**IAŞI** (pronounced “yash”), in the northeast of Moldavia, is the region’s cultural capital and by far its most attractive city, the only one where you’re likely to want to stay a while. Its university, theatre and resident orchestra rival those of Bucharest – which was merely a crude market town when Iaşi became a princely seat – and give it an air of sophistication enhanced by a large contingent of foreign students. Cementing its place in the nation’s heart, Romanians associate Iaşi with the poet Eminescu, and Moldavians also esteem it as the burial place of St Paraschiva.

The majority of Iaşi’s sights are strung along a north–south axis through the city, with the anonymous main square, **Piaţa Unirii**, joining the two halves. To the north of the square, beyond the excellent **Museum of the Union**, lie the university district of **Copou**, home to the enlightening **University Museum** as well as parks and gardens, and the residential district of **Ţicău**, location for a couple of memorial houses. South of the square, Iaşi’s traditional interplay of civil and religious authority is symbolized by a parade of edifices along Bulevardul Ştefan cel Mare şi Sfânt, where florid public buildings face grandiose churches, not least the magnificent **Church of the Three Hierarchs**. This in turn leads down to the huge **Palace of Culture**, housing several museums, though these are currently closed as part of a long-term restoration programme. Beyond here is the Nicolina quarter, where you’ll find a trio of fabulous hilltop **monasteries**.

**Brief history**

Iaşi’s ascendancy dates from the sixteenth century, when the Moldavian princes (*hospodars*) gave up the practice of maintaining courts in several towns, and settled permanently in Iaşi. This coincided with Moldavia’s gradual decline into a Turkish satellite, ruled by despots who endowed Iaşi with churches and monasteries to trumpet their earthly glory and ensure their eternal salvation. **Basil the Wolf** (Vasile Lupu, 1634–53) promulgated a penal code whereby rapists were raped and arsonists burned alive; he also founded a printing press and school, which led to the flowering of Moldavian literature during the brief reign, from 1710–11, of the enlightened **Dimitrie Cantemir**.

After Cantemir’s death, Moldavia fell under the control of **Greek Phanariots**, originally from the Phanar district of Constantinople (Fener in modern Istanbul), who administered the region on behalf of the Ottoman Empire, chose and deposed the nominally ruling princes (of whom there were 36 between 1711 and 1821), and eventually usurped the throne for themselves. The boyars adopted Turkish dress and competed to win the favour of the Phanariots, the sole group that advised the sultan whom among the boyars he should promote.

As Ottoman power weakened, this dismal saga was interrupted by the surprise election of **Prince Alexandru Ioan Cuza**, who clinched the unification of Moldavia and Wallachia in 1859 with the diplomatic support of France. In the new Romania, Cuza founded universities at Iaşi and Bucharest, introduced compulsory schooling for both sexes, and secularized monastic property, which at the time accounted for one-fifth of Moldavia. Finally, his emancipation of the serfs so enraged landowners and military circles that in 1866 they overthrew Cuza and restored the status quo ante – but kept the union.

The latter half of the nineteenth century was a fertile time for intellectual life in Iaşi, where the Junimea literary circle attracted such talents as the poet **Mihai Eminescu** and the writer **Ion Creangă**, who, like the historian **Nicolae Iorga**, became national figures. This was also the heyday of Jewish culture in Iaşi (or Jassy, as it was called in Yiddish), and in 1876 local impresario **Avrom Goldfadn** staged the world’s first Yiddish theatre performance at the Pumul Verde (“Green Tree”) wine garden, facing the present National Theatre. The Junimea brand of nationalism was more romantic than chauvinist, but unwittingly paved the way for a deadlier version in the Greater Romania that was created to reward the Old Kingdom (Regat) for its sacrifices in World War I, when most of the country was occupied by the Germans, and the government was evacuated to Iaşi. With its borders enlarged to include Bessarabia and Bucovina, Moldavia inherited large minorities of Jews, Ukrainians and Gypsies, aggravating ethnic and class tensions in a region devastated by war.

During the 1920s, Iaşi became notorious for **anti-Semitism**, spearheaded by a professor whose League of Christian National Defence virtually closed the university to Jews, then over a third of the population, and later spawned the Iron Guard. Their chief scapegoat was **Magda Lupescu**, Carol II’s locally born Jewish mistress, widely hated for amassing a fortune by shady speculations; in 1940 she fled abroad with Carol in a train stuffed with loot.