

A Day In th



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Text - Daniel List

Pictures - Daniel List

After waking up in Moldova's capital of Chişinău, I felt excited yet anxious, knowing I had a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to experience something unique and extraordinary. I was about to spend a day touring Tiraspol, the capital of the unrecognized breakaway region of Transnistria. Historically, the area encompassing modern day Transnistria fell under Moldova, which was part of the Soviet Union from post-World War II to the early 1990s. By the 1990s, many of the Soviet republics, including Moldova, were breaking away to become independent. As Moldova moved to become independent, a dilemma arose in the eastern part of the country. The Russian-speaking majority in the Transnistrian region didn't want to be part of Moldova seeing the local culture threatened by the rise in Moldovan nationalism. For two years, from 1990 to 1992, a military conflict

would erupt resulting in hundreds of people losing their lives from both the Moldova and the separatist Transnistrians. After the conflict, a ceasefire agreement was signed between Moldova and the Transnistrian separatist. Transnistria emerged as a de facto independent state, however it has no international recognition.

Upon checking into my Airbnb in Chişinău two days before, the landlord asked why I had come to visit the city. I told her I wanted to see many historical places in Chişinău and thought about going to Tiraspol. She mentioned that she knew a tour guide who offers day tours of the city and gave me the tour guide's phone number via WhatsApp. Without hesitation, I contacted the tour guide, who went by the name of "Tim Tiraspol," and told him that I wanted to spend a day in Tiraspol. In his text, Tim mentioned he was available for a

tour on March 8. After thinking about it, I confirmed with Tim that I would spend the day in Tiraspol. At that point, there was no backing out if anything went badly for me in Tiraspol. I was worried that my identity as an American anything could go wrong in the area. However, going with Tim, who has years of experience bringing tourists into the region, brought me a sense of security and safety in the Transnistrian region.

Fast forward to March 8, I received a text message from Tim saying he had arrived at my apartment. I made my way down and to his car. There I met his friend Simon, who is fluent in Russian and has years of experience getting tourists across the Transnistrian checkpoint. After a few pleasantries and exchanges, we went to Tiraspol. An hour of driving later, we finally reached the Transnistrian border control. A few armed Russian sol-



diers were guarding the border, and I felt anxious. I went with Simon to the customs house to enter the region. After ten minutes, I received a paper slip of the day visa from the authorities. We were cleared to enter Transnistria, with Russian troops looking at us as Tim drove away.

The first impression of the town was astonishing. It felt like entering a new world. I didn't see any Moldovan language signs like in Chişinău. Driving by, I was able to see multiple Russian military bases, remnants of the original Russian forces from the Moldovan-Transnistrian war. Occasionally, we saw Russian troops walking down the street. Tim took me to see a railroad station

that was built after World War II with an original Soviet train that was standing still on the railroad tracks. I could appreciate the history behind the Iron Curtain during the Cold War. Many relics of the Soviet Union remain today at Tiraspol. Tim told me that since the Soviet Union collapsed, much of Tiraspol's town had been able to adjust to capitalism. However, much of the city of Tiraspol determines what businesses can be run under their controlled capitalism philosophy in the region.

After visiting the train station and observing the bullet-riddled apartments from the Transnistrian War, Tim guided me to an outdoor market to exchange my Euros for Transnis-

trian Rubles. Where many of the sellers were selling food, metal hardware tools, used cameras and used smartphones. One tent I spent most of my time in was a person selling Soviet pins. I bought a Communist Party Pin from Soviet times as a souvenir to remind myself that I was present in Transnistria. The seller was friendly and we exchanged pleasantries. Next, we went to the center of Tiraspol. Tim told me to climb onto a tank in the center square, see their national hammer and sickle flag, and visit the memorials of World War II and the Transnistrian War. Later, Tim, Simon, and I spent time at a newly built café where I bought pizza and some pastries. The cashier and many of the café workers



were super friendly and amazed that I came from the United States. The locals even patiently communicated with me in Russian, which was heartening, accommodating my beginner level easily.

I asked Tim how he got to live in Transnistria in the first place. He told me that years ago, he lived in California and wrote a script for a Hollywood movie called "Deep Blue Sea," which was a box-office success. However, he never got any royalties from the film and attempted to sue the company. The case would not favor Tim, and the movie industry's lawyers would prevent Tim from gaining his royalties. He decided to leave the U.S. and tour Europe. He finally settled in

Transnistria when he met his girlfriend. Later in the 2000s, tensions rose between Transnistria and Moldova, and it gained a lot of interest among popular mass media outlets like BBC, CBS, CNN, and many other international news sources. Tim was one of the only Western individuals to be contacted by many media outlets, so he successfully got many reporters through the border checkpoints and made a permanent living by corresponding with media news outlets and giving tours to anyone in the Transnistrian region.

Tim, Simon, and I drove to the city's outskirts to tour the Orthodox Church and an important battle site fought during World

War II. From the top of the hill of the Great Patriotic Memorial, you can see Moldova on one side, and on the other, you can see Ukraine. Once we drove back into town, I took a few more pictures of Lenin statues and a few government buildings, then relaxed at a park where they had a statue of a MiG-21 in the center. Overall, many locals with whom I interacted along the way were friendly and wanted to know about Finnish and American culture. They were excited that I was getting an education in Russian Studies and appreciated me for visiting. Many of the locals there were very laid back and relaxed.

To end the final part of the tour, Tim took me to see a private



garage in Tiraspol. Once I entered the garage, I was shocked and amazed at what I saw. There were collections of Soviet and Nazi weapons, army uniforms from World War II and the Afghanistan War, and even a rubber hazmat suit that was present from the Chernobyl disaster. Even crazier, Tim said that I could hold the weapons. I touched each of these historical items, like the Russian AK-47, Carbine Gun, The German Luger, MP-40, and other guns and grenades used during World War II. Throughout my life, I have seen World War II equipment kept in a glass case in many museums I have been to. It was the first time I got to touch and hold many of the World War II artifacts. Not only weapons were present, but there were Soviet flags and banners, and Tim showed me a Soviet fighter pilot's helmet that I could wear. With the tour's last stop concluded, seeing the historical

World War II artifacts was highly memorable.

Tim and Simon drove me back to Chişinău as we exited the garage. I gave the border guard my paper visa and passport on the Transnistrian border. After the guard handed back my passport, we left Transnistria. The entire tour gave me a new perspective of what Transnistria truly is. Before the tour, I was worried about how unpredictable this trip might be. After the tour, I saw a place still full of life, and a local population admiring anyone visiting the town. I saw how Tiraspol has well-preserved its Soviet past, and built new cafes, shops, and other areas to attract more international tourists. I got a sense of this region's culture and society, and learned about how daily life works there. It will forever be an unforgettable experience for me. 

