

Culture Capsule: Romania

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According to Craig Storti, culture can be defined as “the shared assumptions, values, and beliefs of a group of people which result in characteristic behavior (Storti, p. 5).” With this interpretation in mind, it becomes clear that encountering novel cultures can be held as both exciting and simultaneously challenging experiences. While one is enriched by the new perspective on life and the differing rituals and festivities that another country often has to offer, one can also be bombarded with the more “invisible” cultural aspects that seem to isolate and alienate the traveler from meaningful interactions (Storti, p. 5). In preparing a female friend for a hypothetical study abroad experience in Romania, I would provide her with a thorough analysis of the Romanian culture on “cognitive”, “behavioral”, and “affective” levels (Ang & Earley, p. 266). By covering all sides of culture, she would be better equipped for a smooth transition.

The cognitive aspect of the Romanian culture would first be examined. According to Ang and Earley, this aspect includes all the overt factual information about the country. Location, climate, language structure, safety, and money are all important physical factors of culture that would directly affect a prospective study abroad student. By understanding these more physical foundations of the Romanian country, one will have a practical knowledge of what to expect within the new environment, how to get around as well as special accommodations that may need to be made. Further, it provides a strong base in which one can understand the strong core values that act as an undercurrent to these structures.

Geographically, Romania is a country in Eastern Europe surrounded by Bulgaria, Hungary, Moldova, Serbia and Montenegro, and the Ukraine (The World Factbook, 2005, Geography Section, para. 6). There are approximately 22, 329, 977 people living within its borders (The World Factbook, 2005, People Section, para. 1). When compared to the size of

states in the United States, the size of this nation is very close in size to the state of Oregon (The World Factbook, 2005, Geography Section, para. 5). The climate within this nation is fairly moderate overall. There are four clear seasons within a given year (The World Factbook, 2005, Geography Section, para. 9). Spring and summers are warm and pleasant with moderate amounts of rain, whereas fall and winter are colder in nature (The World Factbook, 2005, Geography Section, para. 9). Winters are characterized by regular snowfall, but are generally not bitter or harsh in temperature (The World Factbook, 2005, Geography Section, para. 9). On the other hand, because certain areas in Romania are mountainous, climate can become much harsher at high altitudes. If one is planning on staying or traveling into these higher altitudes, climates will most likely be more extreme in nature (Kokker & Kemp p. 335).

This is important to note because travelers must be aware of the season in which they are traveling in order to pack appropriate dress for the occasion. While dressing in light weight clothes may be appropriate in lower altitudes, the winter months and mountainous regions require heavier and more insulated clothes (Romania Tourism, 2003, Climate Section, para. 3). Further, travelers must be prepared for cooler weather at nights during all seasons (Romania Tourism, 2003, Climate Section, para. 3). Practical clothes that function within this climate are necessary for a comfortable experience. Other accommodations for dress should be met in order to accommodate to the cultural norms of this country. In general, Romanian dress is conservative (Launois, 2005, Social Profile Section, para. 5). While more informal attire could be acceptable, wearing more revealing clothes such as beachwear should be avoided except in explicitly appropriate environments (ex. Going to the beach) (Launois, 2005, Social Profile Section, para. 5).

In Romania, the official and most widely used language is Romanian, while fewer numbers of the population may speak Hungarian or German (The World Factbook, 2005, People Section, para. 1). Romanian is a Romance language that is most related to Latin, Italian and French (Comrie, 1990, p. 306). It based off the Roman alphabet which contains 32 letters (Comrie, 1990, p. 308). Sentence order often follows a pattern similar to English of “subject-verb-object” (Comrie, 1990, p. 315). Like other languages, Romanian nouns often have a set gender (Comrie , 1990, p. 311). Another aspect that is fairly different from English is the Romanian tendency to use “consonant clusters” such as “zg” and “zdr” which pronunciations would be very difficult to figure out if one had not learned to rules before one was exposed (Comrie, 1990, p. 310). Pronunciation is pretty straightforward after one has learned the basic rules (Burford& Longley, 2004, p. 449). Unlike other languages, there are few exceptions and once one has mastered the general pronunciation rules, one can be able to pronounce most words consistently and correctly by following the same structure (Burford &Longley,2004, p. 449). Although this language is a Romance language, auditory versions of this language are very hard to decipher and understand for other Romance language speakers (Burford & Longley, 2004, p.449).

Because language is such an integral part in understanding another culture and communicating one’s needs, feelings, and thoughts to one another, careful attention should be given to learning key phrases and polite salutations. Polite and correct salutations are important. Phrases such as “Bună” (Hello), “Da” (Yes), “Nu” (No), “Vă rog” (Please), “Mulțumesc” (Thank you.), and “Iertațmă (I’m sorry.) are all very basic terms that can help in the most basic conversations (Burford &Longley, 2004, p. 439).

Other important phrases may involve presenting or explaining some need or concern to someone. These phrases may be necessary in emergencies or when in unfamiliar or uncertain places or circumstances. Knowing these phrases helps one gets the answers one needs in the most straightforward fashion. Phrases such as “Dreapta” (Right), stânga” (Left), and “Dreapt înainte” (Straight on) are all useful in trying to find one’s way around cities and towns (Burford & Longley, 2004, p. 439). Further, “Vorbiți englezeste?” (Do you speak English?) may be useful in situations where one needs more complicated or extensive interaction or help and the language barrier is too much (Burford & Longley, 2004, p. 439).

Safety would also be a cognitive cultural aspect that should be greatly researched and explored. Every culture tends to have its own unique pattern of crime. Targeting dangerous cities and popular forms of crime would be helpful so that travel accommodations could be made to avoid more dangerous areas or to make plans to travel with company. Romania’s crime record is mostly made up of nonviolent crimes (U.S. State Department, 2005, Romania-Crime Section, para. 1). While this seems to be good news and should provide travelers confidence in traveling within this country, it must be noted that while not violent in nature, many crime patterns in Romania specifically target tourists (U.S. State Department, 2005, Romania-Crime Section, para. 1).

Theft, pick pocketing, and credit card fraud all are serious problems in Romania (U.S. State Department, 2005, Romania-Crime Section, para. 1). Train stations and other areas with a high percentage of tourists show higher occurrences in such offenses to travelers (U.S. State Department, 2005, Romania-Crime Section, para. 1). For example, some thieves within Romania use complex and well thought out procedures in obtaining tourist’s valuables. In one popular trick, thieves may pretend to be casually dressed police officers and may swipe people’s wallets

after they ask the unsuspecting tourist for some form of identification (U.S. State Department, 2005, Romania-Crime Section, para. 1). By being aware of possible tricks such as these and having a healthy amount of wariness of the people around oneself, one may be able to prevent being duped. This information is particularly important for people such as my friend who will most likely be using public transportation often. Being aware of the high occurrences of such actions will allow her to be more on guard for potential thieves.

The money system would also be a practical concern for a traveling student. Allotting oneself adequate amounts of money for traveling and having a good understanding as to how American currency translates into Romanian currency is significant in knowing how closely one must watch their spending or how much one should reasonably budget to use within a given time frame.

The Romanian currency is Lue (Launois, 2005, Money and Budget Guide Section, para. 1). This currency has been recently changed. While the old currency used to deal in thousands (2,000-1,000,000), the new currency ranges from 1-500 lei (Launois, 2005, Money and Budget Guide Section, para. 2&3). Because this change did not occur until July of 2005, the old currency will be allowed to be in use up until December 2006 (Launois, 2005, Money and Budget Guide Section, para. 1). After this point, the old currency will be taken out of circulation (Launois, 2005, Money and Budget Guide Section, para. 1). This is important for a tourist to know so she is not confused as to the value of money she has. Without being aware of this situation, she may think she has way more or considerably littler amount of money that she actually does.

It also is important to know the exchange rate of Lue to the American dollar. In 2005, 3.11 lei could be given for every American dollar (Launois, 2005, Money and Budget Guide Section, para. 3). In knowing how much Romanian currency one may get for the American

dollar, my friend would be better able to know how much money she has available to her and how she may need to budget accordingly. It also must be noted that Romania also accepts many major credit cards such as Visa and Mastercard (Launois, 2005, Money and Budget Guide Section, para. 5). This may make buying necessities and souvenirs easier for people who are confused by the currency exchange.

While all of these more blatant manifestations of Romania are very important in becoming functional within this culture, there are several other aspects that are important that take a less overt form. Behavior-oriented focus on the Romanian culture is also needed in order for understanding and relating to those in the new environment (Ang & Earley, p. 266). While behaviorally oriented cultural aspects can still be clearly visible in the culture, they are less strictly blatant than the cognitive forms of culture. Instead of aiding in physically functioning in Romania, concern for proper behavior plays a more integral role in interpersonal relations and in “blending in.”

By understanding the more subtle cultural norms and roles of society, travelers are less likely to unknowingly offend those within the culture. Likewise, being aware of specific cultural values and behaviors will allow for travelers to feel more assimilated in their new environment (Ang & Earley, p. 266). By providing a sense of comfort, this allows for travelers to experience the culture more fully, connect more deeply with those around them, and understand better how this culture is unique.

Romania, like all countries have specific behaviors that are culturally accepted and reinforced and certain behaviors that are considered rude or offensive. As a traveler or student studying abroad, one goal would involve following these behavioral norms so as to not upset or offend those that one comes into contact with. In Romania, some of these norms are very similar

to norms within the United States. For example, punctuality is very important (Axtell, p. 66). Like the United States, time is an important aspect of everyday life. Appointments, class, and meetings should be attended on time. Meandering through the day is generally not looked upon well.

Further, introductive gestures are similar to normative behavior in the United States. A firm handshake is often a proper and appropriate way of addressing people during introductions at the beginning of meetings or informal get-togethers (Axtell, p. 152). This is very comfortable for most Americans who partake in this norm on an everyday basis. On the other hand, it must be noted that other factors of greeting and meeting people are different in Romania. Sometimes, it is appropriate within Romania for men to kiss the hand of a woman (Axtell, p. 152). While this is not unheard of in the United States, unknown men do not generally partake in this behavior except for particular contexts (ex. fancy dinner party). This type of behavior from of stranger who is only trying to be polite could be taken as flirtation by women who are not used to such a practice.

Further, introductory conversations are more formal than they generally are in the United States. In Romania, it is often seen as inappropriate or rude to address someone by their first name (Axtell, p. 66). First name use is reserved only for close friends and family (Axtell, p. 66). It would be easy for an American to fall into this cultural trap. The United States often encourages less formal greetings between adults. Adult acquaintances rarely seem to call each other by their title and last name. By showing more formality until invited to use more relaxed titles, a student studying in Romania may have a better chance of having and maintaining good and positive relationships with those older than her and with the many people she encounters in public places. It is an easy way of showing respect and blending in.

Other taboos within the Romanian culture are concerned with conversational topics.

While getting to know someone, one may be tempted to ask about certain topics that unknown to the traveler may be inappropriate. There are several topics that are “safe” to talk about in casual conversations. Sports, entertainment, fashion, Literature, and travel all are topics that are generally neutral (Axtell, p. 66). On the other hand, topics such as politics, communism, Russia, and other topics which may emphasize negative events in Romanian history or culture may be considered inappropriate or offensive if brought up (Axtell, p. 66).

Obviously, there are blatant bodily gestures that travelers should be aware of so as to not unknowingly perform one to someone within this culture. The “fig” and “vertical horns” are both examples of strong insults within the Romanian culture. If one displays these gestures, it could be taken as a sexual affront or an example of cuckolding (Axtell, p. 153).

Special attention should also be taken in considering the role of gender in behavior and how this viewed within this culture. While there appears to be no stringent gender roles that prevent women from performing “masculine” activities, certain behaviors that are held up within this culture point to a more traditional view of gender roles. Men rise when women leave a room or table (Axtell p. 152). Men traveling within this country are probably held to this same standard of respect for women. Likewise, women living and traveling within Romania are expected to act in a specific way in certain contexts. If my friend had planned on attending a Greek Orthodox Church, for example, she would be expected to follow the norms for dress. Women are expected to wear very modest clothing and avoid pants (Axtell, p. 152). This being a huge cultural difference from the United States where dress is much less modest and where gender roles are more lax, proper considerations of this aspect of behavior should be considered in order for the traveler to feel more comfortable as well as the people around them.

Once one is aware of the more structural or formal examples of cultural as well as the more relationally oriented cultural behavioral norms, more effort can be made in experiencing the unique cultural treasures that the nation of Romania has to offer. This affective focus on the Romanian culture would include examining the cultural values that underlie the overt aspects of culture (Ang & Earley, p. 266). The main goal of such an investigation would mainly be to build understanding and tolerance of unique aspects of the Romanian culture while simultaneously lessening the effects of prejudice (Ang & Earley, p. 267).

Physical manifestations of cultural prides and values can be appreciated in the art and festivities that the Romania cultures holds up as important and beautiful. By exploring the more culturally rich activities and locations within Romania, rather than the commercialized tourist attractions, my friend traveling, along with other travelers, may be able to better understand this culture and appreciate the differences it has to the American culture, rather than superficially accepting or judging the differing values. Not only would this cultural information help understand what is held to be important and in turn aid in interactions, but it would also enrich the traveler. Being exposed to new places and things allows one to grow and appreciate aspects of life that one never knew existed. Romania has several visible cultural manifestations that could serve this purpose.

One outlet in which cultural pride can be seen is within the strong base of folk culture within this nation. Folk art, dress, and writing not only hold a strong base within Romanian culture, but it also appears to be an inspiration to modern artists and professionals in this country (Britannica). Cultural festivals that occur regularly throughout the year would be a good way of my friend to experience the cultural heritage in which modern Romanian culture gets its roots (Romania Tourism, 2005, Festivals and Events Section, para. 1). These festivals which are often

firmly based in folk tradition include young and old members of this culture partaking in traditional food, dress, and activities (Romania Tourism, 2005, Festivals and Events Section, para. 1). Like much of Romanian tradition, much of these festivities are based largely in their medieval heritage as well as Latin tradition (Romania Tourism, 2005, Festivals and Events Section, para. 1).

One other example of a cultural treasure that Romania has to offer is its numerous castles that often date back to medieval times. Bran's Castle, often nicknamed "Dracula's Castle" not only is a specimen in and of itself of the historical background of Romania, but also now houses several art pieces and Romanian artifacts that further display Romanian culture (Romania Tourism, 2005, Castles and Fortresses, para. 8). Nearby, there is a museum with an even more extensive museum of art and objects that are important to the culture and history of Romania (Romania Tourism, 2005, Castles and Fortresses, para. 8).

Visiting the historical places of Romania as well as viewing many of the artifacts that they hold may allow those visiting to understand what this culture holds to be important as well as which of these objects or places act of symbols of their value system and cultural attitude. By being exposed to these unique and interesting places and experiences, the tourist can forget about the often uncomfortable and tense interaction that often occurs in visiting a new culture, and simply enjoy culture for culture's sake.

While much could be learned in actually moving and experiencing the Romanian culture in Romania, my friend could also get a better understanding of the Romanian culture by researching and participating in events and activities of Romanian organizations within Chicago. For example, the Round Table Society is an organization with the goal and purpose of bringing bonding Romanian American people together through activities based on Romanian traditions

and activities as well providing resources and assistance to those within the Romanian community (Round Table Society, 2005, Mission and Goals Section). By providing financial support to recently immigrant families, providing scholarships for Romanian students wishing to go to college and providing places and events such as fundraiser and holiday parties, the Romanian community within Chicago can be maintained and strengthened (Round Table Society, 2005, Mission and Goals Section). By attending such events, my friend would very likely be able to experience and observe many of the values and norms that the Romanian culture upholds.

The Consulate General of Romania in Chicago also provides valuable information for Romanian Americans as well as those interested in the Romanian culture. It provides information on organizations around the area, facts on Romanian culture, politics, and geography as well as information and resources regarding Romanian legal tasks such as marriage and visas (Consulate General of Romania, 2005).

While it is clear that culture in general is a complicated concept that is hard to fully grasp without personal immersion and experience, there are several strategies and general rules and practices that can be done to make transition into another culture less traumatic and more exciting. If my hypothetical friend would be able to take into consideration the cognitive, behavioral, and affective aspects of the Romanian culture, it seems as though many stressful situations could be avoided. Being aware of the specific norms of the Romanian culture as well as the values and customs to which these behaviors are based allows for a better understanding and tolerance of differences in the future.

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