

I eventually reached Călărași *Rayon* (District), to be welcomed by a sign proclaiming the area to be rich in historic monasteries. A few kilometres later saw me reaching the town itself. I rode through the outskirts of crumbling buildings, looking for the "Centro" sign, where I assumed the town hall would be, or at least someone who could point me in the general direction. Riding further on, the next sign revealed that I had left the town. Whoops! This is it! I turned round and parked up next to the central bus station, a grand name for a tin-roofed shack with 3 minibuses parked outside. I was immediately accosted by a small boy asking for money, but he quickly lost interest and ran off.



Moldova – Călărași central bus station

After calling Susanne to let her know I had arrived, I waited until 9:00am before calling Maria to let her know I had arrived somewhat earlier than planned, and that I now had no idea how to get to the town hall, although I had told her yesterday I would surely have no problem in finding it alone. I hadn't reckoned on there being no street signs whatsoever in the town. Shortly afterwards, a white Lada Niva arrived, driven by Boria, the ever-friendly driver, together with Maria. I followed them to the town hall, where a warm reception awaited me. Although I had been expected, they were not really sure why I was there, and through Maria I explained about the bicycle project and the part I was playing. An appointment had already been made at the orphanage, but they suggested that the bike remained out of site at the hotel, which was the next destination of the day.

The hotel turned out to be one of two rooms in a crumbling, free standing building next to the owners' house. Brown, rubberised wallpaper greeted me in the hallway, and I was led into the living room/bedroom, which was locally-furnished (meaning sparse, several threadbare carpets on the floor, plus an old couch to sit/sleep on). The bathroom was very run down, the split toilet seat leaking its foam lining. Somebody later remarked that you don't see any adverts for toilet paper in Moldova, unlike Western Europe, which is true. To save money, the (always pink) toilet rolls don't have cardboard tubes, making them look even worse to the uninitiated. The shower was just a length of hose without a shower head. I later learned that this was advantageous, since there was just sufficient pressure to dribble a few drops of water from the hose. A shower head and its associated water pressure reduction would have meant nothing at all! Maria later explained to me that the town supplies water just twice per day - for two hours in the morning and a further two hours in the evening. Water is stored in a roof-mounted tank, which also entails opening and closing a number of different taps to allow water to be supplied and to prevent overflowing at critical times during the day.

After changing out of my bike gear, I was driven to the orphanage. The external appearance of the brick built building wasn't as bad as I had expected. Many trees

provided shade in the courtyard and apart from some old, rusting external water tanks outside, the building seemed to be relatively well looked after. The inside was also not bad for local standards, although would probably be condemned in Western Europe. We were taken to the director's office, where we were provided with food and drink, as I was soon to learn is normal practice towards guests in Moldova,

The orphanage started in earnest in 1994. Tatiana Bondarenco has been working there from the beginning, first as a teacher, then for the last eight years as director. Even though she is now officially retired, it quickly became apparent that she lives for "her" children. She explained through Maria that the orphanage had developed over the years to specialise in schooling mentally handicapped children and those with learning difficulties, basically any child that cannot attend a "normal" school. Their aim is to prepare the children for the state-run secondary schools, working on the theory that in the eight years spent there, they are sufficiently prepared to tackle conventional schooling methods. From the little that I saw, they appear to be extremely successful and I later learned that a number of former pupils had gone on to gain good jobs.

Until 2005, some 125 children were here, although the current number is just under ninety. Since Moldova is so poor and offers very little in the way of future prospects, many parents work in neighbouring countries, depositing their children in an orphanage for months on end. Most of the children in Călărași have only one or no parents, meaning they are based here more or less continuously, although some are taken home during the school holidays. The schooling has a bias towards sport, music and drama, since even the more severely handicapped children can also participate in these activities.



Following my explanation that the reason for my visit was to try and describe the current situation to people back home, and encourage them to donate money to support renovation, Tatiana was happy to show us around, let me take some photos and answer my many questions. The first thing that struck me was the condition of the floor. The gangways were tiled with reddish-brown and cream tiles, although many were cracked and missing. I also encountered exposed water pipes crossing some dimly lit gangways at a height of some 10-20 centimetres above the ground. On commenting about the safety risk for running children, I was rewarded with, "It's OK, they know that they're there!". The first room she showed me was empty, apart from a couple of broken beds and three new ones standing on the ancient, torn linoleum floor. Cardboard was used to fill in the gaps where the lino was non-existent. Although this room wasn't currently being used as a bedroom, this type and standard of flooring was consistent throughout all of the sleeping quarters.