



MOLDOVA!

A Peace Corps experience

Valeria Lungu, 11, harvests a few grapes from a vineyard in Druitorea Veche, Moldova recently. It's grape harvest time in a country known for its wine.

By **MARK GILCHRIST**

Special to The News Reporter

About one-fourth the size of North Carolina, the Eastern-European country of Moldova is a small gem with a big heart.

It is a heart that has endured a complicated history; Moldova was once a part of Romania, and then, for more than four decades after World War II, it belonged to the Soviet Union, with all the economic, religious and even language restrictions that come with Communism.

The country broke free, first by declaring its own language, and then by declaring independence on August 27, 1991. In the 24 years since, Moldovans have switched to a market economy, have rebuilt their churches, and have dealt with the loss of thousands of people living and working elsewhere for much higher wages.

A very quiet tourist destination, Moldova is one of the cheapest, with many hotels costing less than \$50 a night, delicious meals for about \$10 a day, a reknown winemaking industry, beautiful countryside, and wonderful, friendly people.

Attractions vary from sightseeing in centuries-old monasteries and attending festivals, to kayaking, cycling, and wine-cellar tours.

The Peace Corps has been in Moldova since 1993, with more than 120 volunteers currently serving. About half work in schools, teaching either health subjects, or English as a second language, and the other half organize projects to build the country's economy, infrastructure and the general quality of life for Moldovans.

That is the structured work they do, for about 20 hours each week. But, what they do every day, all day, is the work they love, on a mission built on a dream of the brothers John and Bobby Kennedy and their inlaw Robert Sargent Shriver, Jr, five decades ago. They work toward the three key goals of the Peace Corps; to teach skills, to improve the understanding of Americans by people around the world, and to improve the understanding of people around the world by Americans.



Children perform the Hora, a traditional Moldovan folk dance, during Independence Day celebrations August 29.

Learn more about Moldova, the Peace Corps and the Moldova-Tarheel relationship, with website links, photos and more: www.MarksTrail.com



Closed or re-purposed during the Soviet era, Moldova's monasteries, like this one in Ocnița, are active again and are popular among tourists.



My office is in the Raion Center building in Riscani.



Miners dug hundreds of miles of tunnels under Moldova in the 1800s and at least two mines were converted to wine cellars. This one, in Milestii Mici, holds thousands of bottles and is toured by vehicle.

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Above, "First Bell" is a formal occasion on the first day at all Moldovan schools, as are the last day and Teachers Day. Students wear their finest clothes and bring flowers for their teachers. Below, call it "Ma-croeconomics," if you like, as thousands of Moldovan mothers make cheese, bake bread or harvest crops all night, and rent market stalls and sell it all day. Notice the "Carolina blue" with white color scheme? It is very popular in Moldova, on houses, fences clothing and decor everywhere.



Above, the Peace Corps is all about building friendships and teaching skills, achieved nicely through even informal projects like this English club in Costesti, led by PC Volunteer Gail Vallieres. Below, what I call a feast, is just another meal, or "masa" here.



The massive bell, nearly seven feet across, in the tower of the main church in Costesti.

