



## We Tick to Different Clocks: An Immersive Adventure in Romania

By Shandin Rikard | March 21, 2011

Culturally, Americans are like the White Rabbit in Disney's rendition of Alice in Wonderland: "No time to say hello, goodbye! I'm late I'm late I'm late!" Punctuality; organization; dependability; professionalism. In the United States these words reflect the way we perceive the relationship between time and behavior; the way an individual structures and prioritizes his/her time is taken as an indication of his/her essential characteristics. In order to get or keep a good job, people need to display the above attributes; they need to be consistently "on time" and exhibit excellent time management skills to be taken seriously.

We are trained from the moment we enter school the significance of maintaining order and efficiency with strictly adhered-to schedules through an established disciplinary regime: tardiness equals detention. In college, tardiness equals a lower letter grade, and in the "real world" of adulthood, tardiness equals loss of employment. You bet us Americans run around with a loud clock ticking in our heads.

As a product of the well-oiled machine that is America, I am definitely the kind of person that makes every effort to always be on time, and in turn I expect other people to keep appointments, for events to begin and end according to schedule, and for everyone to use time effectively and efficiently. When you grow up exposed to only one such environment, the ideals and expectations of the culture become like second nature – I would probably never have reflected on the value I place on time if I hadn't decided to become a traveler and to experience the world's many other cultures.

I have been living in the capital city of this country, Bucharest, for 10 weeks – long enough for me to realize that Romanians are nothing like the White Rabbit; instead, I liken Romania to the chorus of "Time" by Hootie and the Blowfish: "Cause tomorrow's just another day, and I don't believe in time!" Since I have been here, all of my time-centered values have been challenged: punctuality and organization are not essential, dependability takes on a new and nearly reversed meaning, and professionalism is not a term to be tied to an individual's time management abilities. Time is more of a fluid concept here than in the States; it is a melody rather than a pendulum.



Romanian students are not trained to show up on time. Romanian undergraduates (who I spend most of my time working with and doing research for) have hectic schedules, but instead of being required to find a balance between work time and class time as we are in the States, they simply decide each day which obligations to show up for and which ones not to. It is not considered inappropriate for teachers to have 15% attendance or to have students walk into class half an hour or more late. With this type of culture at the college level, it is little wonder that in the Romanian organizational culture that I have experienced people are frequently late for meetings, events usually start 15 minutes late and may end anywhere from 15 minutes to an hour later than scheduled, meetings and events are rescheduled and then rescheduled again, and plans are made with very little forewarning or without any solid details until the last minute.



While I have experienced times of frustration in my work due to these cultural differences (I have had people cancel and reschedule on me numerous times, and I often don't know what the plan is until a couple of hours before the time), I was made aware early on of a perk as an intern here: my work schedule is extremely flexible. I do not have to be at the Educational Advising Center until late morning, and my actual arrival depends on the activities of the day, as does my departure in the evening. Some days I work 10:30-18:00, some days I work 12:00-20:00, and on days that we don't have a particular event planned, I can choose to arrange my hours to fit around my personal life. Another wonderful advantage of the abstraction of the American idea of the work day is that businesses such as pharmacies and post offices are open until much later here; post offices don't close until 20:00 and pharmacies are sometimes open until 22:00, if not 24 hours! This is a huge convenience that I shall miss.

The culture is, of course, not much different in its social scene. A Romanian that I regularly hang out with seems incapable of getting to the cinema until the movie has started – but this is an extreme example. She apologized to me and explained that it is common for friends to be half an hour late or more to meet up, and that it isn't considered disrespectful or unusual. Each time I have gone to a classical music concert it has started at least 10 minutes behind schedule, and once lasted a full hour longer than the program stated. When some of my American friends here took a cultural tour of Bucharest that was supposed to leave at 9:00,



end at 15:00, and include a lunch break at 13:00, they were a little frustrated that it left late, ended around 17:00, and they were starving for the lunch they didn't get until after 14:00. I told her that I wasn't at all surprised. That is what immersing yourself in a new culture does; the shock fades and soon you begin to move in time to the new melody.

I see some beauty in the Romanian concept of time. In the States, you are expected to leave no more than an hour, hour and a half after you're seated in a restaurant. In Romania, nobody bothers you if you want to sit at your table for three hours enjoying the company (and the wine). In the States, people you know might not stop on the street to talk to you for even thirty seconds, all you get is a passing "how are you" (it might as well not even be a question!) – again, cue the White Rabbit. In Romania, you are almost always as important if not more so than someone's next appointment. Here, people matter, not the calendar, not the clock. Romanian time may not be as efficient as the gears in our American machine, but it still works.

I only have a week and a half left in this beautiful Eastern European country. Boy, time flies when you're compelled to re-evaluate its essence and significance.