

A Million Bottles Underground, Then a Soviet Time Capsule — A 5-Day Moldova Itinerary

Moldova is Europe's most overlooked country, and that's precisely the appeal: five days here cover two of the largest wine cellars on Earth (one holds the Guinness World Record), a cliffside cave monastery carved by monks eight centuries ago, and a day trip across the Dniester River into Transnistria — a Soviet-flagged breakaway territory with its own currency, border checkpoints, and hammer-and-sickle flag still flying over the parliament. It's a short, inexpensive loop built around Chişinău, with one overnight in a cliffside village along the way.

DURATION

5 Days

BEST TIME TO GO

May - June & Late Sept - Early Oct

Spring and early autumn bring mild, dry days without summer's heat. Early October adds National Wine Day, when Chişinău's Great National Assembly Square fills with winemakers pouring their best; winter is coldest but the underground cellars stay a cozy, crowd-free alternative when it's below freezing outside.

FROM

\$760 USD / person

for 2 people, incl. 3 nights in Chişinău, 1 night in Butuceni, the Cricova & Milestii Mici wine tour, and the Transnistria day trip

Day 1

Arrival in Chişinău

Land at Chişinău International Airport, a 15-minute ride from the center, and spend the afternoon getting oriented on Europe's least-crowded capital boulevard.

Taxi — Chişinău Airport (KIV) to City Center

~15 min · 115-150 MDL (~\$6.50-8.50 USD)

Official airport taxis post fixed prices on signboards in the arrivals hall — a base fare of roughly 50 MDL plus 5 MDL per kilometer. Pay cash in Moldovan lei and have your hotel address written down, since drivers rarely speak English.

Walk — Ştefan cel Mare Boulevard & Nativity Cathedral

~1.5 hrs, self-guided · free

Chişinău's central spine runs from the Triumphal Arch and the gold-domed Nativity Cathedral through a long, leafy park built over a buried stream — one of the quietest, least touristed capital-city strolls left in Europe.

Check-In — Radisson Blu Leograd Hotel Chişinău

Check-in 2pm · from \$143 USD/night

A modern high-rise hotel a short walk from the main boulevard, with the city's best spa and pool facilities and rooms well above what the rate would buy in most EU capitals.

Radisson Blu Leograd Hotel - 77 Mitropolit Varlaam, Chisinau - radisson-blu-leograd.hotel-chisinau.com

Dinner — La Plăcinte

Dinner · mains \$4–9 USD/person

A homestyle Moldovan chain built around the country's namesake stuffed pastries, plus mămăligă (cornmeal porridge), sarmale (stuffed cabbage), and mici (grilled sausages) at prices that make this one of Europe's cheapest places to eat well.

La Placinte - Str. Decebal 99/6, Chisinau - +373 22 26-54-01

Day 2

Underground Wine Cities — Cricova & Milestii Mici

A full day touring two of the largest wine cellars on the planet, both carved from the limestone mines left behind after decades of quarrying for building stone.

Guided Wine Tour — Cricova & Milestii Mici

~6 hrs, hotel pickup · from \$320 USD/person

A private full-day tour covering both underground wine cities, with a driver and guide, wine tastings at each stop, local snacks, and a bottle to take home — booked through operators like byfood.com or any licensed Chişinău tour agency. Bring a light jacket; both cellars hold a constant 12–14°C (54–57°F) year-round.

Cricova's Underground City

Included on tour · streets named for wine varieties

Over 120 km of former limestone-mine tunnels now hold street signs reading Cabernet and Feteasca, a few of which are navigated by golf cart. The cellar's private collection has hosted numerous visiting heads of state and celebrities over the decades, and doubled as a bomb shelter and secret Soviet aircraft-parts depot during the Cold War.

Milestii Mici — the Guinness World Record Cellar

Included on tour · ~1.5 million bottles on site

At roughly 200 km of underground galleries and around 1.5 million bottles in permanent storage, Milestii Mici holds the Guinness World Record for the largest wine collection on Earth — some of it dating to the 1960s. Visitors ride through sections of the cellar by cart before walking the main tasting hall.

Day 3

Orheiul Vechi's Cave Monastery & Butuceni Village

Out of the capital to Moldova's most striking natural and historic site: a monastery carved directly into a limestone cliff above a river bend, with an overnight in the cliffside village below it.

Drive — Chişinău to Orheiul Vechi

~45 km, ~1 hr by car (or marshrutka minibus, ~45 MDL)

A straightforward drive northeast through rolling farmland and small villages to the Orheiul Vechi archaeological reserve. Minibuses (marshrutky) run from Chişinău's Central Bus Station for travelers without a rental car, though the last return often leaves by mid-afternoon.

Orheiul Vechi Cave Monastery & Cliffs

~2 hrs, self-guided · ~15 MDL (~\$0.85 USD) museum entry

A cave church and monks' cells hand-carved into the limestone cliffs above a hairpin bend in the Răut River, first hollowed out in the 13th century and still used for worship today. The walk along the cliff edge above the ruined Geto-Dacian fortress is free and open any time; only the small visitor-center museum charges admission.

Butuceni Village Walk

~1 hr, self-guided · free

A handful of thatched-roof, whitewashed cottages scattered across the hills below the monastery, home to a few hundred residents and largely unchanged in appearance for a century — one of Moldova's officially protected historic villages.

Check-In — Eco-Resort Butuceni

Check-in 3pm · from €52 (~\$56 USD)/room/night

A traditional-style guesthouse built into the village itself, with rustic rooms, an organic garden that supplies the restaurant, and an indoor pool and sauna — the only overnight on this trip with a view of the monastery cliffs from bed.

Eco-Resort Butuceni - Butuceni village, Orhei

Day 4

Transnistria Day Trip — Tiraspol & Bender

Back to Chişinău, then across the Dniester into Transnistria: a self-declared, Soviet-flagged state that no UN member recognizes, still running on its own currency and its own border checkpoints.

Drive — Butuceni back to Chişinău

~1 hr

A quick return drive to the capital in time for a mid-morning pickup for the day's border crossing.

Guided Tour — Tiraspol & Bender Fortress, with Moldova Tours

~6 hrs, hotel pickup · from \$110 USD/person

A guided day trip across the border into Transnistria — hammer-and-sickle flags, Lenin statues, Soviet street names, and a currency (the Transnistrian ruble) that's worthless the moment you cross back. The tour includes transport, an English-speaking guide, and admission to Bender's 16th-century Tighina Fortress; bring your passport, since entry requires registering at an unrecognized checkpoint.

Moldova Tours (Librocart SRL) - Str. Stefan cel Mare 171/1, Chisinau - +373 69 842 255

Overnight — Radisson Blu Leograd Hotel Chişinău

Second night · from \$143 USD/night

Back to the same hotel in the capital for the last night of the trip, with the evening free to revisit the boulevard or try a different corner of the city's restaurant scene.

Day 5

Central Market & Departure

One last unhurried morning in Chişinău before the short transfer back to the airport.

Piaţa Centrală — Chişinău's Central Market

~1 hr, self-guided · free to browse

A sprawling, mostly outdoor market a short walk from downtown, selling everything from honey and pickled vegetables to hand-embroidered textiles and bottles of homemade wine straight from the producer — the best spot in the city for last-minute souvenirs.

Stroll — Ştefan cel Mare Central Park

~45 min, self-guided · free

A final slow walk through the city's oldest park, past the statue of its namesake 15th-century prince and a small lake, before packing up for the flight home.

Departure — Chişinău International Airport (KIV)

~15 min taxi · allow 2.5 hrs before an international flight

A short ride back to the airport, which handles a modest schedule of flights to hubs across Europe and Turkey — build in extra buffer, since the terminal is compact but security lines can back up around peak departure banks.