

QUESTIONS FOR STEVEN P. UNGER, AUTHOR OF
***IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF DRACULA: A PERSONAL JOURNEY
AND TRAVEL GUIDE***

1. Please tell how this book came to be, what made you want to write it, and the story behind its creation.

More than 20 years ago, the vista of faded tombstones in Whitby, England's parish church cemetery first inspired me to travel throughout the Dracula Trail.

I stood on the cemetery hill where, in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, Lucy Westenra and Mina Murray (later Harker) spent hour after hour sitting on their "favourite seat" (a bench placed over a suicide's grave near the edge of the cliff), gazing out toward the "headland called Kettleness" and the open North Sea beyond—while Count Dracula slept just beneath them. In my mind's eye, I could see the un-dead Count Dracula rising at night from the weather-blackened slab of the suicide's grave to greedily drink the blood of the living.

At that moment I decided to visit and photograph every site in England and Romania that is closely related to either Bram Stoker's fictional Count Dracula or his

historical counterpart, Prince Vlad Dracula the Impaler—to literally walk in their footsteps and to write this book.

But my journey would have to be postponed. The country of Romania was in the grip of the ruthless regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu, and travel there was impossible. I waited for years and continued my research; when Romania was opened to Western tourists and I could finally fly there, I planned my return trip to Whitby to coincide with its Gothic Festival. My pictures of Whitby's Dracula-related sites would be enhanced, I was sure, by the black-costumed revelers thronging the town. I wasn't disappointed (see picture below).



In my research and travels I discovered two fascinating coincidences that link the historical and the literary Draculas. First and foremost is that Bram Stoker chose to name his villain "Dracula," based on the translation of the Romanian word "dracul" into "devil," never knowing that the historical *Voivode* (Prince) Dracula he had read about was also Vlad Țepeș (Vlad the Impaler), with a horrific and compelling biography of his own.

The second coincidence is the uncanny resemblance of the *real* Castle of Dracula—Vlad Țepeș' fortress at Poenari,

which Stoker had no knowledge of—to Count Dracula's fictional castle at the top of the Borgo Pass in Transylvania. Perched on a remote peak near a glacial moraine in the Făgărăș Mountains of southern Romania, Poenari, in its time, mirrored Count Dracula's fictional castle at the top of the Borgo Pass almost stone for stone.

2. Can you tell us one or two stories about your travels that relate to the book, something unusual that happened or someone that you encountered?

On my first evening in Whitby, I had an appointment to interview Harry Collett, Whitby's "Man in Black" (see picture below). Harry may appear a touch eccentric, even by England's loose standard of unconventional behavior, but he is northern England's foremost authority on the town and Bram Stoker in particular.

I met with Harry in the lobby of the Royal Hotel just before moonrise—there would be a full moon that night, in harmony with a section of the novel *Dracula* that I wanted to replicate with photos in my book. It was 7:00 p.m., and in an hour he would be leading an "In Search of Dracula" walk from the West Cliff opposite the hotel.

Harry was immediately recognizable, dressed completely in black from his top hat down to his shoes. His long black coat and black gloves left only his head exposed, his face pale behind tinted wireless glasses. At the edge of his coat sleeve where it met his glove I could see a sliver of the coat's red velvet lining.

In my picture of him standing in the lobby, I noticed later, there is no reflection in the mirror in back of him. That's attributable to the angle of the shot, I'm sure. Well, pretty sure.

Harry told me of how Bram Stoker first began writing a play titled *The Un-Dead*, a name for vampires that Stoker had originated. At Whitby's tiny public library in what is today the Quayside Fish Restaurant, Stoker first discovered the name "Dracula" in a book published in 1820 by William Wilkerson titled *An Account of the Principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia*. The play itself, which had as its central character a vampire named Count Dracula, was in five acts and took 4½ hours to perform. It was a total disaster.

Stoker rewrote *The Un-Dead* as a novel, working day and night, and returned to the play's publisher in early May of 1897. This time the editor loved it, but, in an inspired moment, he took his blue pencil out of the top drawer of

his desk, crossed out the title *The Un-Dead*, and wrote in its place—*Dracula*. Three weeks later, *Dracula* was published, and since then it has never been out of print.



A second unforgettable encounter was with Father Varahiil Bănăţeanu (see picture below), who is the sole caretaker, in a line of monks that stretches back hundreds of years, of Vlad the Impaler's (Vlad Țepeş) tomb in the inner chamber of a stone monastery church that dates back to 1521, on Snagov Island, about 25 miles north of Bucharest, Romania.

A visit to the tomb of Vlad Țepeş confirms the reverence still felt for the historical Prince Dracula as someone who defended the cross, as opposed to the literary Count Dracula, who abhorred it. The tomb (see picture) is covered by a stone slab surrounded by golden icons and giant candelabras. An antique lantern rests on the left side of the slab, a silver engraving of Vlad Țepeş is at the center, and a vase of fresh-cut flowers graces the right.

On one of the church walls, below Vlad's portrait, is the following inscription (recreated verbatim):

King Vlad the Impaler Dracula

He was a great European personality in fighting against Turkish Empire for Christianity. His courage was admired also by Turkish Army & leaders.

Although Father Bănăţeanu speaks only Romanian, I was able to communicate with him through a friend named Daly who came along with me from Bucharest. Daly speaks only German and Romanian, and fortunately I can converse in German.

Daly found Father Bănăţeanu's cell phone number posted on a narrow wooden pier on the shore of Snagov Lake near the island and arranged for a ride.

Father Bănăţeanu arrived at the pier in his rowboat, dressed in his civvies. He wouldn't allow me to take his picture until he was properly attired in his cassock and cap, and, well, compensated a bit. But after that it was understood that Daly and I would have the entire island to ourselves, with permission to photograph everything. And that's exactly what I did.

As I took in the medieval splendor of the tomb of Vlad Ţepeş, Father Bănăţeanu handed me a leaflet that read in part:

" . . . Prince Vlad the Impaler was known in all Europe as Prince Dracula; he was a great fighter against the Turkish Empire. It is a strange story isn't it?"

I had to agree with that. It is a strange story, even more strange than I knew at the time.





3. What are your personal feeling about Dracula, vampires, and other creatures of the Night?

I have always loved Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, its imagery and sheer sexuality, much of it stemming from Stoker's unconscious mind. *Dracula* was published during the height of Victorian sexual repression—two years later, in 1899, Freud would publish *The Interpretation of Dreams*. It's not a coincidence that vampires are creatures of the night, as are dreams, and, just like dreams, they can never be controlled.

4. Please tell us about yourself, your career and writing career.

I have been a traveler and writer from the time I learned to type with two fingers. I still travel, write, and type with two fingers. I was one of a handful of white students at a black college, Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, and a member of the Bear Tribe, a California commune that tried sharecropping, goat herding, and living in teepees—and failed at everything. These adventures and many more can be found in my novel, *Dancing in the Streets*.

I also wrote the accompanying text and the Preface for *Before the Paparazzi: Thirty Years of Extraordinary Pictures*, a collection of over 300 pictures taken by Arty Pomerantz, staff photographer and assignment editor for the *New York Post* from the 1960s through the early 1990s. Almost all of the pictures in *Before the Paparazzi* appeared in the *Post*, and a great many of them were on the newspaper's front page. The text and Preface for *Before the Paparazzi*, about 23,000 words, were gleaned from extensive research and hundreds of hours of interviews with Arty.

My other recent published work includes photoarticles in the September 2006, January/February 2007, and August

2007 issues of "Cycle California!" magazine, and in both the online and print editions of the August 2008 issue of "Rocky Mountain Sports" magazine.

Future projects include *The Total Beginner's Guide to Peru and the Machu Picchu Trail*.

5. How would you describe your book, its writing style?

There are three aspects to the book, and the writing styles, while all in my voice, differ accordingly. There is memoir, the story of how I came to write the book, the people I met, and the adventures I had; history, the story of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, the biography of Vlad the Impaler, and the intersection of the personae of the real *Dracula* and the imagined; and finally there is a travel guide for the would-be independent traveler to England and Romania.

Part V, *Nuts and Bolts: A Practical Guide to the Dracula Trail*," includes a complete Sample Itinerary with recommendations for lodging and detailed instructions on traveling to each British or Romanian *Dracula*-related town or site. Also in the *Practical Guide* are maps and sections on money; recommended reading; modes of transportation;

security and health; internet access, shopping, and cable TV; and alternatives to independent travel.

The Sample Itinerary in the *Practical Guide*—updated for 2009 and not found on any Web site or in any guidebook—is particularly essential because of the decentralization and lack of infrastructure in Romania, which make it impossible to plan in advance for an independent trip (i.e., using only public transportation, including taxis, but without renting a car or hiring a guide) to all of the country's Dracula-linked sites.

Often there are no trains at all between these sites; in other cases, the train is a much slower option than taking a bus or the Romanian equivalent of stuffing a telephone booth: the MaxiTaxi.

While Romania's railroad system, the Compania Nationala de Cai Ferate, does have a Web site, even when translated into English, it's anything but user-friendly. There are no Web sites at all for Romania's MaxiTaxis, which are independently operated and decentralized, nor are there official tourist offices in Romanian towns like those found everywhere in Western Europe. The unique Sample Itinerary provides an invaluable service by describing the best means for traveling to each site in sequence.

The itinerary for Romania is the product of a journey achieved one leg at a time, by inquiring at each location how best to get to the next one, whether by bus, train, MaxiTaxi, or a combination of two or even all three forms of transport.

Readers of *In the Footsteps of Dracula* who crave more than a vicarious travel experience will find the most challenging problem—how to get from Point A to Point B to Point C in Romania without a guide or a prohibitively expensive rental car—no problem at all. All they have to do is follow the Sample Itinerary.

6. Can you describe some of the places you visited?

Aside from its connections to Bram Stoker and *Dracula*, Whitby, England, with its bracing North Sea air, postcard views, and, according to Lonely Planet's *Britain*, "the best fish and chips in the country," is a treat to visit on any journey to Great Britain. It's one of my favorite places in Europe, and I highly recommend the ten-mile round trip, whether by foot or bicycle, down the coast to Robin Hood's Bay. If the length of the trip sounds daunting, keep in mind that Mina Harker and Lucy Westenra were able to

complete the same trek in their unwieldy Victorian clothing (see Chapter VIII of *Dracula*).

Dominated by the ruins of a 1,000-year-old abbey atop its eastern headlands, Whitby is the setting for Chapters VI-VIII of the novel *Dracula*.

The town of Whitby is in Yorkshire, in northeast England on the North Sea coast. Part vacation village and part working seaport, it is split into eastern and western halves, each with a high cliff looming above the Esk River. Pretend pirate ships drift in the modern harbor, and in the older section of town, the narrow, cobbled streets and red-brick buildings have scarcely changed since medieval times.

There is nowhere else on Earth besides Whitby where one can truly walk in the footsteps of the literary *Dracula*. Bram Stoker's Transylvania was the pipe dream of an armchair traveler with a genius for writing: real enough for the 19th Century English or American reader (the early editions of *Dracula* were much more popular in America than in England), but bearing little resemblance to the society or even the architecture of any Romania that ever existed.

In Chapter I for example, Jonathan Harker writes of the "hay-ricks [haystacks] in the trees" that he notices en route to Count Dracula's castle at the Borgo Pass. Stoker

based his description on illustrations he had seen of Transylvanian haystacks built around stakes stuck in the ground, with the ends of the stakes poking out like branches. Thus, generations of *Dracula* readers, if they were paying close attention, assumed that Transylvanians put their haystacks up in trees (see picture below).



On the other hand, Stoker was intimately familiar with Whitby and its ancient legends. He lived there: you can see his house. You can see the "house at The Crescent" where Mina Murray (later Harker) stayed with Lucy Westenra and her mother, and where Count Dracula circled Lucy's bedroom window in the form of a "great bat." Three doors away from the "house at The Crescent" was the office of Mr. S. F. Billington, the attorney who arranged for "50 cases of common earth, to be used for experimental purposes" (one of those cases containing the Count in his coffin) to be transferred by rail and wagon from Whitby to Dracula's estate at Carfax near London.

You can stand on the Tate Hill Sands where Count Dracula first touched the English shore in the shape of an immense dog, and stroll among the ancient tombstones of the churchyard cemetery where he took refuge in a suicide's grave and first tasted Lucy Westenra's blood.

You can see all of these places, and more, virtually unchanged from the 1890s. And if you go during Halloween (or in late April as I did), you'll be there for the Whitby Gothic Festival, when hundreds of costumed enthusiasts of the macabre add a touch of the bizarre to the town's literary landmarks. On Festival days, hundreds of Goths and Dracula fans, most of them costumed in black

trenchcoats and high laced boots, climb the 199 steps to the cemetery that circles St. Mary's Parish Church. In an obligatory pilgrimage to Bram Stoker's infamous Count, they trudge along, many of them still hung over from the parties of the night before.

Another wonderful site on the Dracula Trail is Sighișoara, in Transylvania, Romania, the birthplace of Prince Vlad Dracula the Impaler—Vlad Țepeș.

I remember walking from the train station, across the bridge above the Tarnava Mare River, and then along the narrow passageway that led through the city gate. I was enchanted the moment I entered Sighișoara's Upper Town.

All at once I was in the middle of a perfect storybook medieval village enclosed by thick fortress walls, with cobblestone streets and Easter-egg-colored houses leaning every which way. Guarding the town square was a spire-roofed and turreted 14th Century clock tower replete with carved wooden figures that circle a track to mark the passage of time. In one window, a drummer plays to signal the hours; below the drummer, the angel of the night replaces the angel of the day at the final stroke of midnight. In another window, gods and goddesses appear, changing for each day of the week.

Known as the "Pearl of Transylvania," Sighișoara is the supreme example of a Saxon city and the best-preserved medieval walled town, or citadel, in Europe.

I was fortunate to be in Târgoviște, the site of Vlad Țepeș' royal palace in Wallachia, Romania, on Easter Sunday for the Eastern Orthodox Christians (87% of the Romanian populace is Eastern Orthodox), just in time to catch the town's tiny but utterly charming parade (see picture below).



And then there is Poenari, the *real* Castle of Dracula.

I had traveled to other remote, forbidding places before entering the almost lightless forest of Poenari. Near Albania's southern border, I hiked the Vikos Gorge—the deepest canyon in the world in proportion to its width—a dozen miles from the nearest stone-housed village. I baked beneath the unrelenting sun of the Timna Valley close to the Red Sea, where 120° in the shade is considered picnic weather.

But never before or since have I felt the apprehension and isolation I did while climbing to Vlad Țepeș' mountaintop fortress at Poenari. The forest was as quiet

as a tomb; I can't recall hearing the song of even a single bird.

The ascent was exhausting. At last, I encountered a grizzled, elfin gentleman sitting on almost the very top step, who indicated with his fingers the amount of the small entry fee. From there the lone approach to the fortress is by a wooden footbridge.

Of all the places I explored that are associated with Vlad Țepeș, only at Poenari did I feel that he was somehow still keeping watch. Perched on a remote peak near a glacial moraine in the Făgărăș Mountains of southern Romania, Poenari remains pristine and almost inaccessible. Because the terrain is too steep and isolated to ever be cultivated or developed, there will never be a theme park at Poenari with scary rides and Count Dracula/Vlad Țepeș collectibles. Nor should there be, given the malevolent history of the fortress.

Thousands of boyars and their families had been force-marched there from Târgoviște to die rebuilding the castle for Prince Vlad; it was here that his treacherous brother Radu stormed the fortress with cannons, reducing the once courtly residence into broken turrets and formless rubble. And it was here that Prince Dracula's wife cast herself

from the highest window of the eastern tower, choosing a swift death over the torture of the stake.

At Poenari, only the orientation is different from that of Count Dracula's castle: the "great valley" and the "jagged mountain fastnesses, rising peak on peak" above the valley are toward the north, rather than the west. If you walk along the top of the thick fortress walls of Poenari and look northward, you can see part of the Transfăgărășan Road, leading to a glacial moraine and one of the deepest lakes in the world.

(According to local legend, a dragon sleeps at the bottom of the lake, and the villagers nearby will caution you not to throw stones in the water lest the dragon awake.)

The view southward from the fortress is straight down, leading the eye to the Arges River far in the distance, and even farther, the road back to Curtea de Arges, another of my favorite sites along the Dracula Trail.