

Count Dracula's legend can still send a shiver up a traveller's spine

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Special to the Times Colonist

While travelling through Romania I could only find one place to buy postcards. Images of Vlad the Impaler were sold next to a 50-cent bottle of "human blood" (a nice Merlot) and plastic vampire teeth. This lovely assortment of souvenirs can be found at the entrance to Bran Castle, supposed home of Vlad Tepes, the Wallachia Prince who inspired Bram Stoker's terrifying tale of the immortal Transylvanian Count, *Dracula*. Vlad's father was a Knight of the Order of the Dragon, which was formed by the Roman Emperor Sigimund to protect the Royal Family from the Turks. Born in 1431, his son adopted the name Vlad Dracul — Son of the Dragon, or probably more accurately, The Devil's Son.

Vlad became Prince of Wallachia, what is now eastern Romania, and his reign of torture and cruelty quickly spread throughout the region. He would hold banquets, forcing his guests to eat while watching people being boiled or skinned alive. He locked the old and sick into houses and burnt them to the ground. A favourite method of torture was impaling his victims on a long wooden stake and then planting the stakes into the ground, sometimes creating elaborate designs.

He found a way to impale the person without damaging any major organs, allowing the poor soul to last for days before dying of exposure. This horrific pastime gained him the nickname Vlad the Impaler.

A telling example of the Prince's brutality is how he managed to defeat the Turkish army. He was desperately outnumbered and forced to retreat into his home, a fortress on the Arges River. Vlad rounded up every Turkish prisoner he could get his hands on and had them staked in the fields in front of his castle.

When the Turks arrived, they were greeted with the dying bodies of thousands of their fellow soldiers. Horrified at what became known as The Forest of the Impaled, the Turkish army gave up and went home.

It is difficult to believe this bloody history when standing in front of the picturesque Bran Castle. The medieval fortress has put itself on the map by being advertised as the home of Vlad Dracul. Dracula's Castle, as it is now called, was built in the 13th century to protect the nearby village of Brasov.

The castle has been used as a military outpost, a trading centre by local merchants, a residence for royalty, and currently as one of the only tourist traps in Romania. Bran Castle lies deep in the Carpathian Mountains, perched on a 200-foot rocky bluff on

the outskirts of Bran village. Probably the best-preserved castle in Romania, it is a stunning example of a medieval styled fortress. The brilliant white walls and towers capped with a brick-red roof surrounded by a lovely forest feels more like the set of *Sleeping Beauty* than the home of a dreadful tyrant.

Three dollars gains entrance to the impressive medieval castle (another \$2.50 if you would like to take pictures).

Shuffling through the white-washed walls and immaculately kept collection of 13th - 19th century antique furniture, it is hard to imagine the dark and disturbed Count Dracula skulking about centuries ago, luring unsuspecting travellers into his dungeons and spontaneously turning into a flock of bats. It feels more like standing in line at an amusement park. There are ropes to carefully lead you in the right direction, unfriendly employees to make sure no one touches anything, and more tourists and school groups than you can shake a stick at.

There is also shopping to be done at Romania's only tourist shop. Or, more accurately, tourist market — a small square packed with Dracula-brand T-shirts, shot glasses, and rubber snakes.

Yet despite all the fanfare surrounding the lovely Bran Castle, it has little to do with the real place. Yes, it's true, Dracula's Castle was not Vlad Dracul's home. There is even doubt as to whether he ever set foot inside its gates.

So, what happened to Dracula's "real" castle? The one whose front lawn displayed the Turkish prisoners impaled on wooden stakes? It's called Poenari Castle, and its crumbling remains can be found clinging to a mountain along the Arges River.

It was built in the 1450's by Vlad's very own nobles, whom he enslaved and forced to haul stones up the mountainside. Any intrepid traveller who now braves the 1800-step climb up the mountain gets to wander the castle's ruins. With moss-covered caved-in walls, grass and weeds growing rampant in the hallways, and a long, rocky drop to the river below, it is much easier to imagine Poenari as the home of a bloodthirsty medieval prince. Or a bloodthirsty vampire.

How did Vlad Dracul meet his end? He was finally defeated in battle in 1462.

Legend has it his head was wrapped, perfumed, and sent as a gift to the Turkish Sultan. His body was buried in a monastery outside of Bucharest. In 1931, Vlad's grave was excavated, but no sign of a coffin was found.

Perhaps Vlad Dracul really was Count Dracula, the immortal vampire. If so, he will more likely be discovered stalking the ruins of his Poenari home than spotted standing in line at Bran Castle.