

1. Introduction

Welcome to Cluj-Napoca, the vibrant heart of Transylvania!

Join me as we wander through the city's cobbled streets, uncovering stories that stretch back centuries, from the Romans through medieval times, to a bustling modern city, with a vibrant student life.

2. The Tour Begins: Union Square

We begin our journey in the heart of Cluj-Napoca, Piața Unirii, or Union Square.

Walk towards the glass-covered rectangular structure rising from the ground in the south of the square, opposite the church and the statue.

As you walk towards it, imagine being in the Roman city of Napoca, at the time of Emperor Trajan. After defeating the "Dacians", he began transforming this territory into a Roman Province. Under the rule of later emperors, the city kept rising in importance, reaching the "ius italicum" distinction, the highest liberty attainable in the Roman Empire.

The city was built around two perpendicular axes, intersecting at the Forum, near today's church of Saint Michael, which you can see at the northern end of the square. The wealth and prosperity of Napoca during this period was in large part fueled by the trading of salt and precious metals. The Turda Salt Mine near the city is a spectacular testament to the importance of this mineral in the region's history.

If you've arrived at the rectangular structure, look through the glass. You can see the remains of buildings from this period. Imagine houses with numerous rooms, underfloor heating, paved interior yards with fountains in the middle; porticoes and columns facing the streets. A true luxury by any standard. This prosperous Roman period lasted until about 274 AD, when Napoca was abandoned.

The city re-emerged in the middle ages, when it was incorporated into the Kingdom of Hungary. At the turn of the 12th and 13th centuries the name "Clus" is recorded in multiple written sources. The origin of the name is debated, but it is the earliest documented form of the current "Cluj" name.

3. The Matthias Corvinus Monument

Start walking towards the monument at the other end of the square. What you are looking at is a relatively recent addition to the square, erected in 1902. It depicts the Hungarian King Matthias on his horse, flanked on both sides by four of his generals. King Matthias holds a special place in the history of this city. Born here in 1443, he was the son of the Transilvanian Voivode Hunyadi János or Iancu de Hunedoara, a family with Romanian origins; his mother a Hungarian

noblewoman. He is regarded as a Renaissance King bringing the art, culture and science of the period into the Kingdom. But this monument depicts him in a different role, on a horseback in a proud and heroic pose, with a golden laurel wreath on his head symbolizing power and triumph. If you look closer, you can see the astonishing details of the horse's anatomy, depicting an animal in full force. The creator of this statue, Fardusz János, was awarded a gold medal for this monument at the Paris World Expo of 1900. Now go find the figure on the right side of the monument. The one with the two feathers in his hat. The figure is supposed to depict the nobleman Bathory István. Legend has it that it's actually the sculptor's face you see in this figure.

4. Saint Michael's Church

This was a tumultuous period. The city was repeatedly raided by the Mongols. Its buildings were destroyed and the population decimated. To help repopulate the area, German speaking settlers were invited and given special privileges. Thanks to the rights and freedoms enjoyed by the city's dwellers, highly influential and wealthy guilds have been established. The city's walls were built and bastions erected, with different guilds being responsible for their upkeep and for ensuring preparedness in case of a siege. But we'll talk about that later on our tour.

For now, look around the square. The layout of the streets you see today is pretty much the same as it was back then with Saint Michael's church to the north and buildings flanking the square on all sides. These days the square is home to numerous events throughout the year such as the Transylvania Film Festival commonly referred to as TIFF, hosting open-air projections, or the very popular Christmas Market.

Throughout the centuries, the city kept growing in importance and wealth, but it wasn't spared the great events of history. At the start of the 18th century, it was ravaged by the plague, reducing its population to around 6000. It recovered in the following centuries and moved towards becoming the cultural and educational hub we know today.

The population outgrew the inner city and many of the walls and bastions suffered demolition to make way for modern infrastructure. In the period between the two world wars, the city saw an explosive population growth expanding further and further out from the city center.

The communist era which began after the second world war, saw a doubling of the population to close to three hundred and twenty thousand by 1989. The city became a melting pot for people from all over Romania. Industrial sites were built, and massive buildings in the socialist realist style were erected.

Following the fall of communism, the industries which provided jobs to many of Cluj's inhabitants have failed. High inflation and notorious ponzi schemes mark this difficult period in the city's history.

Recovery started in the 2000's, when industry was replaced by an economy based on services, finance and a highly educated workforce. The city received considerable foreign investment and the economy was boosted by the arrival of students from all regions of the country and from abroad. The estimated number of a hundred thousand students attending the many universities of this city make it today one of the most vibrant places in Romania.