux wood-panelled compartment, with its soft blue seats.

Even at night, as my train chugged past moonlit towns and villages as it skirted the Carpathian Mountains, I got a real sense of my surroundings.

Unsure of the quality of the onboard catering, I had packed

plentiful provisions including Romanian *placinta* cheese pies, pickles and beer, which I'd picked up at a supermarket in Bucharest.

But after the conductor dropped off my bedding, I wandered to the buffet car to explore.

The meagre offering was limited to sweet snacks and drinks, but I decided to indulge in a local cognac and chocolate bar for less than the price of a takeaway coffee in the UK.

I got chatting to a few passengers who were returning home for the weekend after working in Romania. They were keen to tell me that I was travelling on Moldova's most famous train – *Prietenia* was the subject of the country's 2022 folk-punk Eurovision Song Contest entry. With "Trenulețul" still ringing in my ears, I headed to bed.

The bizarre border crossing at Ungheni was the least pleasant part of the journey, but passengers can stay in their beds while passports are inspected and the train is jacked up for its wheelset change.

Soon enough, I was carried back to sleep by the swaying of the train heading towards Europe's least-visited country (which has pulled out of this year's Eurovision Song Contest).

When I woke up at Straseni, I used the communal coal samovar in my carriage to make some tea with a mug from the buffet car, before the train pulled into Chisinau at around 8.30am.

Travel essentials

Getting there

Wizz Air flies to Bucharest and Chisinau from Luton. Ryanair flies from Stansted to Bucharest. Sleeper train tickets start at £20, bileteinternationale.cfrcalatori.ro

Staying there

TA Collection Hotel in Chisinau has doubles from €53 (£45), tacollection.md

More information

moldova.travel/en
The Foreign Office advises against all travel to Transnistria on Moldova's eastern border with Ukraine. foreign-travel-advice/moldova

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I set off on the short walk from the station to the city centre. In the sprawling central market, there were rows upon rows of stalls selling tools and chainsaws, textiles, fruit and vegetables.

I spent a few lei on some chillis and pickles from a lady who had grown them in her garden just outside the city.

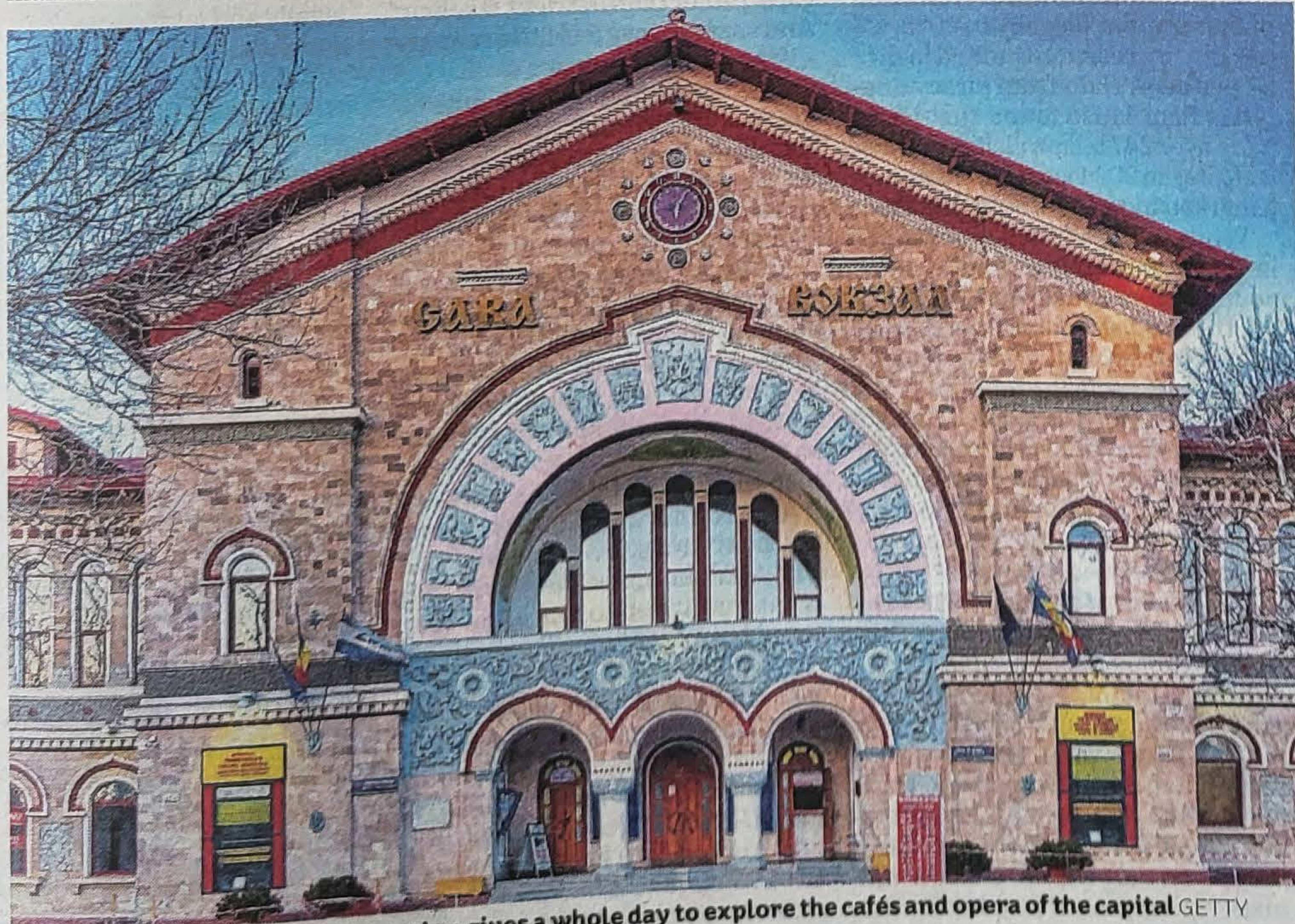
Walking along central Mitropolit Street, I stopped at a café for a pastry and to admire the diverse combination of Soviet-style brutalism and neoclassical architecture. I enjoyed a relaxed wine-tasting at Carpe Diem, a wine shop near Triumphal Arch (inset).

Despite being a sizeable wine-producing country, this was my first time trying Moldovan wine and I was impressed by the depth of the reds, which use indigenous grape varieties including *feteasca neagra*.

Later, I enjoyed a dinner of jellied rabbit, black dumplings and the sweet and moist *baba neagra*, a black cake from northern Moldova, at Fuior restaurant, followed by a world-class performance of Verdi's *Rigoletto* at the historic Chisinau Opera.

As I strolled back to my hotel, past Communist-era high-rises and Parisian-style parks, I was reminded again of the words of "Trenulețul" – "Is it old or is it new? Seems like one but also two."

This journey between two little-visited countries was one that I couldn't wait to make again.



An 8.30am arrival at Chisinau station gives a whole day to explore the cafés and opera of the capital GETTY