

Halloween treat: A night at Dracula's castle in Transylvania



In this picture Bran Castle lies on top of cliffs in Bran, Romania.

Dracula's castle will have overnight guests on Halloween, marking the first time since 1948 that anyone has slept in the Transylvanian fortress. The site's actual name is Bran Castle, and two people will get to sleep there Oct 31 thanks to a promotion by Airbnb. The guests will be wined and dined, then left alone to lie down in red velvet-trimmed coffins just as Dracula did in the Bram Stoker horror novel that popularized the legend.

The castle is famous for its connection to Vlad the Impaler, a real-life prince who stayed there in the 15th century and had a cruel habit of using stakes to impale his victims. Vlad inspired Stoker's story of Count Dracula. The Airbnb contest to find guests for the night launched yesterday. Applicants were asked to use their "vampiric wit" to imagine what they'd say to Count Dracula if they met him. Winners will be flown to Romania and then taken to the castle set dramatically in the Carpathian Mountains. If they're too spooked to sleep in the coffins, beds are on hand.

Welcome to my house

The castle is one of Romania's top tourist attractions, with more than 630,000 visitors a year. Hosting the one-off Airbnb event is a descendant of Bram Stoker, Dacre Stoker. "I want to make it both realistic and show the legend in the wonderful country that birthed the whole thing," Stoker

said in a telephone interview. He'll play the role of Jonathan Harker, a character from the novel who encounters Dracula at the castle. When the winners arrive in a horse-drawn carriage, he plans to greet them using the same words Dracula used in his ancestor's story: "Welcome to my house! Enter freely. Go safely, and leave something of the happiness you bring!"

Stoker added that staging "Halloween night in Dracula castle" was a way of "re-creating the book, and giving people a good experience and a good scare." The winning pair will tour the castle, then be treated to a candlelight dinner of chicken paprikash, the same meal described in the novel. Airbnb's rules for the night are simple: no garlic or silver jewelry - both believed to ward off vampires - and this reminder: "The count is not a fan of mirror selfies." (According to legend, a vampire's image cannot be seen in mirrors.)

Bran Castle was originally a military fortress, strategically set on a highway that links Transylvania to southern Romania. Vlad the Impaler did not own the castle, but is believed to have used it briefly during his incursions in Transylvania. He is also believed to have been imprisoned in the castle for two months in 1462 when he was captured by a rival Hungarian king. Vlad impaled his victims as punishment for wrongdoing. His victims reputedly included all the elderly residents of one community to avenge the deaths of his father and brother.

Rented for weddings

Following World War I, the castle was given to Queen Marie in gratitude for her role in unifying Transylvania with the rest of Romania. She bequeathed it to her youngest daughter Princess Ileana. In 1948, the Communists seized it from Ileana. In 2006, years after communism ended, the castle was returned to Ileana's son Dominic Hapsburg, a retired New York architect. His sisters spent their childhood there.

A Romanian company manages the castle which is rented for weddings, soirees and corporate events. Hapsburg plays an active role in the site, but nobody has stayed overnight there since Hapsburg and his family were exiled from Romania. The castle is very popular with tourists. "We just love Halloween, so what drew us to Romania was Transylvania," said Gina Ricciardi of Boca Raton, Florida, visiting with her husband and friends. "We wanted to see Dracula's castle and just experience the whole Dracula." Might Count Dracula himself show up on Oct 31? "Did he really die at end of the novel when he was stabbed with knife? Bram leaves the question ambiguous," Stoker said. "But if he's still floating around, he would make an appearance." — AP



A portrait of Vlad the Impaler is hung on a wall in Bran Castle, in Bran, Romania.



Candles and books are arranged on a table before a photo shoot of a room in Bran Castle.



In this picture Bran Castle lies on top of cliffs in Bran, Romania. — AP photos



Two coffins are lit before a photo shoot in Bran Castle, in Bran, Romania.



Two girls light up candles before a photo shoot in Bran Castle, in Bran, Romania.