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IRON CURTAIN ROULETTE II

SPINNING THE WHEEL OF CHANGE IN EASTERN EUROPE

words and photos by Joseph Pisani

Travelling east in a rundown minibus along a rough road in Moldova. Jay and I were the only foreigners among the twenty other passengers headed to Trans-Dniester, a small communist strip of land that doesn't officially exist. The border crossing comprised of a makeshift assortment of old trailers and barracks, with military personnel wearing big guns and milling around smoking cigarettes. An armed officer boarded our bus, and we became the focus of his attention. Suddenly my attempts at concealing my large camera inside my daypack seemed like a bad idea. We'd been warned that journalists were sometimes arrested here, and I cursed myself under my breath for not taking the warnings more seriously.

The rules of this trip were simple. The entire former Soviet Union was within bounds and each travel decision was to be made spontaneously at the bus or train station, as if spinning a roulette wheel at each juncture. We had already made it half way across Poland and Ukraine, and were now headed to Tiraspol, the capital of Trans-Dniester, and the chosen goal of our journey. We weren't really sure what awaited us, but had heard many rumours. It seems that Trans-Dniester didn't really want any visitors, and if it wasn't for border guards looking to make some extra money, we wouldn't have had a chance of getting in. Even though Trans-Dniester isn't an officially recognised country, they still have their own military, police force, currency, and even their very own Ministry of State Security (a modern KGB). It just seemed like too good an experience to pass up.

The border guard approached us quickly, snatching our US passports from our hands while mumbling something in Russian. "You two come... Police!" he said, switching to broken English.

Our bus pulled away without us and the interrogation began. "But sir, our bus is leaving! Vy ponimayete po angliski?" I asked him in my own broken Russian if he spoke English. I always try to learn some language basics before I visit a country, but meaningful conversation with the border police was way beyond my abilities. "Niet angliski, ruski! Why you no speak Russian?" he continued. Then, while ushering us into the small barracks, he asked in a thick, accusing tone, "drugs or guns?" Once inside, he pointed at the Ukraine exit stamp in our passports, and informed us that we had entered Moldova from the wrong place. "Small problem," he said, and, having already learned what this was code for, we wondered how much this 'small problem' would cost us. "You have money? Euro? Dollar?" he asked, insisting on a look inside our wallets before instructing us towards a second immigration office next door. →



Bus and train station in Tiraspol, Trans-Dniester

We found a small, white office with two windowed counters lining the far wall. Everyone turned to stare as we entered; a policeman behind the counter motioned us over, took our passports and slowly flipped through them. His curiosity was piqued by my visa stamps. He lingered over the Arabic ones while eyeing me suspiciously. "Where is your invitation?" he pointed at a sample taped to a nearby window. "We didn't know we needed one, sir," I replied. "No invitation, no Trans-Dniester," he replied as he handed back our passports. Jay and I stood there in dismay. "Surely that can't be it?" Jay asked rhetorically.

We were concerned about offering a bribe, but we had few options left. It wasn't the first time that the bleak thought of getting arrested in a country that didn't officially exist had crossed our minds. But we were so close to the goal of our journey and not yet ready to back down. We slowly slid our passports back and politely asked if we could give him a gift to help with our invitation. His eyes rotated towards us, as a quick smile blinked across his face. "What are your professions?" he asked. "I'm an artist; a painter," I said, while acting out my best 'paint stroke' pantomime. He started to hum and act out playing the violin. Realising the mistake, I said, "niet... a painter," continuing to dab my imaginary palette while making exaggerated brush strokes in the air. "Ah, Picasso!" he bellowed, before focusing on Jay, who was now keen to display his newly-learned word for lawyer. Beaming proudly, he said, "advocat", adding that he was a defence attorney for good measure – seemingly forgetting about Trans-Dniester's dismal track record for both political and civil liberties. "Advocat," the policeman repeated, as his face lit up and he rubbed his thumb and index finger together to indicate money. After negotiating over the sum of an advocat's salary, we got off relatively easily with a 20 euro surcharge. We were also delighted to see that our bus driver hadn't abandoned us after all and was in fact waiting, however impatiently, behind us. "You only stay today, no overnight," the officer demanded as he handed us our documents. "Yes, of course, sir. Thank you!"

"Tiraspol, here we come!" we cheered and high-fived each other on the bus. From the window, the approaching skyline, grey and ominous, was even drearier than we had expected. Tiraspol bus station was relatively well kept compared to the otherwise drab surroundings, with the only décor provided by a small chandelier hanging high above the main hall. While heading to the bathroom, I noticed a woman sitting at a table outside. As well as collecting money from visitors to the toilets, she was also measuring strips of brown toilet paper to the toilets, she was also measuring strips of brown toilet paper to exact lengths with a ruler, and placing them into neat rows on the table in front of her. Scenes of bread lines and shortages flickered in my memory as I wondered where on earth we'd ended up.



Market in Moldova



As if it had been scripted into the scene, the rain and heavy sky added to the gloomy atmosphere as we tried to find our bearings. Large crumbling blocks of apartments with accents of earth tones and decay unfolded before us, contrasting starkly with the pristine statues of Lenin, the centrepiece for most towns. Drying laundry hung from windows and across tiny balconies provided the only scattering of colour. I decided to get a feel for the place before taking out my camera.

Only the day before, we'd met a woman who was born and raised in Tiraspol before moving to Holland. She warned me that all photography was in fact illegal, but that arrests were 'hit or miss', depending on the mood of the officer. She explained that freedom of the press was limited and stories from inside Trans-Dniester were long sought after by foreign journalists. The police, she said, are often on the look out for such behaviour, so it is better to play it safe. Aside from making us more nervous, she was able to tell us a bit more about Trans-Dniester's history and how it serves as a power play between the encroaching EU and Russia's tribute to its glorious past. Trans-Dniester's self-proclaimed independence is still not recognised by any country in the world. Moldova declared its independence from the USSR in 1991, and as an EU hopeful, looked forward to the future security of other EU lands bordering it.

Needless to say, a breakaway republic of Russian descent was most unwelcome. Despite signing international obligations to withdraw, Russian military forces supposedly still remain in Trans-Dniester – a symbol that most likely reminded all parties of the short war that was fought in 1992, when Trans-Dniester declared its independence from Moldova.

We made our way down the main promenade after passing many high-walled factories in various states of disrepair. While looking for a restaurant, we attracted many strange glares, but aside from being tourists, we couldn't discern any reason why. English was definitely off the menu, so we ordered randomly, again as though spinning a wheel of chance. This time, neither of us was happy with our selections, but the beer tasted fine and we thought it was decidedly well deserved.

Back outside, with my camera now in hand, we had the feeling that someone was following us but weren't sure if we were just being paranoid. We decided to test our theory by entering a supermarket before leaving hastily, and waiting for our 'shadow' to do the same. Sure enough, he followed us in, then right back out – a bit too much of a coincidence we thought. Undeterred, if not a little bit nervous, we pushed forward, walking the quiet streets, trying not to look suspicious, while feeling anything but.

I snapped a few more photographs outside the bus station before trying to board the bus back to Moldova. The driver simply looked at my camera and claimed the bus was full, even though there was barely anyone on it. Finally, after putting my camera away, we were allowed on the next bus, thirty minutes later. →

Tiraspol, Trans-Dniester



The drive back to Moldova was strange and somewhat surreal. We had succeeded in our goal, having ventured into a place that few westerners had ever seen. The truth was that there hadn't really been much to see – getting there and the fear of the unknown was definitely the highlight of the journey. Otherwise, it was the intangible elements and undertones that made this experience truly unforgettable – things that you couldn't quite put your finger on even though you felt their presence all around you. After all, we had visited a land that didn't officially exist, and reflecting on this added to the dreamlike mood of the journey. Leaving the country was also much easier than entering. We actually had the impression that the border guards were happy to see us leave. This sentiment also seemed like a good allegory for the trip, at least as far as we surmised: they were content with their set ways, and didn't seem to want any outside attention. We only wondered if they were really happy, or if this was just an act due to the oppression they lived under.

Back in the pitch black night in Moldova, Jay was intent on going back to our hotel after our journey, but I was determined to visit a bar I'd read about called Déjà Vu. It held personal significance for me considering the title of one of my previous art exhibitions, The Lasting Tingle of Déjà Vu. But even more, I wanted to confirm rumours that the Chişinău nightlife was something that had to be experienced. I found the place easily and passed through various security checks and a metal detector before being allowed inside. Moldova was notorious for quite a few dubious distinctions, such as being a haven for money laundering and arms trafficking. Security like this only perpetuated the myths. Despite being alone, I pledged to stay for at least a drink and made myself comfortable at the bar among a few people and DJ spinning house music near the small dance floor. After ordering a five-dollar gin & tonic, I sat back and watched the bartender flip and spin bottles in true *Cocktail* fashion. Sipping my drink in relative solitude, I began to wonder what all the nightlife



Grocery store in Tiraspol, Trans-Dniester

hype was about – and how the locals could afford these drink prices. As if on cue, the place became instantly packed with clubbers. Men in expensive suits ogled scantily-clad women who seemed to welcome the attention. The bartender's bottle-flipping frenzy intensified, resembling a side show circus routine: lighting bottles on fire and flinging them around with ease as the clientele danced, rang bells and blew whistles to the music. The bar in front of me transformed into a second dance floor as women from all directions clamoured in stiletto heels to climb up on to it and sway above the crowd. I had to snatch my drink out of the way to avoid losing it in the whirl of excitement. I stayed until 4 am in complete amazement that a Wednesday evening could ever be so wild, especially compared to the sombre afternoon spent in Tiraspol.

Joseph Pisani is an artist from New York who now lives in Zurich. In 1995, after visiting more than forty of the fifty US states, he set off to see the rest of the world. Twelve years and almost fifty countries later, he's just warming up. Known for never booking more than a plane ticket in advance, and purposely avoiding the easy route, Joseph puts it this way: "Spontaneity keeps things fresh, while serendipity guides me through it all. There have been a lot of rough moments along the way, but they often bear the best memories."

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