

The average U.S. Peace Corps volunteer spends about 800 days serving in a foreign country.

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News and activities in Rîșcani, Republic of Moldova • Mark Gilchrist, U.S. Peace Corps volunteer

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Religion in Moldova

Banned from worship for five decades during the Soviet occupation, Moldovans still believe.



A dome atop the monastery in Calaraseuca in northeastern Moldova.

Orthodox Christian churches are beautiful, with strong influence from Middle Eastern architecture, so you'll see many pointed domes in Moldova, as well as ornate rooflines and beautiful colors. It is not unusual to see a church painted green, or blue, with golden domes.

More than 90 percent of Moldovans see themselves as Orthodox Christians, favoring the eastern, or Russian, brand, though the number of active, weekly worshippers is much lower.

The word "orthodox" comes from the Greek "orthos," which means "correct," and "doxa," or "belief," so adherents, in either Orthodox Christianity or Judaism, are thought to have "correct thinking."

Two things separate Orthodox Christianity from western religions; First, they



A nun cares for flowers at the Rudi Monastery in Soroca. Photos: Click

read the same Bible, but with an Old Testament based on a Jewish translation, rather than the Western, Hebrew translation.



Second, nearly 1,000 years ago, belief in who bore the Holy Spirit caused the "Great Schism," officially dividing the Catholic and Orthodox churches. The Latin-speaking Catholics' interpretation of the Nicene Creed had Jesus and the Father bearing the Spirit, while only the Father was involved in the Greek-speaking Orthodox interpretation.

Religion suffered a heavy blow for five decades beginning in 1940, when the Soviets banned all worship after they formed the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic out of what was once a part of Romania in a region called Bessarabia. The buildings were not destroyed, but were used for other functions, and worship went underground. Religion returned in 1991, after the Soviet Union broke up, and the Republic of Moldova was formed. Two years later, the country adopted a constitution that provides for freedom of religion.

As of only a few years ago, churches no longer are tax exempt here. Amid all that, there are tussles about church leaders publicly endorsing political candidates.

Compared to many of the newer religions in the United States that have strong social functions, worshipping here is more

solitary, focusing on prayer and on God. I have not seen open prayers, including saying grace before meals, which is said quietly, to oneself.

Services here are on Saturday evening and Sunday morning, with bell choruses calling people to church. They last for a few hours, but are not structured programs like many in the west. Worshippers may come and go during services, pray, listen to a choir and hear a priest give a sermon.

You won't find chairs or pews in Orthodox Christian churches here, as people stand or kneel during services.

One role a priest has in a community is to bless everything. On religious holidays, (mostly in the spring, I've noticed,) he will visit all offices, stores and some homes, where he will chant, pray, and douse everything with Holy water. If you build a home or office building, a priest will bless it for you.

The Calendar

Historically, Easter has been the most important holiday here, with Christmas coming centuries later. Belief is that Jesus was conceived in the spring, and his birth came nine months later, in early January.

Moldovans have recently started observing the "New Christmas" on December 25, but it is not a holiday. The traditional Christmas here is on January 7 and 8. Unlike in the U.S., if Christmas falls on a weekend, no weekdays off are given.

The Fast

Fasting here is not as popular as it once was, but adherents observe every Wednesday and Friday, and also four periods; Lent in the spring, then the Fast of the Apostles through June, the Dormition Fast in early August and the Christmas Fast.

The Cross

The Orthodox cross has three "beams," two more than on the Latin cross favored in the west. On the small, top beam, is often inscribed "INRI," initials for a Latin phrase that is loosely translated into;



Father Teodor Bazatin blesses food baskets Easter morning. Photos: Click

"Jesus of Nazarene, King of the Jews."

There are a few explanations for the slanted beam on the bottom, including one that it is a nod to the X-shaped cross of St. Andrew. But the one I've heard around here refers to Christ being crucified with two thieves; one repentant, (on his right, who would follow that side of the beam up to Heaven) and one unrepentant, (on his left, who would be sent down to Hell.)



An Orthodox church in Drochia, Moldova

The Icons

Eastern Orthodox Moldovans recognize dozens of saints, with their icons painted in churches, and printed on posters and calendars. Each saint is celebrated on a special day of the year, so there are a dozen or so saints honored each month.

I have been told that most Moldovans are named after saints, and parents have had it pretty easy when picking names, because when a child is born, he or she is named after a saint with a date on or near the child's birth day.



The Fountains

Many drinking wells in every village and city are decorated elaborately. Either the well or a nearby shrine will honor a saint. On some of these shrines, residents light candles on important dates.

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"All people need adult supervision, and men get that through marriage."

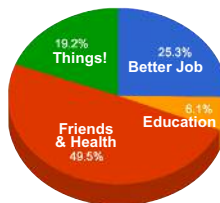
Garrison Keillor

JOKE OF THE MONTH

It is so cold, when I milked the cow, I got ice cream.

Fun Survey

I asked 100 people what they most wish to have in 2017. The largest group, 49, hope to improve friendships and health, 25 want a better job, 19 desire a nicer home, car or other things, and 6 want more education.



MOLDOVANS OF THE MONTH



MARIA BANCU

Donating and delivering dozens of bags filled with grocery gifts to needy people in Duruitoarea Noua for Christmas, Ion Costetchi and his sister, Maria Bancu, are our Moldovans of the month.



ION COSTETCHI