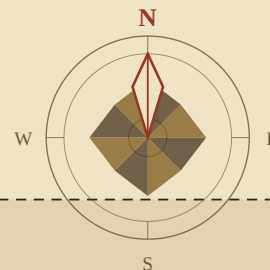


LEGEND

- the driving route
- stage stop
- △ summit above 900 m

SCALE — KILOMETRES



MADE TO EXPLORE

THE ICON ROAD

*Eight churches, two materials, from the
timber of Maramureș to the wall of Bukovina*

8 stops · 500 km · by campervan

1

SĂPÂNȚA

The Merry Cemetery — the icon as a portrait of the dead

THE ICON From 1935, Stan Ioan Pătraș began carving oak crosses, painting them blue and writing on them, in verse, the life and death of the person buried beneath — including what they did wrong. There are over eight hundred. Each carries a painted scene: the man with his scythe, the woman at her loom, the lorry that ran him over. It is the only cemetery in the world where the icon is not of a saint but of an ordinary person, treated with the same seriousness.

THE CAMPER Camper place and guesthouses in the village. The cemetery car park is small and fills by midday; coaches come in summer. Early in the morning you are alone.

FREE The Săpânța-Peri monastery, three kilometres away, has the tallest wooden church in Romania — 78 metres — and is free. The cemetery has a small ticket, and photography is allowed.

Săpânța → Sighetu Marmației → Bârsana, 45 km up the Iza valley · ~1 h by camper. You pass through Sighet, where the Memorial to the Victims of Communism stands.

2

BÂRSANA

UNESCO — the fifty-six-metre spire

THE ICON The wooden church at Bârsana, raised in 1720, is one of the eight in Maramureş on the UNESCO list. Its spire is fifty-six metres and it was built without a single iron nail. Inside, the walls are painted throughout, in tempera on wood — the icon is here, under cover, because timber will not hold a fresco outdoors. Beside it, the new monastery of 1993 is an entire village of timber raised from nothing.

THE CAMPER Guesthouses and a camper place in the village and at the monastery. The Iza valley road is good and narrow, with wooden houses on both sides.

FREE The new monastery is open to visit, in decent dress. The old church, the UNESCO one, has opening times and a small ticket. The carved Maramureş gate stands at every third house and costs nothing.

Bârsana → Poienile Izei, 12 km upstream. A narrow hill road.

3

POIENILE IZEI

The Last Judgement painted on timber walls

THE ICON The oldest wooden church in Maramureş, from 1604, and the one with the most disturbing painting: on the walls of the porch, a Last Judgement in which every sin has its punishment drawn beside it, concrete and without mercy. Whoever stole, whoever lied, whoever worked on a Sunday — each is shown with what happens to them. It is the village's manual of morals, painted for those who could not read.

THE CAMPER The village is small and the road effectively ends here. Leave the camper at the church; there is no room to turn higher up. Guesthouses in the village.

FREE The church has a small ticket and is opened on request — the key is at a house nearby, and whoever opens it tells the story. The village, with its timber houses, is walked freely.

Poienile Izei → Bârsana → Vișeu de Sus, 50 km · ~1½ h by camper. Down the Iza and up the Vișeu.

4

VIȘEU DE SUS

The Vaser forest train — still working

THE ICON The narrow-gauge forest railway up the Vaser valley was built in 1932 and is the last in Europe still hauling timber with steam locomotives. It is not a museum: the train climbs twenty-one kilometres up a valley with no road, reached only by rail. There is no icon here — this is the stage that links painted timber to felled timber, and explains where the material came from.

THE CAMPER Camper place at the station, where the vehicle is left for the day. The train leaves in the morning and returns in the afternoon — a whole day. Booked online, days ahead in summer.

FREE The station, the shed and the locomotives are seen from outside without a ticket. The Vaser valley can also be walked or cycled up the service track, free.

Vișeu de Sus → Borșa → Prislop, 40 km of climbing · ~1 h by camper. The last stretch of Maramureş.

5

PRISLOP

1,416 m — the border between the two worlds

THE ICON

The pass between Maramureş and Bukovina, and the border between two answers to the same question. Behind you the timber ends; ahead the stone begins. At the top stands the monastery where Father Arsenie Boca lived and is buried, the site of Romania's largest pilgrimage. And from the pass you see the Rodna massif, with the Pietrosul at 2,303 metres.

THE CAMPER

Large car park at the monastery, where campers are tolerated. The road is good, with wide bends, no trouble. The pass is open all year but asks for winter tyres.

FREE

The monastery, the view and the path towards the Pietrosul are open. And at the pass, sheep's cheese is usually sold straight from the fold — the best thing to eat on the whole route.

| Prislop → Câmpulung Moldovenesc → Moldovița, 100 km through the Obcine · ~3 h by camper. The only stage without churches.

6

MOLDOVIȚA

The Siege of Constantinople, painted on the wall

THE ICON

Raised in 1532 by Petru Rareș, son of Stephen, and painted on the outside in 1537. On the southern wall is the Siege of Constantinople — a scene showing the fall of the city in 1453, but with the besiegers dressed as the Turks of the painter's own day. It was propaganda: the village coming to church on Sunday saw on the wall who the enemy was. Moldovița yellow is its colour, as blue is Voroneț's.

THE CAMPER

Guesthouses and a camper place in the village. The road through the Obcine from Câmpulung is good. The monastery has its own car park.

FREE

The exterior, which is all that matters, is seen from the fence, free. The interior and the museum have a small ticket. And three kilometres away, at Vatra Moldoviței, black pottery is made.

| Moldovița → Sucevița, 30 km over the Ciurmârna pass and its hairpins · ~45 min by camper.

7

SUCEVIȚA

The Ladder of Virtues — the last and the most complete

THE ICON

The latest of the painted monasteries, from 1585, and the only one fortified like a castle, with six-metre walls. The northern wall carries the Ladder of Virtues: thirty rungs up which souls climb, with angels above and demons pulling them down at every rung they miss. The western wall was left unpainted — legend says the master fell from the scaffold. It is the best-preserved exterior painting in Bukovina.

THE CAMPER

Campsite and guesthouses in the village below the monastery. The car park is large. Ten kilometres away, at Marginea, is the centre of black pottery.

FREE

The walls and the painted exterior are seen from the courtyard, and the courtyard is free. The interior has a ticket. Putna, where Stephen the Great is buried, is 20 km away and the church is free to enter.

| Sucevița → Voroneț, 40 km through Gura Humorului · ~1 h by camper. The last stop.

8

VORONEȚ

The blue that has held for five hundred years

THE ICON

Raised by Stephen the Great in 1488, in three months and three weeks, and painted on the outside in 1547. The Last Judgement on the western wall covers the whole façade and is the largest in Bukovina. And the ground is Voroneț blue — a colour made from ground azurite, whose full recipe has never been reconstructed, and which has survived five hundred years of rain and frost without fading. That is why it is called the Sistine Chapel of the East.

THE CAMPER

Campsite and camper place at Gura Humorului, 4 km away, the best in Bukovina. Voroneț is the most visited; come at opening or towards evening.

FREE

The exterior, which is to say all the painting, is seen from the courtyard with a small ticket. Photography is allowed outside, forbidden inside — the rule is the same at all of them.

WHERE TO SLEEP

Campsite · Camping Area Voroneț, Gura Humorului · GPS 47.50514, 25.87280

| End of the route. Suceava is 35 km away, Timișoara 600, Germany 1,500.

THE ROUTE IN BRIEF

Distance	~500 km
Driving time	~14 h in all, without stops
Recommended time	8–10 days
Stage stops	8
Countries	RO
On the unesco list	7 of 8
Direction	west → east
Best months	May–Jun · Sep

GOOD TO KNOW BEFORE YOU LEAVE

The rovinietă (road vignette) is compulsory on national roads.

The steam train at Vișeu de Sus is booked online, in summer days ahead.

At several churches the key is kept at a nearby house: they open on request.

WHEN TO GO

Ideal: May–June and September. The green is complete, the low light lifts the colour off the walls, and the coaches have not come yet or have gone.

Workable: July–August, but Voroneț and Sucevița queue at midday. Go at opening, around eight.

The feast days: at Easter and on St Elijah's day the villages fill, and the churches are full of people rather than tourists. It is something else, and it is worth it, but it is not photographed.

Winter: the monasteries are open and empty, and snow on the walls is another picture altogether. The Prislop asks for winter tyres.

WHAT MAY BE PHOTOGRAPHED

The exterior may be photographed freely at all the painted monasteries — and the exterior is why you came.

The interior is closed to photography almost everywhere, and the rule is kept. It is not about money, it is about smoke and light: flash damages the pigment.

At the wooden churches of Maramureș the rule differs from village to village. Ask whoever opens the door.

During a service nothing is photographed anywhere, inside or out.

Dress: shoulders and knees covered, at all of them. At the convents a skirt is handed out at the gate if needed.

WHERE YOU SLEEP

Bukovina and Maramureș do not have many campsites, but they have guesthouses in every village, and many will take a camper in the yard, with power, for very little.

Proper camper places: Gura Humorului, Vatra Dornei, Vișeu de Sus at the station, Sighetu Marmăției. Elsewhere, ask at a guesthouse or at the monastery.

The large monasteries have car parks where campers are tolerated overnight if you are discreet and leave in the morning. Ask first.

The valley roads are narrow with houses at the edge; do not drive them at night. That is exactly why the stages are short.

WHY THEY PAINTED ON THE OUTSIDE

The question How do you make a church speak to someone who cannot read? Both regions gave the same answer — with pictures — but in different materials, for different reasons.

Maramureș Under Hungarian rule, Orthodox Romanians were not permitted to raise churches of stone. They built in timber, and to make up for the height they were denied they raised spires of fifty-six metres. The painting stayed inside, because timber will not hold a fresco outdoors.

Bukovina Under Stephen and his successors, the building was of stone, and the church was small — it held the prince and his court. The village stood outside. So they painted outside, on the render, with scenes anyone could follow from the fence: the Last Judgement, the Ladder of Virtues, sieges.

Why the colour stayed The exterior frescoes of Bukovina have survived five hundred years of rain and frost, which happens nowhere else. The explanation lies in the render and the pigments; Voroneț blue, from azurite, has never been fully reproduced.

What you actually see The best-preserved façades are those facing south and east, sheltered from the rain that comes from the north-west. At every monastery, the northern wall is the faded one.

Why are the Bukovina monasteries painted on the outside?

Because the church was small — it held the prince and his court — and the village stood outside. They painted the exterior wall with scenes anyone could follow from the fence, at a time when people could not read.

Why are the Maramureş churches wooden and not stone?

Under Hungarian rule, Orthodox Romanians were not permitted to raise churches of stone. They built in timber, and to make up for the height they were denied they raised spires of up to fifty-six metres.

Can you photograph in the painted monasteries?

The exterior, yes, freely — and the exterior is why you came. The interior is forbidden almost everywhere, because flash damages the pigment. During a service nothing is photographed anywhere.

When is the best time for the route?

May–June and September. The low light lifts the colour off the walls, and the coaches have not come yet or have gone. In summer there are queues at Voroneţ and Suceviţa at midday.

THE RULE OF THE ROAD

*“Both regions had the same thing to say to people who could not read.
One had timber and built upwards; the other had stone and painted outwards.
What you see on the walls is not decoration — it is the text, written for the eye.”*

Documentary check: September 2026. Places, hours and conditions change — check them before you leave.