



The Orthodox Metropolitan Cathedral anchors one end of Victory Square, which is three football fields in length. Credit...Alexandru P. Galmeanu for The New York Times

# It Might Be Time to Consider Timisoara

OK, “Little Vienna” might be a stretch, but the Romanian city is a genuine, livable and multicultural place that offers just enough for visitors to fill two or three days.

**By Andy Trincia**

Published Oct. 27, 2023 Updated Oct. 29, 2023, for The New York Times

Families stroll and savor gelato cones as bike couriers whiz by. Pensioners relax on benches near manicured flower beds while earbud-wearing hipsters walk dogs and children chase pigeons by a fountain laden with bronze fish. The scene in Victory Square in Timisoara, Romania, is quintessentially European — modern meets Old World.

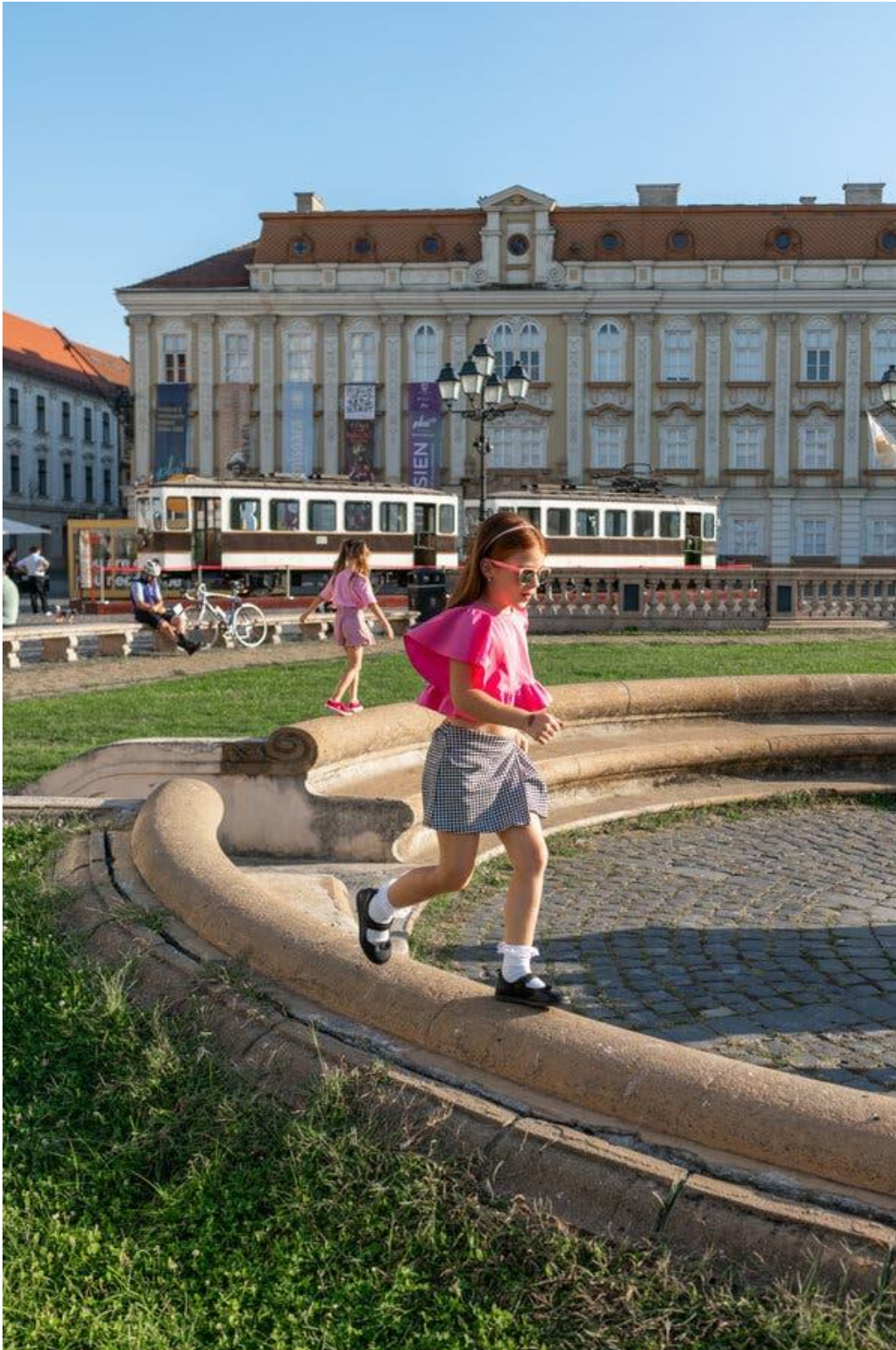
Scanning the imposing Art Nouveau palaces lining the grand plaza — larger than three American football fields and bookended by the [National Opera House](#) and [Metropolitan Orthodox Cathedral](#) — I wonder how Timisoara remains a travel sleeper, the most noteworthy city you’ve probably never heard of.

Romanians and history buffs know Timisoara for its leading role in the bloody Romanian revolution in December 1989, when local protests set off a nationwide wave that toppled dictator Nicolae Ceausescu. ([The country is still struggling with the unresolved legacy](#) of that revolution.) As I gaze at vibrant Victory Square, it’s hard to envision 100,000 anti-Communist protesters crammed together during those fateful days.

Other claims to fame include being the first city in Europe — second worldwide after New York — with electric street lighting (1884) and being called Little Vienna for its abundant Secession and Baroque architecture, an indelible mark of Hapsburg rule, which began in 1716 after 164 years under the Ottoman

Empire. Liberated from the Turks, Timisoara flourished in the ensuing two centuries under Hungarian and Austrian control and the dual-monarchy Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Vienna moniker is a stretch, although the architecture, trams and green spaces do evoke the Austrian capital.

Timisoara is largely unknown to tourists — and relatively undiscovered — despite being just a few hours from Budapest. As close to Vienna as to the Romanian capital, Bucharest (both about 340 miles), and even closer to five other European capitals, Timisoara is also accessible by a small but expanding [airport](#) that connects it to cities across Europe.



Children playing in Timisoara’s Union Square. The city is filled with Secession and Baroque architecture. Credit...Alexandru P. Galmeanu for The New York Times



I'd never heard of Timisoara either when I arrived in 2002 as a wide-eyed [Peace Corps](#) volunteer. I stayed two years, fell in love, returned to get married and made annual trips from America, when Timisoara tugged at me like an old friend. My wife and I moved back six years ago. I've witnessed an evolution from the glum post-revolution years to today's cosmopolitan vibe, thanks to a booming tech sector, significant foreign investment and youthful energy from 40,000 university students.

For me, Timisoara's appeal is twofold: its architecture, which jumps out immediately, and its authenticity, which sinks in gradually. This is no tourist trap with trinket shops galore, but a genuine, livable and multicultural city that moves at a measured pace and offers just enough for visitors to fill two or three days — perhaps surprising them with a taste of Romania, a country still enduring an unwarranted image problem, either nonexistent or leaning negative.

In Victory Square, the 300-foot-tall Orthodox cathedral dominates with its striking neo-Moldavian, Byzantine-tinged style more common on the other side of the country. The cathedral, built in the 1930s and one of the world's tallest Orthodox churches, features multiple turrets, a massive gilded altar, towering frescoes and cavernous porticos. A free, often overlooked [museum](#) in the basement, curated by a gregarious nun, houses ancient icons, manuscripts and religious artifacts.

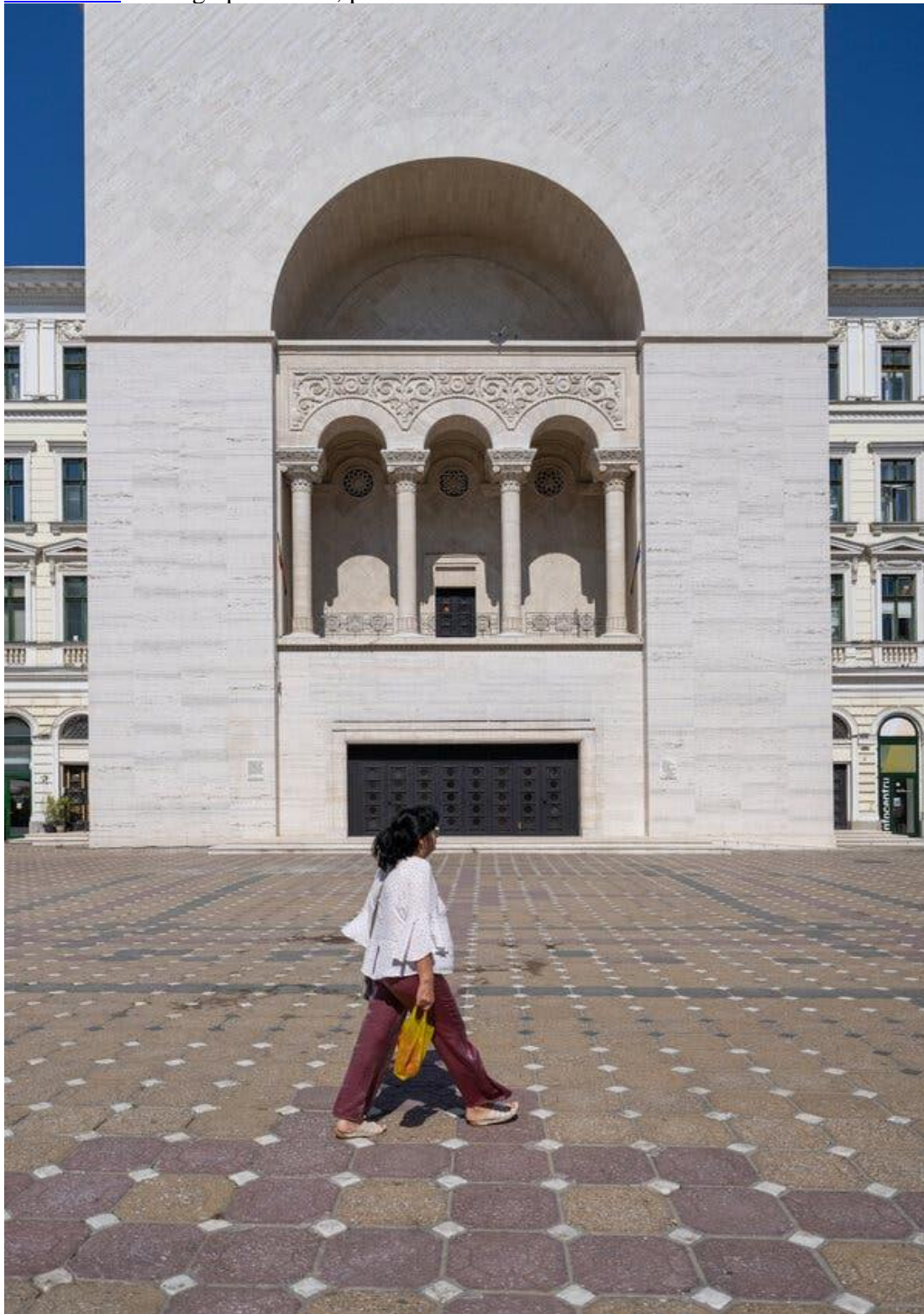


A view of Victory Square, where early-20th-century palaces are still identified by the names of their original owners, then the city's wealthiest families. Credit...Alexandru P. Galmeanu for The New York Times

Elsewhere in the square, it's worth admiring the early-20th-century palaces still identified by the names of the original owners, then the city's wealthiest families, including Neuhausz, Weiss, Dauerbach, Löffler and Széchenyi. On one side, two Modernist Communist-era apartment blocks discombobulate the design continuity, but mostly the buildings are superb examples of Art Nouveau, specifically, Viennese Secession with colorful, even playful Hungarian and eclectic elements — legacies of a building boom when the city was under Austro-Hungarian rule. Restoration work continues, but several facades were recently returned to their original grandeur that rivals any in Europe.

At the end of the square, the 686-seat opera house is intimate and stunning inside, but open only for shows and tour groups with prior permission.

From Victory Square, many wander the short Alba Iulia Street, which is shaded by umbrellas overhead, passing buskers and gelato shops on their way to Freedom Square and its elaborate statue of St. John of Nepomuk and the Virgin Mary, made in Vienna in 1756. A former Hungarian bank on one corner has yet to be restored, but its elegant tower and rounded balconies exude Art Nouveau. The pomegranate-colored, 18th-century former City Hall, in eclectic style fused with classical elements, now houses a university music school — violin and trumpet sounds often emanate from its windows, adding to the charm. If hunger beckons, there's [Cafeneaua Verde](#), an inviting bistro with a diverse menu, and the popular [La Focacceria](#) serving up focaccia, panini and croissants.



The Romanian National Opera House also sits in Victory Square. Inside it is intimate, with just 686 seats, and stunning. Credit...Alexandru P. Galmeanu for The New York Times

Nearby edifices are a mix of renovated and not, a common theme across the city center, from side streets to the inner neighborhoods of Fabric, Iosefin and Elisabetin, which simultaneously radiate architectural charm



and neglect, but are worth exploring. Timisoara has restored scores of its 14,000 historic buildings, spiffing them up to a point — in the interwar period, it must have been a stunning city. But much work and well-worn edges remain, a reality of a city not fully polished — authentic and steadily transforming, seemingly eager to shed stereotypes associated with Eastern Europe.

Two blocks away is Union Square, a picturesque potpourri of pastels and architectural jewels. The Baroque Palace, an administrative center during the Austro-Hungarian Empire, now houses the [Timisoara National Museum of Art](#), which is hosting a monthslong exhibition of the Romanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi, bringing pieces from the Pompidou Center in Paris, the Tate Modern in London and elsewhere. The celebrated artist spent most of his career in Paris, and this is the largest exhibition of his work in Romania in 50 years.



The restaurants in Union Square, most with outdoor seating, are go-to spots for locals. Credit...Alexandru P. Galmeanu for The New York Times

Next to the art museum is the whimsical 1911 [Brück House](#), an arresting example of Art Nouveau and Secession with its pink-and-mint color scheme resembling a gingerbread house. Across the square is St. George Roman Catholic Cathedral, resplendent after its recent four-year, nearly \$6 million makeover. Inside the Baroque masterpiece, you're transported to Italy, though Masses are celebrated in Romanian, Hungarian and German.

Union Square encapsulates Timisoara's multiculturalism and religious tolerance. Opposite the Catholic "dome," as it's known locally, is the ornate and colorful Serbian Orthodox bishopric and church. A German-language school (that produced two Nobel laureates) and bookstore are nearby, while a few blocks away is Cetate Synagogue, completed in 1865 and reopened last year after a lengthy renovation.

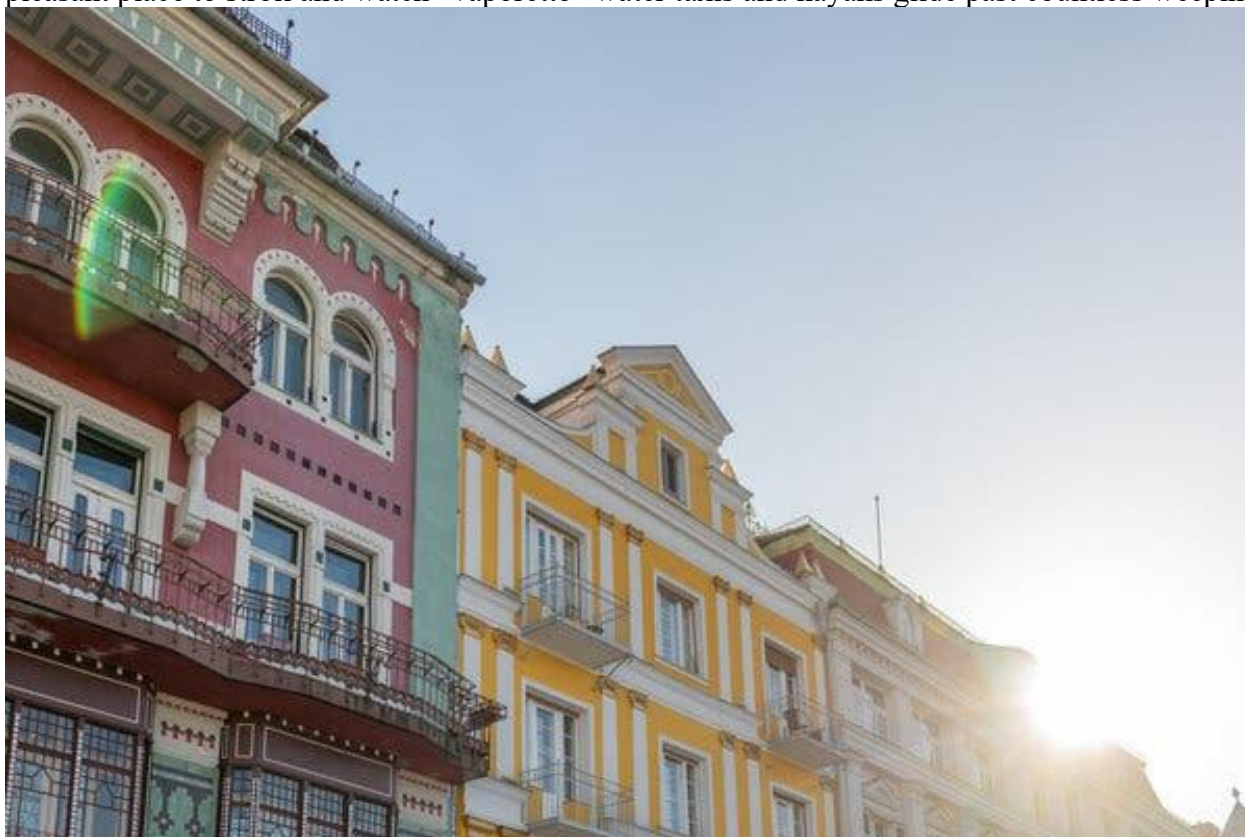
A once-thriving Jewish community exceeded 13 percent of the population in the interwar period but dwindled significantly because of mass emigration during the Communist regime. Even so, the Jewish legacy in Timisoara is outsize and visible in many of the finest buildings, including the Brück House and landmark [Max Steiner Palace](#), which emits Gaudí vibes on its corner of the square.

The Union Square area is full of places to dine and imbibe, most with outdoor seating, and it's the go-to spot for locals. For traditional Romanian food, try [Miorita](#) for soups, stews and grilled meats with

polenta. [Vinto](#) is an upmarket, wine-focused restaurant where you can sample Romania's underrated varietals. [Zai Miniature](#), with a wide gin selection, serves cocktails and spritzes with a view, while [Garage Cafe](#) has some of the best breakfast and pastries in town, including vegan ones. [Naru](#), a cozy, vegetarian-friendly restaurant with a shaded terrace, is across from [Doppio](#), one of several specialty-coffee standouts.

Near Union Square is the [Revolution Memorial Association](#) and its [museum](#) about the tragic and euphoric events of December 1989. A short film and exhibits are informative and riveting but graphic and not for young children or the queasy. It's a worthy if humbling experience, especially eye-opening for Americans and other Westerners.

Besides exploring the main squares, another way to experience Timisoara like a local is to wander along the navigable Bega Canal, which runs through the city, passing verdant parks with walkways and bike paths, [one](#) leading 25 miles to the Serbian border. Several bars and restaurants dot the canal, but it's mostly a pleasant place to stroll and watch "vaporetto" water taxis and kayaks glide past countless weeping willows.



The colorful facades of Union Square's buildings. Credit...Alexandru P. Galmeanu for The New York Times

### **If you go**

Timisoara is one of three European Capitals of Culture in 2023. A full slate of art exhibitions, concerts, music festivals, theater and dance extends through December.

The cultural capital organizers are using venues outside museums, from hidden courtyards to private galleries, as exhibition spaces. [See the full schedule of events](#) or peruse the highlights by month.

The Romanian currency is the leu (plural, lei). At restaurants, expect to pay 25 to 45 lei (about \$5.50 to \$10) for soups and starters and 70 to 90 lei for entrees. For accommodations, the four-star [Atlas Hotel](#), which opened in 2021, provides modern comfort just steps from the main squares. Doubles from 700 lei.

***Follow New York Times Travel on [Instagram](#) and [sign up for our weekly Travel Dispatch newsletter](#) to get expert tips on traveling smarter and inspiration for***

*your next vacation. Dreaming up a future getaway or just armchair traveling? Check out our [52 Places to Go in 2023](#)*