

Rasnov vs Bran, chasing Dracula in Transylvania

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Having grown up on old horror movies it was a natural thing to seek out Dracula's native Transylvania. Of course the real culprit was Vlad Tepes, the man Bram Stoker based the legendary vampire on. A real life prince with a passion for impaling his victims on wooden spikes. I wasn't seeking out bats in the belfry here, nor politically correct history lessons. I was seeking out boyhood fantasy's - plain and simple.

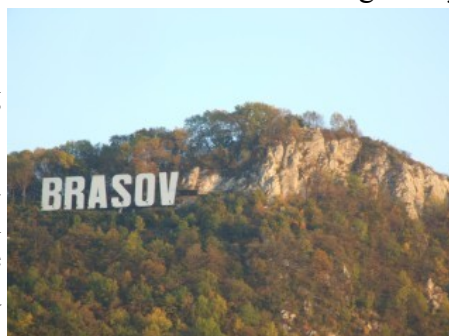
I knew something was a miss when I arrived in Brasov and found a giant white Hollywood style sign looking down upon



the idyllic gothic village below. Some tourism board was at work. That said,

Brasov was charming. Black Churches, watch towers, town squares and a great atmosphere. It was also a short bus ride away from Bran, where legend has is stoker based Dracula at. In reality Val Tepes was rumored to have stopped by, no more. For me it was a vast disappointment. Graphic descriptions of a

high walled towering castle where unspeakable things happened were far from reality. Castle Bran was more like a mini fairy princesses tower. A mere jut of a building surrounded by pine trees and two large steep hills on either side.



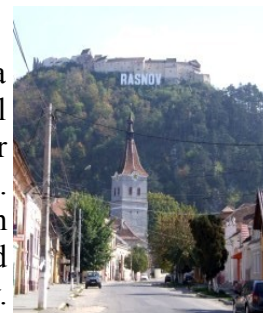
Around it's base, gift stores, Drac t-shirts, and more memorabilia than you could possibly want.

It was on the way back, disappointed , looking out the window that I saw something far more disturbing. Another giant hillside sign. This time it read Rasnov. I returned the following day. Rasnov was a rundown little town. Nowhere near as neat and pretty as Brasov. But it did have something neither Bran nor Brasov has. High above the town was a crumbling old castle, with high walls and a sense of ancient legend.

Following the winding road up through thick pine groves I came across a green area. It was sunday and it seemed like Sunday was then the local



security teams took their guard dogs out for exercise. On my steep gravel strewn assent to the castle I could hear them howling below. Could it get any better?



Yes it most certainly could. Castle Rasnov was a virtual treasure trove of horror. Inside the main walls the castle had a small crumbling village. A few buildings had been restored, but most were roofless and falling apart. Unlike Bran, there were no tourists and no souvenir stores around. I ventured down into its museum. Here, items of from past were laid out in dusty splendor. Swords, paintings and artifacts from past nobility were everywhere to be found. Further on there were more sinister items a foot. Archeologists had uncovered a tomb in small stone room. The woman, was buried deep under the floor. While along the walls were sketches from that era of witch craft, devilish implements and horrific torture.



I made my way to the top of the castle. Again mere rubble separated me from plunging over the side in parts. A top a platform the castle's had a panoramic view of the whole area. A magnificent warlords advantage point that overlooked Bran with ease. To the rear of the castle was a pasture land where two horses and some donkey's were gazing under their masters watch. An old peasant man. Simple, with a pipe, he waved to me as I sat down and took in the mighty vista of the carpathian mountains.



Surely they'd got it wrong. This must have been where Stoker had meant.

I traveled north to the town of Sighisoara. Birthplace of Vlad Tepes. I expected a tourist town, but got a quiet village under extreme renovation. There everything was being dug up and modernized. They were after all in the bidding to host a new Dracula theme park. Behind the town church was a lone bust of Vlad. Nothing special. Nearby his fathers house where he was born. Now a themed restaurant.



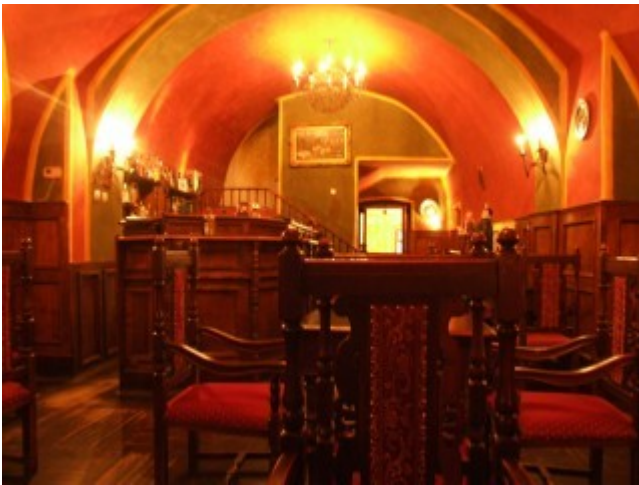
I debated whether I should go in or not. I imagined hideously bad cartoon images, and child friendly souvenirs. But, as fate would have it, on my third passing I said why not. And, there wasn't a gaudy thing about the place. It was rustic, gothic and not at all made out to be themed. More a rich restaurant dedicated to a long passed family. Paintings hung from the wall depicting family portraits from the Tepes era, alongside the odd landscape watercolor of an impaling field. The waitress were dressed in traditional garb, wenches if you will. And, I was alone. Not a soul around. I couldn't resist.



I sat in the main dining area and ordered steak and red wine. My only luxury meal in my whole journey. Served on a platter with a hunting knife my wine was poured from an old style jug and I was lost in another world. I thought back to

Brasov, Bran and Rasnov. I personally think this is what happened -

Vlad Tepes may or may not have passed by Bran, most likely if he did it was to Rasnov castle just down the road. No military man would pay second heed to Bran. Unless of course there was a princess inside. Centuries later Stoker wrote his book. Based on it's popularity the good folk at Bran laid claim to their own castle's importance. Meanwhile the town council in



Brasov knowing they were too late, went tourist crazy and thought a giant white hillside town would attract more attention from tourists. Which it did, thanks to the upkeep of their town. Then the wondrous town council of Rasnov decided to copy them and build there own giant white sign. Only that's as far as they got before they drank the rest of the money away. The town did seem to have a high level of intoxicated people around. Sighisoara on the other hand is yet to



fully cash in though. A theme park will no doubt aid in all that. And so a second meal will be out of the question.

I sat at the head of my long table for about thirty minutes. A genuine tear in my eye as boyhood dreams and child like fantasy's from late night movie nights faded into reality. The a group of camera clutching tourist entered. No restrictions on the number of flash bulbs they could fire off. Then another group and another. I looked over at the painting of Vlad, then of the field of his impaled victims; and left.

