



ASSOCIATION LAG DANUBE DELTA

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CULTURAL HERITAGE ON LOCAL ACTION GROUP „DANUBE DELTA” TERRITORY

SULINA

Mile Zero of the Danube



Contributors: Association „Cu drag din Sulina” · Lotca Studio lotcastudio.ro



Sulina and the Danube, seen from above

ROMANIA · THE DANUBE DELTA

Tulcea County

Tulcea County lies in the far east of Romania, in the north of the historical region of **Dobruja**. Its capital, Tulcea, stands on the site of ancient *Aegyssus*, founded in the 7th century BC and mentioned by the Roman poet Ovid and, centuries later, by the Byzantine historian Procopius.

The county rests on an ancient continental promontory – a strategic place for guarding the Danube, above all in Roman times – later partly submerged by the floodplain of the Delta.



Ethnic festival in Sulina

Main source of information: Interreg Europe – HERICOAST Project, Territorial analysis and identification of Tulcea County, Romania

Its greatest treasure is the **Danube Delta**, which covers about a third of the county, in the north-east. The river and coastal zone belong to the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve, together with the Razim – Sinoe lagoon complex and the Black Sea coast. This is a land of **rich cultural heritage**, tangible and intangible: 40 of its sites on the *List of Historical Monuments of Romania* are of outstanding national and universal value – archaeological sites from many eras, as well as architectural, historic and memorial monuments.

Over the centuries, its isolation made the Delta a **refuge** for successive waves of religious and political exiles. Today *Romanians, Russian Lipovans, Ukrainians (Haholi), Greeks, Turks, Tatars and Bulgarians* live side by side – whatever their language or faith, the shared waters have always bound their destinies together, in what is known as “**the Dobrujan inter-ethnic model**”.



The port of Sulina and the Sulina branch of the Danube, flowing towards the Black Sea

Mile 0

THE END OF THE DANUBE

72 km

BY WATER FROM TULCEA

2,857 km

ACROSS EUROPE

WHERE THE RIVER ENDS

Sulina – where the Danube meets the sea

This is where the Danube's journey ends. After 2,857 km and ten countries, Europe's second-longest river reaches the Black Sea at Sulina – the **easternmost town of Romania** and, since 1 January 2007, of the European Union. Built on a narrow tongue of land between river and sea, it was first mentioned more than 1,000 years ago, as *Selina*, by the Byzantine Emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus.

Sulina is the only Romanian town that is both a **river port and a sea port**, and the lowest-lying one, less than 4 m above sea level. No road leads here: the town is reached only by water, 39 nautical miles (about 72 km) downstream from Tulcea. On the maritime Danube distances are counted in nautical miles – and Sulina, terminus of the Delta cruise ships, stands at *Mile 0*.

All around lies the **Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve**, established in 1993. Channels lead to the Roșu – Roșuleț – Puiu – Lumina lakes, and a beach of very fine sand runs south towards Sfântu Gheorghe. River, sea and delta meet in one place.

Main source of information: Sulina Local Development Strategy 2018–2035



A shipwreck off the coast of Sulina at sunset



Traditional boat on Sulina beach

— WHERE RIVER MEETS SEA

Mile Zero: the mouth of the Danube

A short boat ride from the town takes you to **Musura Bay** and the very end of the river, where the fresh waters of the Danube dissolve into the salty Black Sea. Before the Commission's works, the river mouth was a sailors' nightmare: in a single storm in December 1855, 24 ships and 60 barges ran aground or sank here, and more than 300 lives were lost.

On a sandbank in the bay lies the rusting wreck of the cargo ship *Turgut S*, driven aground by a winter storm in 2009 and never removed – a dramatic landmark, and a perch for pelicans and cormorants.

About 2 km from the centre, the **Sulina beach** runs north-south along the coast, with exceptionally fine sand, towards Sfântu Gheorghe; since dykes were built at the river mouth in the 1980s, it has kept growing seawards.

Sulina is Romania's capital of sunshine, with national records for *the most sunny days*, the highest solar radiation, the lowest cloud cover and the lowest rainfall. Around it stretch reed beds, floating reed islands and the lakes of the Roșu – Puiu complex, home to many protected birds. Go out by boat at sunrise or sunset, when the Delta is at its most beautiful.

Main sources of information: Sulina Local Development Strategy 2018–2035; Association LAG Danube Delta – Travel Guide & Guest Dossier (R. Iacob, 2026)

From Ottoman outpost to river-sea port

1484

OTTOMANS TAKE CHILIA

1616

FIRST DANUBE TREATY

1840

RIVER-SEA PORT

Sulina's story is a story of navigation. In the 1480s, after taking Chilia (1484) and the mouths of the Danube, the **Ottomans** raised a redoubt here to watch over the entrance to the Delta. A garrison later guarded it against Cossack raids, and ships sailing up to Tulcea, Galați and Brăila were inspected on their way. Like every port, Sulina had its smugglers – and its legends of *Greek and Maltese pirates* hiding in the reeds.

For centuries the great powers kept watch on the mouths of the Danube. Austria and the Ottoman Empire signed the first treaty on Danube navigation in 1616, followed by the treaties of Karlowitz (1699) and Passarowitz (1718). The **Congress of Vienna** (1815) then set out the principle of free navigation on Europe's international rivers.

In 1840 the **Russo-Austrian Convention** of St Petersburg became the first international agreement to name Sulina as a river-sea port – the opening of the town's most remarkable century.

Main source of information: Sulina Local Development Strategy 2018–2035

Ships on the Sulina branch of the Danube



European Commission of the Danube

On 30 March 1856 the **Treaty of Paris** was signed, officially marking the end of the Crimean War, fought between Russia on one side and the Ottoman Empire, Great Britain, France and the Kingdom of Sardinia on the other. The treaty established, among other things, the neutrality of the Black Sea, the recognition of Moldavia and Wallachia as semi-independent states formally under Ottoman suzerainty, the return to Moldavia of three counties in southern Bessarabia – Cahul, Ismail and Bolgrad – and free navigation on the Danube.



The flag of the European Commission of the Danube

The Western powers, but especially Great Britain, were interested in the Danube trade. As a result of the food crisis that the United Kingdom faced in 1845–1846, it was decided to import cereals from Europe, the Romanian Principalities being an important source of grain. However, navigation on the Danube in this area and access to the Black Sea were very difficult due to the shallow depths at the mouths – in some places less than one metre. The Turks had a rudimentary dredging system – a tree tied to the stern of a boat. Only small boats sailed on this section, and cargo was loaded and unloaded many times, as ships ran aground on the sandbanks. These shortcomings were compounded by piracy in the Delta.

In this context the **European Commission of the Danube** was established – an international body that began its activity on 4 November 1856 in Galați, in which the Austrian Empire, France, Great Britain, Prussia, Russia, the Kingdom of Sardinia and the Ottoman Empire were represented.

Initially created for two years, the Commission existed for 82 years, with wide administrative powers: it collected all navigation dues, was exempt from taxes and customs duties, and had the right to fly its own flag – which made it *a kind of state within a state*.

1856

TREATY OF PARIS

7

POWERS REPRESENTED

82

YEARS OF ACTIVITY

The Father of the Danube

The British delegate, **John Stokes**, was charged with surveying the Delta and opening the Danube to sea-going ships. On his recommendation the Commission brought in **Charles Augustus Hartley**, one of the finest engineers of his time, later known as the “**Father of the Danube**”. British cartographers, officers and engineers set to work on modernising the Delta.

Hartley arrived in 1856, aged just 31, fresh from the Crimean War. The Sfântu Gheorghe branch was deeper but the most winding, and correcting it would have cost far too much, so the works were concentrated on the shorter, straighter **Sulina branch**. Short of funds, he found an ingenious solution: two jetties of wooden piles filled with stone, which narrowed the river so that its own current *soured the sandbar* and deepened the channel. Knighted in 1862, he was later consulted on the harbour of Constanța.

Following Hartley’s plans, the Sulina branch was corrected and became easily navigable. Its port grew into the most important on the western coast of the Black Sea, and in 1870 Sulina was declared a *porto franco* – a free port, exempt from customs duties.

Main sources of information: Association LAG Danube Delta – Cultural heritage, Sfântu Gheorghe; Sulina Local Development Strategy 2018–2035; Association LAG Danube Delta – Travel Guide & Guest Dossier (R. Iacob, 2026)



The Danube Delta in a 19th-century German map, after the surveys of Capt. T. Spratt

The Old Lighthouse and the Sulina branch, corrected by the Commission, flowing into the Black Sea





Souvenir from Sulina – Carol I Street, early 20th century

1857

TELEGRAPH TO TULCEA

1903

WATER TOWER AND
TELEPHONE

1910

ELECTRIC LIGHT

THE GOLDEN AGE

Sulina, the Commission's town

In the mid-19th century Sulina felt like a distant outpost of London, Paris or Vienna, built over a marsh. Consulates lined the waterfront of Street I, with Western façades, inner courtyards and private piers, while Italian stonemasons and Croatian sailors brought in by the Commission built the stone jetties.

Around the Commission a modern town took shape: a hospital, the **Palace** (1868), workshops, light-houses, a telegraph line to Tulcea and Galați (1857), the first **weather station** on today's Romanian territory (1859), the Water Tower and a telephone line (1903), and street lighting – with petroleum at first, electric from 1910.

The golden age was cut short by the **First World War**, which left Sulina in ruins. Rebuilt after 1920, with new schools teaching Romanian, French and Italian, the town became a *fashionable seaside resort* in the 1930s. In 1939 Romania took over the Commission's main duties, and the cosmopolitan life of Sulina slowly faded.

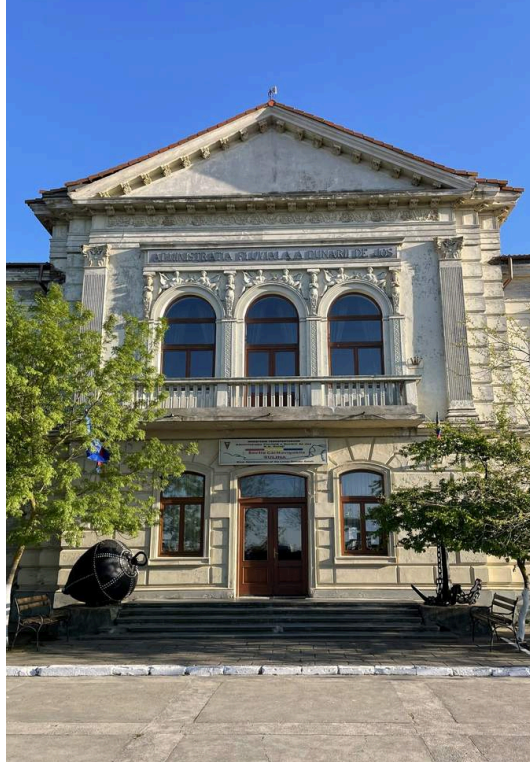
Main sources of information: Sulina Local Development Strategy 2018–2035; Association LAG Danube Delta – Travel Guide & Guest Dossier (R. Iacob, 2026)

The Palace of the Commission

On Street I, facing the river, stands the most elegant reminder of the Commission's power: its **Palace**. Built in the 1860s in Neoclassical style, it housed the Commission until 1921, when it passed into the administration of the Romanian state.

Today it is a **historic monument** and the seat of the Sulina section of the *Lower Danube River Administration* – which still looks after navigation on the river, the very task the Commission was created for in 1856.

The Palace of the European Commission of the Danube,
today the seat of the Lower Danube River Administration



Its façade, with arched windows and rich stucco ornament, is one of the finest examples of the **classicising eclectic architecture** that gave the Sulina waterfront its European look. Its finishes and materials were brought from France and Italy to reflect the prestige of the institution; damaged in the First World War, the Palace was restored in the early 1920s.

Main sources of information: Sulina Local Development Strategy 2018–2035; Romanian Cultural Institute – "Sulina: Past and Present"

Stucco decoration on the façade of the Palace



Europolis – Europe in miniature

Picture a small port where every street spoke a different language. At the end of the 19th century Sulina had almost **5,000 inhabitants** of more than twenty nationalities. Greeks were the largest community (2,056), followed by Romanians (803), Russians (546), Armenians (444), Turks (268), Austro-Hungarians (211), Jews (173) and Albanians (117), alongside Germans, Italians, Bulgarians, English, Tatars, Montenegrins, Serbs, Poles, French, Danes and others. Greek was the language of the streets, but *French was the official language*, followed by Romanian, Russian, Italian and Turkish. By 1912 the town had 7,347 inhabitants.

Austria, Britain, Germany, Italy, Denmark, the Netherlands, Greece, Russia and Turkey kept consulates or vice-consulates here, and Europe's great shipping lines – Austrian Lloyd, Deutsche Levante Linie, Johnston Line, Messageries Maritimes and others – had offices in the port. By the early 20th century the town counted 1,886 houses, 154 shops, a 300-seat theatre, a printing house, two hospitals, a water plant and electric lighting in the port.

Each community had its own school and house of worship: Greek, Lipovan, German, Anglican and Romanian churches, mosques and a synagogue. In 1927 the beach and the **Casino** opened, where consuls, Commission officials and sea captains met for shows and balls.

Main source of information: Sulina Local Development Strategy 2018–2035

An old merchant house on the streets of Sulina



≈5,000

INHABITANTS AROUND 1900

20+

NATIONALITIES

7,347

INHABITANTS IN 1912



The Orthodox Cathedral on Street I

— NEO-ROMANIAN STYLE

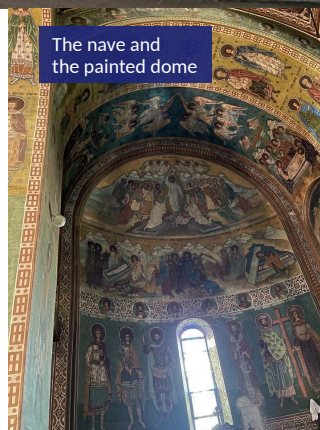
Saint Nicholas and Saint Alexander Cathedral

The Orthodox cathedral was raised at the initiative of **King Carol I** to mark the union of Dobruja with Romania after the War of Independence. It is dedicated to *Saint Alexander* – on whose feast day, 30 August 1877, the Romanian army took the Grivița redoubt – and to *Saint Nicholas*, patron saint of sailors.

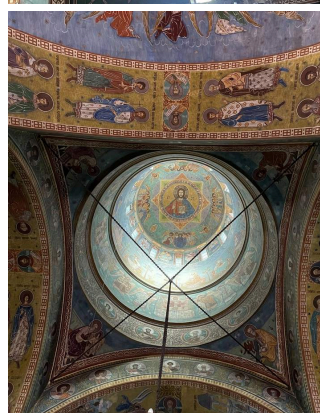
Designed in the **Neo-Romanian style** by architect Nicolae C. Mihăescu, it was built in 1910–1912 and 1933–1934. A historic monument, it entered a restoration project in 2022, launched by the Ministry of Culture through the National Heritage Institute.

The Commission supported every faith. The **Greek Church of Saint Nicholas** (1869), raised with the help of wealthy Greek shipowners and royal donors, shows the influence of their community; the Italians built the Catholic church, and Sulina also had Russian Orthodox, Lipovan, Protestant and Anglican churches, mosques and a synagogue.

Main sources of information: Sulina Local Development Strategy 2018–2035; Romanian Cultural Institute; Basilica.ro



The nave and the painted dome





The Old Lighthouse of the European Commission of the Danube

MUSEUM

The Old Lighthouse

For ships arriving from the open sea, this white tower once marked the gateway to the Danube. Built by the European Commission of the Danube in **1869–1870**, the lighthouse is 17.34 m high. As the river carried sand seawards and the shore advanced, it now stands about *1.5 km from the sea*.

Since 2003 it has been a **museum**, run by the Eco-Museum Research Institute “Gavrilă Simion” Tulcea. Documents, maps, medals and photographs tell the story of the Commission, alongside furniture and family photographs of the writer **Jean Bart** and a collection of weapons from the 18th to the 20th century.

1870

COMPLETED

17.34 m

HIGH

1.5 km

FROM THE SEA TODAY

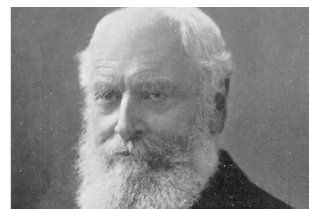
The museum also honours two great sons of the port. The navy officer and harbour master Eugeniu Botez chose his pen name, **Jean Bart**, after a famous 17th-century French corsair; his novel “Europolis” still captures the nostalgia of Sulina’s golden age. The conductor **George Georgescu**, born here in 1887, left the mouth of the Danube to become one of the great conductors of the 20th century, making his debut with the *Berlin Philharmonic* in 1918. At the end of August the courtyard hosts the open-air festival “**The Lighthouse with Movies**”.



Eugeniu P. Botez, alias Jean Bart – the writer



George Georgescu – the conductor



Sir Charles A. Hartley – “the Father of the Danube”

Main sources of information: Guide of Romanian Museums (ciMeC); Sulina Local Development Strategy 2018–2035



ARCHITECTURE

Houses of the old port

Walk along the river and you read Sulina's history in its houses. On the outskirts, homes keep the **reed architecture** of the Delta villages, clad in wooden weatherboarding against the salty air. In the centre, between Streets II and III, one-storey houses with tiled roofs mark the passage from village to town.

The finest ensemble is the *Danube promenade* on Street I – Sulina's first point of contact with the world. Riverside land was expensive, so

houses stood wall to wall, most with one upper floor: shops, cafés and workshops at street level, homes above. Narrow plots gave them slender proportions, and the wish for an imposing front gave Sulina its signature – the **bow window**.

Many of these wooden houses on tall stone foundations are fragile today – the most eloquent witnesses of Europolis, best explored on foot.

Main source of information: Sulina Local Development Strategy 2018–2035



Old families of Sulina

Behind the consulates and the steamships were the families who made Sulina their home. Some came by sea, others from the mountains; some stayed a season, others for generations. Their names still live on in the town's streets, churches and cemetery.



The waterfront in the days of the Commission, when dozens of ships docked at the port

The Greek families

The **Greeks** were the backbone of the port's trade and shipping. In the age of the Commission, many came from the Ionian Islands – Corfu, Kefalonia and Ithaca – to the Danube ports of Sulina, Galați and Brăila, valued as sailors, shipwrights, river pilots and merchants. Families such as the *Survános* (Sourvanos) belonged to this world, gathered around the Greek Church of Saint Nicholas.

Aristocratic families

Aristocracy came too: Princess **Ecaterina Moruzi**, of the Phanariot family that gave rulers to the Romanian Principalities, rests in the Greek section of the cemetery – and Greek captains such as Giorgios Kontoguris became part of the port's legend.

Main source of information: Association LAG Danube Delta – Travel Guide & Guest Dossier (R. Iacob, 2026)

The Romanian families

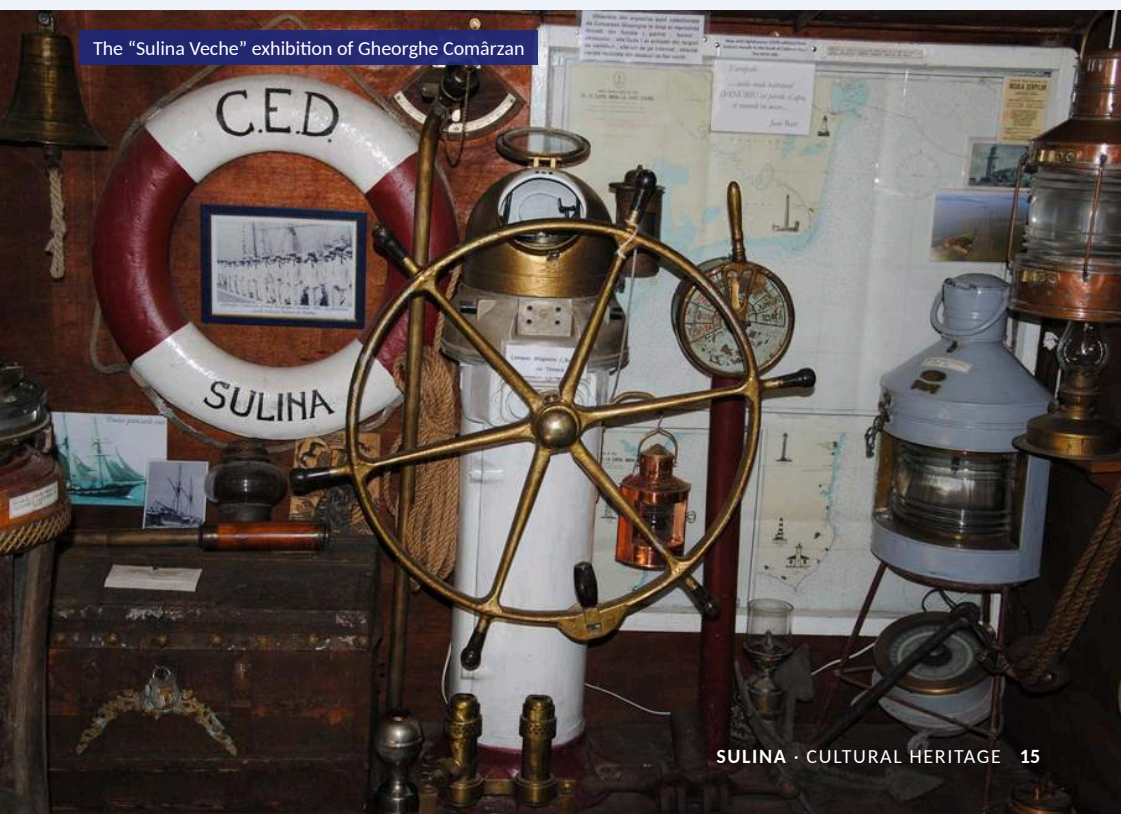
Not everyone came by sea. Family tradition says the **Comârzan** family descends from the *mocani* – Romanian transhumant shepherds from the Carpathians, who drove their flocks across great distances and settled on the dry ridges of Sulina. Among their early ventures was a traditional windmill; as the port grew, the family became part of the town's maritime life.

Today the name belongs above all to **Gheorghe Comârzan** – former sailor, border police officer and soldier, and Sulina's living archive. In the courtyard of his home he has gathered the *"Sulina Veche"* (*Old Sulina*) exhibition: sea captains' trunks, ship lanterns, maps, navigation instruments and old magazines brought by the Commission's ships, with corners dedicated to Jean Bart and to the Olympic canoeist Ivan Patzaichin.

He tells the town's stories – mostly in Romanian – with rare passion, and his small book *"Sulina's Stories"* is available in English on site.

Visit the *"Sulina Veche"* exhibition · Str. C.A. Rosetti 5, near the Greek Church of Saint Nicholas · Daily 10:00–17:00; off-season by appointment · +40 746 030 783 · About one hour, guided by Gheorghe Comârzan

Main source of information: Association LAG Danube Delta – Travel Guide & Guest Dossier (R. Iacob, 2026)



The "Sulina Veche" exhibition of Gheorghe Comârzan

The Maritime Cemetery

At the edge of town lies one of the most unusual places in Romania: a cemetery complex with separate sections for Western-rite Christians, Orthodox, Old-Rite Orthodox, Jews and Muslims – all of Europolis, side by side. **Jean Bart** was the first to call it the “*Maritime Cemetery*”, in sketches published in 1899.

The pirate’s grave. The most famous stone bears a skull and crossbones. It belongs to Giorgios Kontogouris, born in Kefalonia, who died on 25 March 1871 – said to be the only pirate’s grave in Romania. Legend says he waltzed at the consular balls, and at night tied lanterns to the horns of oxen on the shore, so that captains mistook them for the harbour light and ran aground. He died poor, they say, leaving his treasure buried on the beach – pour water on his stone at sunrise, and the faded inscription reveals the clues.

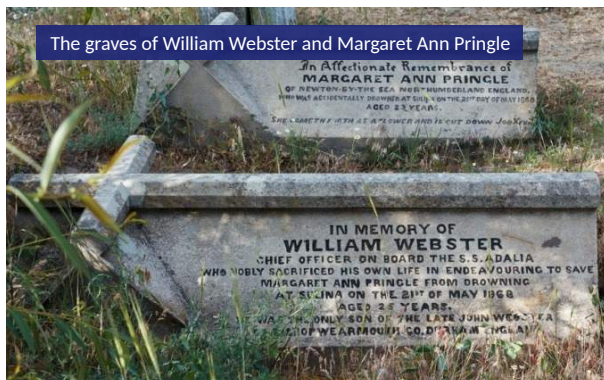
The Romeo and Juliet of the Danube. Legend tells of two lovers from rival families – he a ship’s captain, she disguised as a sailor – who died together in 1868. The stones tell the true story: on 21 May 1868 Margaret Ann Pringle, 23, of Northumberland, drowned at Sulina, and **William Webster**, chief officer of the S.S. Adalia, gave his life trying to save her. They lie side by side.

Main sources of information: Romanian Cultural Institute – “Sulina: Past and Present”; Adevărul; Association LAG Danube Delta – Travel Guide & Guest Dossier (R. Iacob, 2026)

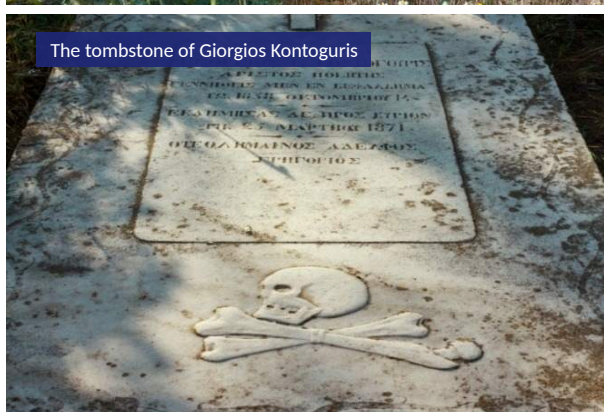
The grave of Abraham Farrar from Hartlepool, England – engineer



The graves of William Webster and Margaret Ann Pringle



The tombstone of Giorgios Kontogouris





The Danube promenade on Street I

WALKING ROUTE

A day in Sulina

Sulina is best discovered on foot. This walk follows the town from the river to the sea – a perfect day in Europolis.

- 09:30** **Street I – the waterfront**
Start on the Danube promenade, once lined with consulates, shipping agencies and elegant shops.
- 10:00** **The Old Lighthouse**
The Commission's lighthouse, now a museum of maps, documents and the story of the Danube's mouths.
- 11:30** **"Sulina Veche" exhibition**
An hour with Gheorghe Comârzan in his courtyard museum, Str. C.A. Rosetti 5.
- 12:30** **Greek Church of Saint Nicholas**
A short walk away – proof of how wealthy the Greek community once was.
- 13:15** **Lunch on the waterfront**
Back on Street I for fish soup or fried catfish, facing the river.
- 15:00** **The Maritime Cemetery**
Europe's most remarkable international cemetery: the Greek section, Princess Moruzi, the pirate's grave and the British engineers.
- 17:00** **Sulina beach**
Fine sand and a wild shore where the Danube meets the sea – stay for the late-afternoon light.

Good to know · Wear comfortable shoes – paved streets turn to sandy roads towards the cemetery and the beach · Carry some cash in lei for small purchases



Listen to Sulina

Scan the QR code for Voice Your Place Sulina, an audio guide narrated by teenagers about the town's heritage (EN).

Project developed by:



In collaboration with:



Project co-financed by:



Main sources of information: Association LAG Danube Delta – Travel Guide & Guest Dossier (R. Iacob, 2026);
The project **Voice Your Place SULINA**, financed through AFCN, 2024–2025

LITERATURE

Jean Bart and “Europolis”

Eugeniu Botez (1874–1933), known by his pen name *Jean Bart*, was a naval officer and one of Romania’s great writers of the sea. He knew Sulina from the inside: in 1912 he served here as maritime commissioner, and from September 1917 he was military commander of the port.

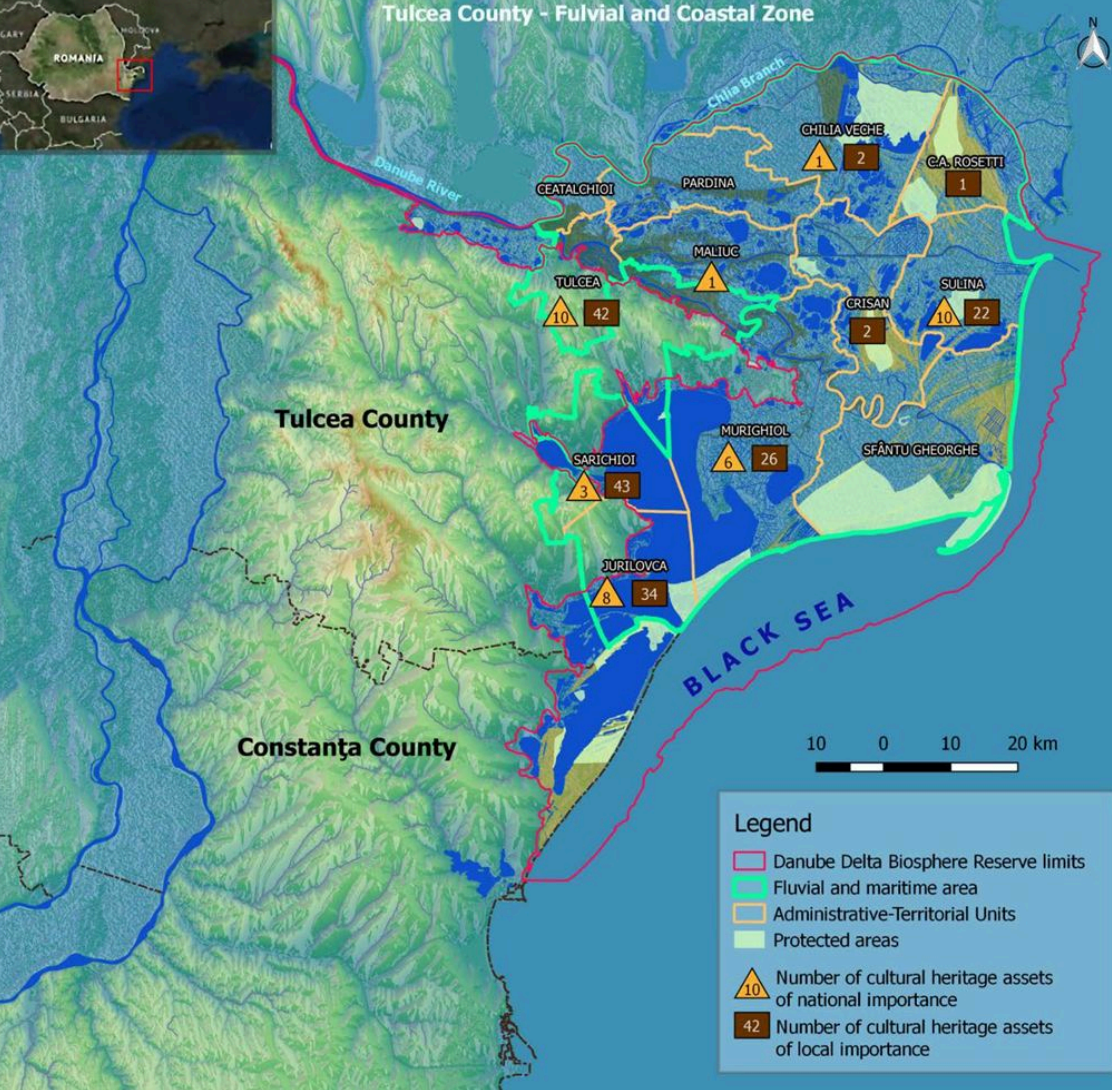
His novel “**Europolis**” (1933) gave Sulina the name it still carries – a port where every nation, every language and every destiny of the Danube met.

“The life of this small, cosmopolitan port is original and interesting. [...] A mosaic of races. Every nation, every type, every language. The small world of this institution – Europe in miniature – [...] has a life of its own.”

— JEAN BART

Sulina’s high school bears his name, and his furniture and family photographs are on display in the Old Lighthouse museum.

Main sources of information: Sulina Local Development Strategy 2018–2035; Evenimentul Zilei; Guide of Romanian Museums (clMeC)



EXPLORE THE COUNTY

TULCEA COUNTY - Map of the fluvial and coastal areas, with the main locations for cultural heritage assets

Source of information: Interreg Europe - HERICOAST Project, „Territorial analysis and identification of Tulcea County, Romania” - TULCEA COUNTY COUNCIL & ICEM „Gavrilă Simion” Tulcea



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