

Sera Eden, a secluded garden café, is located in the courtyard of an old mansion.

BUCHAREST'S BELLE ÉPOQUE SPLENDOUR

The capital once known as the 'Little Paris' is celebrating its Belle Époque era with wisteria blooming on grand villas, much-lauded restoration sites, and local initiatives that honour and preserve the city's indelible architectural heritage. Join the exploration of Bucharest's romantic side!

Words by *Monica Suma*
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It's not for nothing that in early 20th-century Europe, Bucharest was often referred to as the 'Little Paris'. It was around the time of Carol I, the first king of Romania, that Neoclassical buildings and Beaux-Arts palaces designed by French architects sprang up around town, earning it its long-enduring moniker. The Belle Époque period also saw the rise of cafés, theatres, and literary salons, making Bucharest a hub for artistic and intellectual activities. Prominent figures in literature, music,

and politics contributed to the city's lively cultural scene. This period left a lasting impact on Bucharest's architecture, culture, and identity, shaping its reputation as a centre of art, elegance, and sophistication.

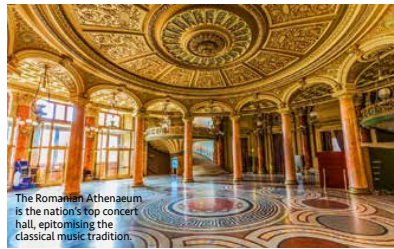
It's fascinating how one can still sense the Belle Époque era in the Bucharest of today. The city's preserved architecture, cultural events, and lively atmosphere capture the charm and elegance of that time. Here are some ways to experience this ambience in modern-day Bucharest.



TRAVEL May
A stroll through Bucharest's Old Town reveals exceptional historical and architectural treasures.



The Belle Époque era left a lasting impact on Bucharest's architecture, culture, and identity.



The Romanian Athenaeum is the nation's top concert hall, epitomising the classical music tradition.

EXPLORE ARCHITECTURAL GEMS

Calea Victoriei is a perfect starting point for delving into the remnants of Bucharest's Belle Époque era in today's modern landscape. This iconic thoroughfare serves as the city's main architectural gallery, offering a captivating journey through its elegant history and showcasing its most iconic monuments.

Calea Victoriei has long been a focal point, drawing the attention of investors and the affluent aristocracy. Along this grand boulevard, opulent private residences emerged alongside major banks, luxury hotels, glamorous boutiques, and renowned pastry shops that continue to thrive today. The street remains vibrant, pulsating with life and history while maintaining a revered café culture that has stood the test of time. For example, *Casa Capşa*, once a favourite among the gentry, still welcomes nostalgic patrons today.

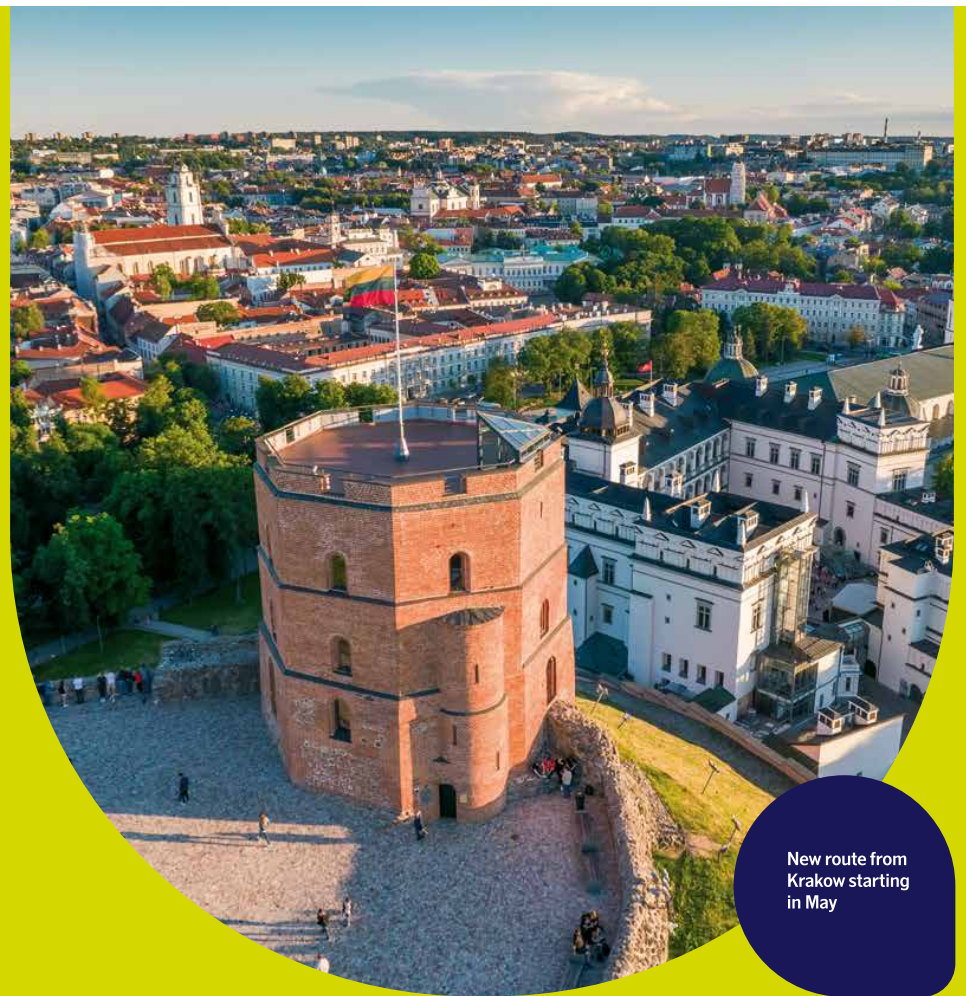
The Equestrian Statue of Carol I, positioned in front of the Central University Library, creates a picturesque moment that pays homage to a monarch whose visionary support greatly influenced urban development. Across from it stands the majestic neoclassical Royal Palace, which now houses the National Museum of Art boasting exquisite interiors, including the magnificent Throne Room.

As you traverse this vibrant artery, you'll encounter more notable landmarks, such as the Cantacuzino

Palace, which is home to the George Enescu National Museum dedicated to the national composer (currently undergoing restoration). Adorned with Beaux-Arts elegance and neo-Rococo elements, the Art Nouveau awning above the palace's entrance is a classic shell-like canopy in the renowned Little Paris style.

The majestic Beaux-Arts CEC Palace on Calea Victoriei stands out with its splendid French Eclectic style envisioned by architect Paul Gottereau. Just opposite, the former Post Office Palace, now the National History Museum, captivates with its architectural brilliance. Many significant landmarks in the area boast restored façades or are undergoing restoration, such as the National Bank of Romania, a late 19th-century masterpiece designed in the Eclectic style by architects Albert Galleron and Cassien Bernard, both students of Charles Garnier, famed for designing the Opéra Garnier in Paris.

Within a kilometre or two of this expansive square, a leisurely stroll unveils several other notable Belle Époque landmarks. The iconic domed Romanian Athenaeum, inaugurated in 1888, stands nearby as the nation's foremost concert hall, embodying a rich tradition of classical music. Designed by Galleron, it exudes a refined ambience, particularly during the revered George Enescu Festival held every September. Adjacent to it, the legendary Beaux-Arts *Athénée Palace Bucharest*, which dates back to 1914,



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TRAVEL May

Take a leisurely walk through the city to admire the charming old villas adorned with wisteria.



Photo by Laurian Ghintobu

The Sera Eden garden café has the vibe of a greenhouse and botanical sanctuary.



Downtown Bucharest comes alive on weekends from May to early October with the Open Streets festival.

reigns as the city's most renowned hotel, known historically as a gathering place for European spies in the lead-up to the Second World War.

In Bucharest's Icoanei neighbourhood, you'll find elegant Belle Époque architecture from the late 19th and early 20th centuries along with charming parks, such as Grădina Icoanei and Ioanid Park. Dumbrava Roşie is a street of refined buildings, while Bulevardul Dacia showcases stately embassies and eclectic villas by renowned architects.

Heading north to Dorobanți, the Primăverii district features Bucharest's most expensive homes, embassies, and luxury fashion houses on prestigious streets such as Strada Paris and Aleea Alexandru. If you're looking for more comprehensive information, consider taking a tour to delve deeper into the city's storied past and legacy. One company offering such tours is *Interesting Times Bureau*, led by Anita Sterea. It infuses enthusiasm and also what some might call a coolness factor into its inspired guided tours, which cater not only to tourists but also to ordinary citizens eager to rediscover their own city. The Fundația Calea Victoriei, in turn, inspires through arts and culture, educating visitors about Bucharest's heritage with courses, projects led by local figures, and also guided tours. It offers scholarships and alternative education, making it a pioneering cultural NGO to follow for a deeper understanding of the city.

DIVE INTO GARDEN BARS AND OLD VILLAS

Embracing modernity, downtown Bucharest comes alive on weekends from May to early October with a festival atmosphere known as 'Open Streets'. This annual event transforms several city arteries into pedestrian zones, offering a vibrant mix of culture and artistic events. Originating during the Covid-19 pandemic to provide an alternative space away from car traffic, 'Open Streets' has revitalised the area and fostered new communities. The success of this initiative has sparked discussions about making the car-free status permanent, extending beyond just summer weekends. It has become a catalyst for civic engagement, highlighting the growing demand for pedestrian-friendly spaces in the heart of the city.

Garden bars also come into play. These cherished spots for socialising are usually located in the gardens of noteworthy mansions, and they're a great feature of Bucharest to discover and enjoy once the weather warms up. One such example can be found at *Grădina Monteoru*, an urban-garden-turned-party-hotspot on the site of the resplendent Casa Monteoru, one of the filming locations for *Netflix's* hit show *Wednesday*. Spot the grand statues flanking the little entrance park, where spring and autumn fairs often take place. The hip *Sera Eden* garden café is located behind a historical villa not far from Rosetti Square, and is part greenhouse, part botanical sanctuary.

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The historic Casa Monteoru has been transformed into a multicultural centre.



The Mingle cafe invites visitors to discover vintage treasures.



The Little Paris Museum takes visitors through the interiors of a bourgeois home.



Nestled in an old house, the Mingle cafe exudes the ambience of a collector's lounge.

And speaking of unique, whimsical gardens, the journey continues in romantic Cotroceni, a tree-lined district evocative of Bucharest's elegance in the 1920s and 50s. With streets bearing the names of prominent doctors so as to reflect the quarter's historical panache, take in the eclectic aesthetics here, including Art Deco, Neo-Romanian, and modernist villas. For vintage flair and street shows with live jazz, the twice-yearly (May and October) Bazar de Cotroceni festival is an invite into the district's close-knit community and its relaxing streets in the form of a big, neighbourhood yard sale.

By the way, during the popular Night of the Museums in May, many century-old houses and museums – including several not usually open to the public – keep their doors open into the evening, thus contributing to the buzzing festival-like atmosphere in Bucharest. An insightful little museum worth seeing during this event is tucked in the heart of the Old Town. A journey back in time to the city's golden era, the Little Paris Museum takes visitors through the interiors of a bourgeois house that's a meeting place of sorts between the French and Oriental-Ottoman styles. There, over 1000 items are on display in a rich collection showcasing the lifestyle of a bygone epoch – antique porcelain, precious silverware, and even period gowns and accessories you can try on and pose for a photograph during a retro photo shoot. Similarly, the Weekend Sessions event emphasises

the bohemia of Bucharest's gardens surrounding Belle Époque homes-turned-museums, such as the Filipescu-Cesianu House, which features jazz, poetry, film screenings, and theatre set in a lovely, leafy courtyard.

EMBRACE THE CULTURAL AND SOCIAL RENAISSANCE

In recent years, a flurry of *Instagram* accounts focused on heritage have emerged, with atmospheric photos sometimes accompanied by long captions describing the history of the site captured. Or even better, *Instagram* Reels of cinematic neighbourhoods paying homage to the enduring beauty of La Belle Époque. Bogdan Buzuleac (@bogdan.buzuleac) is one such visual storyteller who whips urban escapades into captivating clips. You're sure to see the quaint allure of Cotroceni in many of his viral Reels. Buzuleac is also one of the ambassadors of Cronicar Digitali (@cronicaridigitali). Translating to 'digital chroniclers', it's a project promoting Bucharest's cultural legacy through festivals, masterclasses, a podcast with remarkable guests, and also special meetups at landmarks not usually open to the public.

In addition to this legion of advocates, the #Aiciastat association by Ana Rubeli (@aiciastat) delights people with comprehensive stories and events from sites they'd otherwise not know much

The 'Anti-Aging Institute' is a clinic in Latvia that offers a unique concept in preventive and anti-aging medicine.

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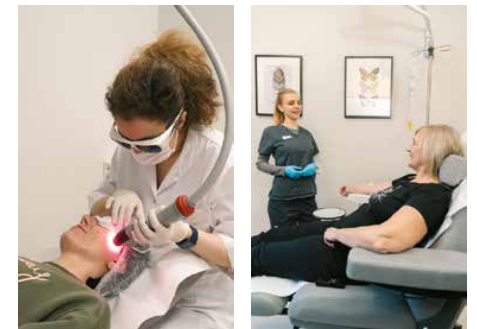
More than 300 clients already trust the "Anti-Aging Institute" concept. It is a solid foundation and a valuable investment for future healthcare throughout life.

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Helping people live healthy lives and age gracefully is one of the goals of the 'Anti-Aging Institute' concept. By creating a health monitoring concept, we become your health guardians and best advisors throughout your life,

emphasises Chief Executive Officer Zane Rēvalde.



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The Carturești Carusel emporium is a captivating blend of bookstore and bistro.

Photo by Cosmin Dragomir



The renovated Casa Mița Biciclista now hosts exhibits and exclusive soirées featuring live music.

© Casa Mița Biciclista



Romania's leading fashion editor, Domnica Mărgescu, curates the sophisticated Aparterre concept store.

Photo by Viad Petru

about or have the chance to explore. A self-described cultural storyteller and Cronicari Digitali podcaster, Rubeli rightfully points out that heritage is what ties one affectively to the city, awakening a creative spirit led by curiosity.

Given all the initiatives, one of the most exciting trends to witness has been the social renaissance of Bucharest's architectural fabric. In a cultural manifesto of sorts led by NGOs, community groups, and passionate influencers wanting to make a difference, it has helped fill a gap in which local authorities have been lagging.

The rebirth of Casa Mița Biciclista is one of the best examples. Following 80 years of neglect, the Baroque-style historical monument near Piața Amzei reopened its doors for masked balls reminiscent of Les Années Folles, with plenty of swing music and jazz, just like in the Roaring '20s. Today, this gem from interwar Bucharest – the house of the famed courtesan Maria Mihăescu, nicknamed Mița Biciclista (Mița the Cyclist) – has become a hip hotspot.

A century ago, Mihăescu made history as the first woman to ride a bicycle – in daring velvet trousers, no less – down Calea Victoriei, thus capturing the attention of society's elite with her nonchalant style and attracting suitors from among artists, intellectuals, and royalty. Her Beaux-Arts villa, built in 1908 and rumoured to be a gift from King Ferdinand when she was only 25 years old, became a hub of luxury and entertainment, hosting lavish soirées for princes, diplomats, and literati. Thanks to the Romanian Association for Culture, Education,

and Normality (ARCEN) and its dedicated founder Edmond Nicușcă, the villa's Parisian-like interior has been beautifully restored and now serves as a venue for exhibits, tours, and exclusive galas featuring live music and a chic bar on the upper floor.

This glamorous era continues to influence the contemporary lifestyle in Bucharest, with a variety of shops tapping into its enduring allure. In the Old Town, the *Carturești Carusel* emporium stands as a captivating blend of bookstore and bistro housed in a meticulously restored 19th-century building with a rich history in banking and retail. The store exudes the glamour of yesteryear and offers an array of unique souvenirs and history books, earning its reputation as one of the world's most beautiful bookstores.

In the bourgeois Icoanei neighbourhood, trendy boutiques have emerged in elegant locations around Grădina Icoanei and Ioanid Park. Notable among them is the sophisticated *Aparterre* concept store curated by Romania's most influential fashion editor and perfectly complementing the district's ambience. On the other side of Cantacuzino Square, the *Mingle* café invites visitors to discover vintage treasures reminiscent of cherished items from generations past, all within the charming setting of a historic house with a terrace. These establishments serve as reminders that in order to embrace the present fully, one must always pay homage to the rich tapestry of the past. **bo**

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