

A Taste
of the
Kavatha

Global

GETAWAY

by Margaret Swaine
Columnist and Author
www.margaretswaine.com



10 REASONS TO VISIT MOLDOVA NOW



Accommodations at Castel Mimi



Castel Mimi



Cheese Pie at Vinuri de Comrat



Musicians in Chisinau

Never heard of Moldova? You're not alone. It's Europe's least visited and poorest country. The republic wants to change that and it has geared up to beckon tourists. When I visited this August I discovered some gems and so give you ten reasons to visit the Republic of Moldova now.

Stump Your Neighbours

When I told people I was heading to Moldova, their first response was puzzlement. No one I spoke to knew there was even a place called Moldova, let alone where it was. This small landlocked country wedged in-between Ukraine on the north, south and east and Romania to the west is not even well known among Europeans. The region, formerly known as Bessarabia, was a part of the Romanian principality of Moldavia until 1812, when it was ceded to Russia. After World War I, it became a part of Greater Romania. It reverted to Russian control in 1940–41 and again after World War II. Upon the collapse of the Soviet Union in August 1991, the republic declared its independence and took the name Moldova.

It's Easy to See it All

Moldovans have a joke they like to tell which goes like this: "I'm taking a vacation and I will drive all through Moldova." Friend answers, "Great idea. What are you going to do in the afternoon?" It is a small country, about 150 kilometres by 300 kilometres. With a total area of 33,843 square km it is only slightly larger than the state of Maryland for example. You could see all of it in under a week. Major roads are generally fine though drivers can be aggressive.

Wine is their Trump Card

Moldova has a long history of wine making dating back to around 3000 BC. With a little imagination, you could agree with Moldovans who claim the map of today's republic is shaped like a bunch of grapes. When they were part of the USSR, state produced wine emphasized quantity over quality – in 1982 they produced 12 million hectolitres of wine and every fourth bottle consumed in Russia was from Moldova. Today they have refocused on quality by establishing protected geographical indications (PGI) for their traditional vine growing areas and replanted indigenous grape varieties

“The underground galleries (Milestii Mici wine cellar) are likely the longest in the world.”

among other measures. There are now 187 wineries of which 64 have registered for PGI wines.

Sip Wine from Grapes Unique to Moldova

Part of the fun of visiting a country is trying something local and unique to the place. Local grape varieties Feteasca Alba, Feteasca Regala, Feteasca Neagra and Rara Neagra are becoming increasingly important as a point of difference and to offer something with real Moldovan character. While at the moment they are only 5% of the production, they are good and worth searching out.

A Guinness Book of Records Wine Collection

The underground galleries of the Milestii Mici wine cellar are likely the longest in the world, stretching for over 200 kilometres. Visitors can drive their cars through these huge limestone tunnels, dug out originally for their stone building blocks. They now contain more than 1.5 million bottles of wine representing the largest wine collection in the world, recorded by the Guinness Book of Records in 2005. After experiencing the dramatic cellars, visitors can settle into a tasting room for wines paired with traditional dishes such as meat stews, mămăligă (a cornmeal porridge) with goat cheese and sarmale (cabbage rolls). Cricova is another winery with an impressive ‘underground city’ of over 70 kilometres of tunnels housing 30 million litres of wine. Visitors take an electric train for a visit that goes as deep as 80 metres below ground and includes a short film in their underground cinema and wine tasting paired with cheese, nuts and cookies. Above ground is a full service restaurant and bar.

www.milestii-mici.md www.cricova.md

Fresh and Tasty Food

Moldova is renowned for its rich fertile black soils. Home grown vegetables such as tomatoes, eggplant, peppers and zucchini are super tasty. At the small artisanal winery Mihai Sava in the village of Costești we were served a huge variety of local dishes all cooked by his wife Valentin. We had plates of fried vegetables from their garden, fresh tomatoes and cucumbers, plăcintă (hot pastry stuffed with cheese), tiny sarmale (the smaller the cabbage roll the more talented the cook’s fingers) served with sour cream, stuffed red

peppers, fried meats and more. It was a typical country meal and one that winemaker Mihai offers to visitors along with a wine tasting for about \$30. [Facebook.com/MihaiSava.GT](https://www.facebook.com/MihaiSava.GT)

Beautiful Vistas and Architecture

There are perhaps a surplus of soviet style ugly apartment blocks in the capital Chisinau but a quick drive outside the city takes you to some gorgeous wineries that offer lovely accommodation and restaurants. Castel Mimi was founded in 1893 by Constantin Mimi, the last governor of Bessarabia who planted vines on his estate in the Anenii-Noi district. When it became a state-run business in 1940, it was one of the largest industrial wine factories in the USSR. Later after decades of inactivity and ruin, an ambitious restoration project was begun in 2011. Today it has been listed among the top 14 most beautiful architectural masterpieces of the winemaking world by Vivino. On property is a lovely ozonated pool and seven gorgeous contemporary stone lodges designed by Italian architect Arnaldo Tranti for overnight accommodation. The restaurant serves traditional dishes reinterpreted as modern haute cuisine using fresh local



Cricova Underground Cellars

A Taste of the *Global* GETAWAY

10 REASONS TO VISIT MOLDOVA NOW



Dining at Chisinau

ingredients. Chateau Vartely, a modern winery founded in 2004, is also a culture and leisure resort with tasting rooms, an excellent 220 seat restaurant where they hold gastro tastings and 14 rooms divided among three guest lodges. It was here I enjoyed a local dessert baba neagra (a moist dark cake) paired with an impressive Riesling Icewine 2017.

www.castelmimi.md www.vartely.md

The Price is Right

I stayed in the modern, centrally located, City Park Hotel on a pedestrian street lined with restaurants with outdoor seating in the capital of Chisinau. My large deluxe room was around \$100 a night. Even the fancy digs at Castel Mimi were only about \$220 a night and included breakfast, mini bar and unlimited access to the pool. Wine tours with tastings and snacks started at around \$15. A tour, tasting and big delicious full meal feast at Castel Mimi is around \$74. A traditional meal with wine at Vinuri de Comrat in the south in Gagauzia in the Budzhak steppe was even less and included shurpa (lamb/beef soup with vegetables and lovage), pide (savoury cheese pastry), and all kinds of grilled meats, veggies and charcuterie.

www.citypark.md www.vinuridecomrat.md




Wine Tasting at Chateau Vartely

Over a Dozen Wine Bars in Chisinau

If you don't want to drink and drive, there are over a dozen wine bars in Chisinau such as the Tasting Room WineMd which offers 400 different wines from 60 producers. A tasting of three wines with snacks here is about \$11. A rib eye steak is \$6, a plate of pasta with shrimps \$7 and an enormous, more than you can eat pork hock dish is \$16.

www.wine.md

October 5 – 6 Moldovan National Wine Day Celebrations

This weekend in October at the 18 edition of The National Wine Day, over 60 producers will pop open thousands of bottles of wine in a village street fair. Dozens of restaurants will have stalls serving up traditional festive dishes cooked on the spot. The artistic program includes Moldovan orchestras, dance ensembles, brass bands and pop stars. There's also a handi-craft fair, wine tutorials and guided tours. 

<http://wineday.wineofmoldova.com/?lang=en>