

I Never Saw Peleş Castle

This past summer, I went to Sinaia, Romania, with one very specific goal: I was going to see Peleş Castle, a spectacular 19th-century royal castle nestled in the Carpathian Mountains, most famous for its lavish Neo-Renaissance architecture. And I was prepared. I had researched the history of the castle. I had learned about its architectural style. I had pre-purchased the train schedule. I even had a detailed itinerary. This was my first time planning a trip with AI, and I had asked ChatGPT many, many questions. Apparently, I asked ChatGPT everything ... except...: “Do I need to book a ticket in advance?”

So I got on the train to Sinaia feeling extremely well prepared. On the train, I met two friendly travelers who were also going to Peleş Castle. They casually mentioned, “Our entrance time is at 11:30.” Entrance time? For a moment, I thought that was interesting. But I didn’t ask another question. I had done my research. I had my itinerary. So somehow, my brain heard this new information and decided: “Nothing to worry about.” That was mistake number two.

Eventually, I arrived at Peleş Castle. It was beautiful, from outside—towers, mountains, forest, exactly what I had imagined. I walked up to the ticket office, only to discover that every ticket for the day was sold out.

I thought: maybe they can squeeze in one person. I’m traveling alone—surely there is some solo-traveler flexibility! So I asked the staff nicely. “Would it be possible to squeeze in one person, please?” The woman looked at me and said, in a flat, apathetic tone like a communist-era bureaucrat, “Tomorrow.” I tried again. “But I’m leaving.” Same flat voice: “Tomorrow.” I tried one more version, just in case Romanian customer service responded to persistence. “Maybe a cancellation?” Deadpan: “Tomorrow.”

At that moment, I was not feeling adventurous. I was annoyed. I had come all this way, and now I was standing outside the castle, feeling rejected. The staff pointed toward a smaller castle nearby: Pelişor Castle. It was less famous, less grand, and, in my mind at that moment, definitely second choice.

But I went. And almost immediately, something changed. Pelişor wasn’t crowded. There were no large tour groups pushing through the rooms. I could actually stop and read the signs at my own pace, look and notice things. I discovered beautiful Art Nouveau and Secession-style interiors. My “consolation prize” was actually wonderful.

And then, when I came outside, I looked up. High above Sinaia, I saw gondolas moving toward the Carpathian Mountains. Now, this was definitely not on my itinerary. So naturally, I went.

I reached the gondola station. I rode higher and higher into the Carpathian Mountains. The air became cooler. The town became smaller below me. At the top, the view opened across the mountains. And then I encountered something I definitely had not researched

on ChatGPT: a group of people holding a prayer meeting and sharing testimonies on top of a mountain in Romania. At that point, I stopped asking what was supposed to happen that day.

And then I saw an alpine slide. That morning, my great ambition had been to quietly study Romanian royal architecture. A few hours later, I was racing down a mountain on a toboggan. I had a blast.

So yes, I never saw Peleş Castle. But I'm rather glad that I didn't.

I left Sinaia by train at 5:40 p.m., because of my pre-purchased ticket. On the train, it hit me how much the experience resembled life.

We all have limited time. We make plans for how we want to spend it—careers we want, relationships we hope for, places we want to go, lives we imagine for ourselves. But no matter how carefully we prepare, sometimes our own “Peleş Castle” falls through. When it does, disappointment can make us stare so hard at the closed door that we stop noticing everything else around us. But there may still be a Pelişor nearby. There may still be another peak to climb. There may be an adventure waiting that we never would have planned for ourselves.

So the next time your “Peleş Castle” falls through, give yourself a moment to be disappointed. But don't spend all of your remaining time standing outside the locked door. Look around—and sometimes, look up. Because the experience you missed may not be the only experience worth having, and the best part of your journey may be waiting somewhere you never planned to go.