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100

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ON WHY THEIR
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SHOULD BE
YOUR NEXT
DESTINATION



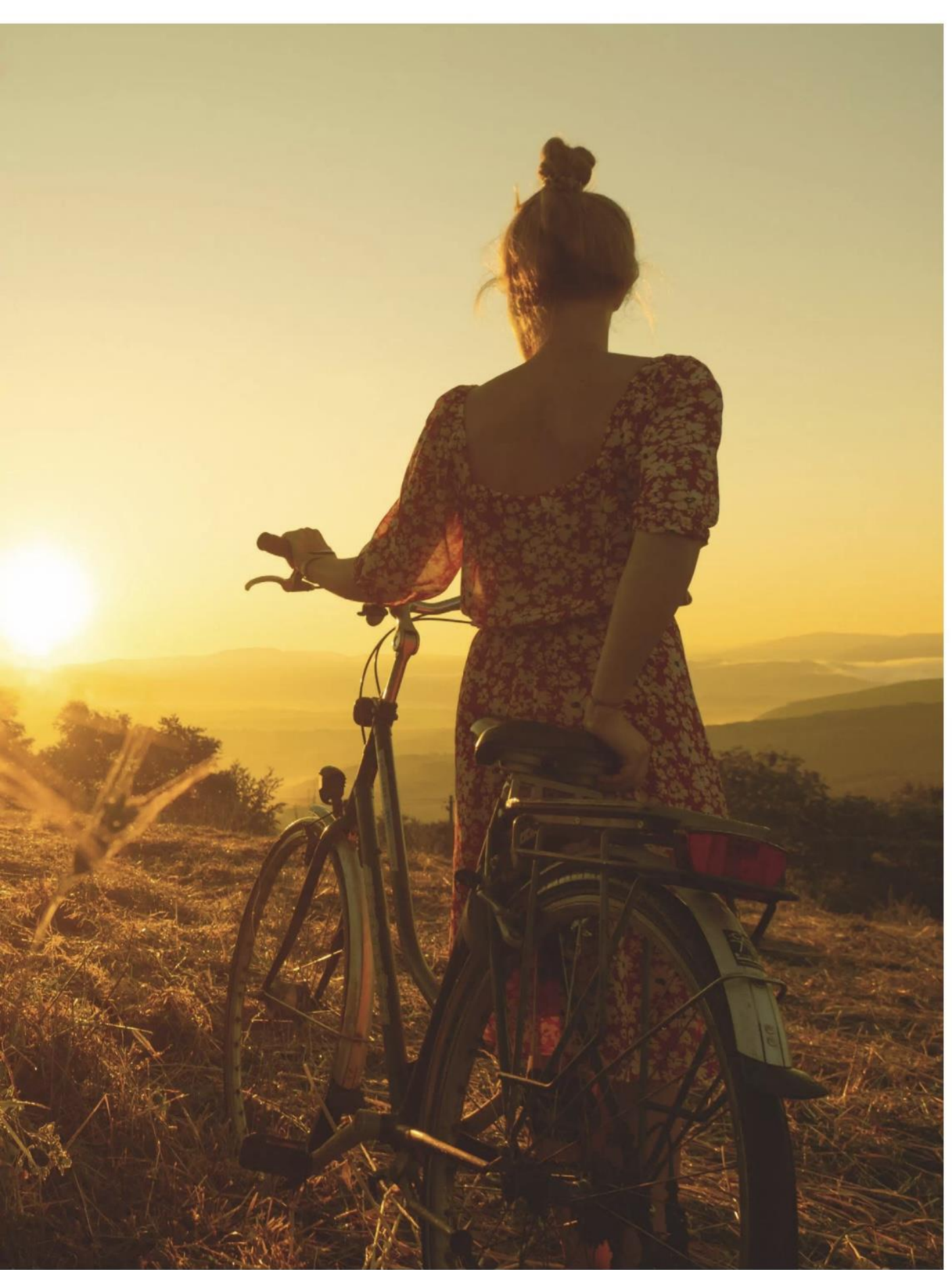
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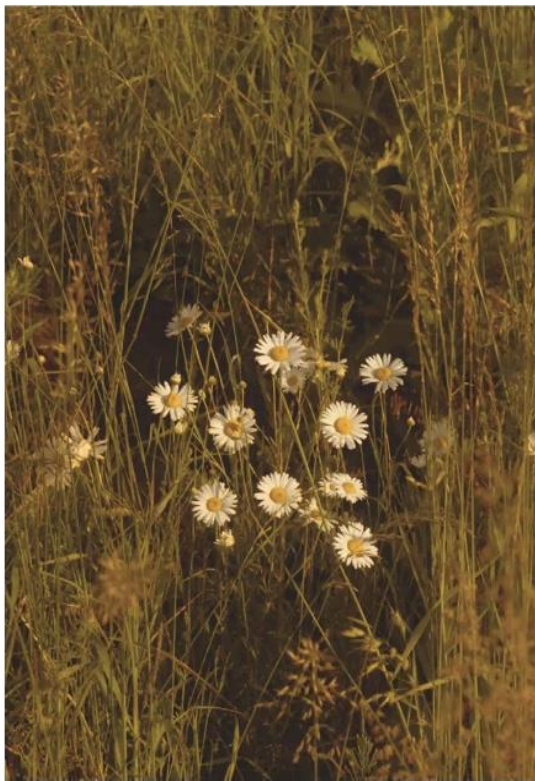


THE LONG WAY ROUND

ON A GO-SLOW CYCLING TOUR THROUGH TRANSYLVANIA – ROMANIA'S
TIME-CAPSULE WILDERNESS – FORMER RESIDENT WILLIAM BLACKER DISCOVERS
HOW THE REGION IS REINVENTING ITS DIVERSE HERITAGE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY LAVINIA CERNAU





ARRIVING IN ROMANIA AT NIGHT BY AIR, as I did in June this year, you know your destination is nearing when the lights of towns and roads disappear and are replaced by almost total darkness. The country is overwhelmingly rural, mostly mountains, remote regions and small villages surrounded by forests. Even the cities here seem bucolic, none more so than Sighișoara in the middle of Transylvania. If you climb the massive medieval clock tower in the walled citadel you see woodland in all directions coming right to the very edge of town. Out of it come wolves at night; when I first visited in 1990, a man told me how one had dragged off a sheep from his back garden in the centre. On paths leading into the forest there are signs that read, 'Beware of bears after sunset.'

This summer I stayed in a Communist-era apartment block on the banks of the Târnava Mare river. Thin mist curled over the vivid green woods. Everything was so verdant and bushy that it seemed almost tropical. The river ran brown from a rainstorm the night before. On the far bank, the citadel rose up – turrets, spires and bastions protruding from among trees. On the promenade below my window, Romanian grandmothers, dressed in clothes as if from the 1930s, looked after grandchildren whose parents were away working in Germany or Britain. Near them a Gypsy was scything grass for his horse. What a calming sound the slow and rhythmic swish of the tool on fresh grass is – scything is not something you can rush. His mare grazed in the shade of a weeping willow, small bells tinkling on its harness. The man's children played nearby. One, a teenage girl, rummaged through rubbish bins and found a black evening dress. She put it on, did a twirl and then walked with her head held high. It brought to mind what Alan Whicker once said about the Duchess of Alba who danced flamenco: 'A duchess imitating a Gypsy imitating a duchess.'

My first visit was two weeks after the execution of President Ceaușescu and his wife in a hail of bullets in the yard of a military base in Târgoviște. In December 1989, Romania had a proper bloody revolution of the sort that was rather expected of Eastern Europe. It could be a brutal place, but peace soon returned, and as I travelled through the country that year I saw a softer side, more in tune with nature. The villagers seemed to be from a tougher yet gentler era, wearing homemade smocks, straw hats and headscarves. For a while, I was able to witness a life as near to the Middle Ages as you could imagine in Europe.

In the summer of 1990 I took a long stroll through Sighișoara's encircling forests. After several hours of walking, I came out of trees into bright sunlight and rolling hills all around. Below me was Criș, a village of terracotta-roofed, Germanic-looking houses, a church tower and, to one side on a knoll, an exuberance of green out of which rose a castle's turret. This was Bethlen Castle, which from medieval times until 1948 had been a stronghold of the Bethlen family. The last to live here was Count Bálint, who died in 1946 after being detained by the Romanian secret police as a class enemy. The writing was clearly on the wall, and two years later Communist thugs ransacked the building and made a bonfire of its famous library of Transylvanian books. From then on the pile fell into disrepair.

I had been searching for ruined castles to pander to my romantic image of the Dracula legend. Here I was not disappointed. This



From top: cowherd, and Caretaker's House bedroom, both at Bethlen Estates in Criș. Opposite, clockwise from top left: table setting for a local family barbecue in Criș, part of The Slow Cyclist's Transylvania itinerary; Mălâncrav's fortified church; worker bees in Criș; wild daisies in Meșendorf. Previous pages, sunrise over the hills of Transylvania



was as romantic a castle as you could hope to find, with glimpses of mullioned windows behind trailing ivy; stones carved with the Bethlen arms scattered on the ground; plaster figures of soldiers on the wall of the old round tower; and an extraordinary wooden winding staircase – its entrance hidden by greenery and steps made from solid, carved chunks of oak – leading through cobwebs to rooms with traces of medieval frescoes.

This summer I set out to retrace my route of 30 years before, though this time not with footsteps but with hooves and rolling wheels. After the revolution there had been years of stagnation in Romania, with millions leaving for jobs in the West. Now there is a fresh optimism, driven by a clear-eyed and idealistic new generation that is working tirelessly to save the country's endangered heritage, biodiversity and traditional way of life.

The first leg of my journey is on horseback from the village of Apoș. Here I watch the volunteers of *Ambulanța pentru Monument*, or The Ambulance for Monuments, mostly architecture students, as they clamber over the roof of the local church. Full of smiles, they repair lathes and pass tiles hand to hand to replace those broken or missing. The group travel in a lorry, with their tools and scaffolding strapped aboard, seeking out historic buildings to patch up, one day hammering shingles to the tops of wooden Orthodox churches, the next shoring up the walls of centuries-old fortifications with lime mortar. This crew, led by Eugen Vaida of the Asociația Monumentum, could no longer bear to watch the

RUINED CASTLES PANDER TO A ROMANTIC IMAGE – MULLIONED WINDOWS BEHIND TRAILING IVY, COBWEBS TRACING FRESCOES

nation's structural heritage crumble into oblivion, so are taking the situation into their own hands. For five years now, with much encouragement from The Prince of Wales, who has a soft spot for Romania, they have been riding to the rescue of properties in all corners of the country.

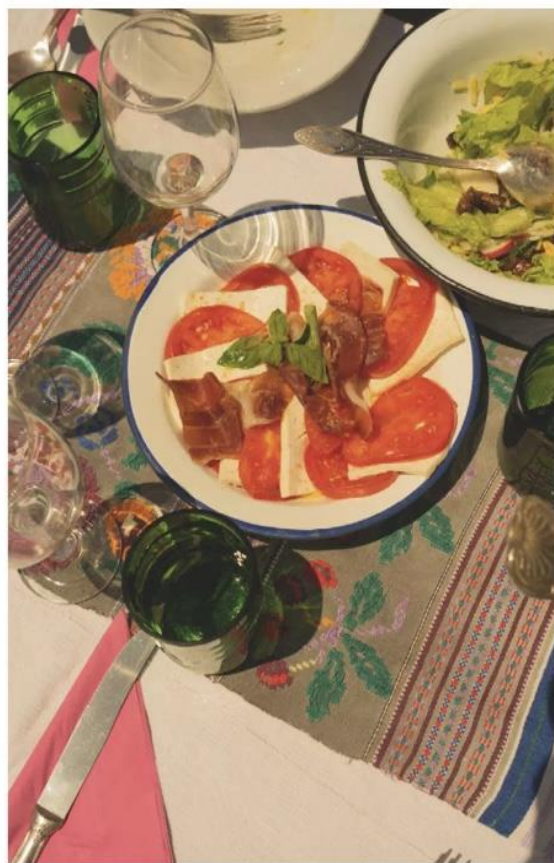
In Apoș there's also a wood-fired kiln, run by young entrepreneurs, which produces tens of thousands of the terracotta tiles needed to mend the roofs and at the same time teach people the classic art of tile-making. It is this craft that helps to give Transylvania its unforgettable appearance. The roofscapes of its towns are reason alone for visiting.

The villages in this area are mostly Saxon, named after a folk who came from northern Europe to settle here in the 12th century. These so-called Saxons were given land and near-autonomy by the Hungarian king in exchange for guarding the southern borders of his kingdom. In 1990, however, following the revolution, these families, who had been in Transylvania for eight centuries, still with Germanic names and speaking their northern European dialect, still with blue eyes and blonde hair, upped and left for Germany en masse. Within a year, their beautiful hamlets had emptied out and began to deteriorate. Their magnificent churches, which were fiercely fortified in the Middle Ages against raids from Turks and Tatars, are disintegrating too. When travelling



From top: bicycle in the village of Viscri; Caretaker's House bedroom.

Opposite, clockwise from top: meadows surrounding the church in Mălâncrav; storks on a roof in Viscri; lunch at Bethlen Estates





through the region, one is guided by their towers and spires, but in the past few years two of them, in Roades and Rotbav, have collapsed to the ground. The Ambulance for Monuments is needed now more than ever.

On one of the horses of my friends Mihai and Bianca Barbu, who have a riding centre in Apos, I ride up into the hills above the village, cantering through meadows of wildflowers speckled with purple orchids and the vibrant pink of carnations. As I climb upwards, the view expands and reveals a powerful beauty. The sheer grandeur of it all knocks you sideways: deep forests, trees and pastures, and beyond them the dramatic line of the Carpathian Mountains fringing the southern sky, over which lies the more Turkish-influenced world of Wallachia.

From Copşa Mare, after a night in a B&B owned by Giovanna and Paolo Bassetti, who settled here from Italy and have worked wonders to preserve this small but perfectly formed village of lime-washed and stuccoed houses, I set off on the second stage of my trip to Criş. I am now on wheels – an electric bicycle – accompanied by the excellent Sergiu Păcă, a local guide. Within a mile, he spots the first bear paw prints in the mud, and starts to whistle loudly to announce our silent approach to avoid surprise encounters. We head, often in the shade of oak clumps, through a pastoral scene of sheepfolds and herds of cattle tended by sun-browned cowherds. Then we plunge into cool, dark woodland, almost like diving underwater. The trees tower above us like

WE PLUNGE INTO COOL, DARK WOODS. TREES TOWER ABOVE LIKE CATHEDRAL COLUMNS, THEIR CANOPIES THE VAULTS

columns in a cathedral, their canopies the vaults. Descending into Nou Sasec we pass beehives, and at the bottom of the slope taste acacia honey retrieved from them, as clear and pure as a tear. Siegfried Klusch, the young Saxon who owns the hives, had been struggling to keep his honey organic as many of his swarms were dying. But he persisted, and this year, with the abundance of blossom on the acacia, lime and fruit trees, the honey is being gathered by the barrel load.

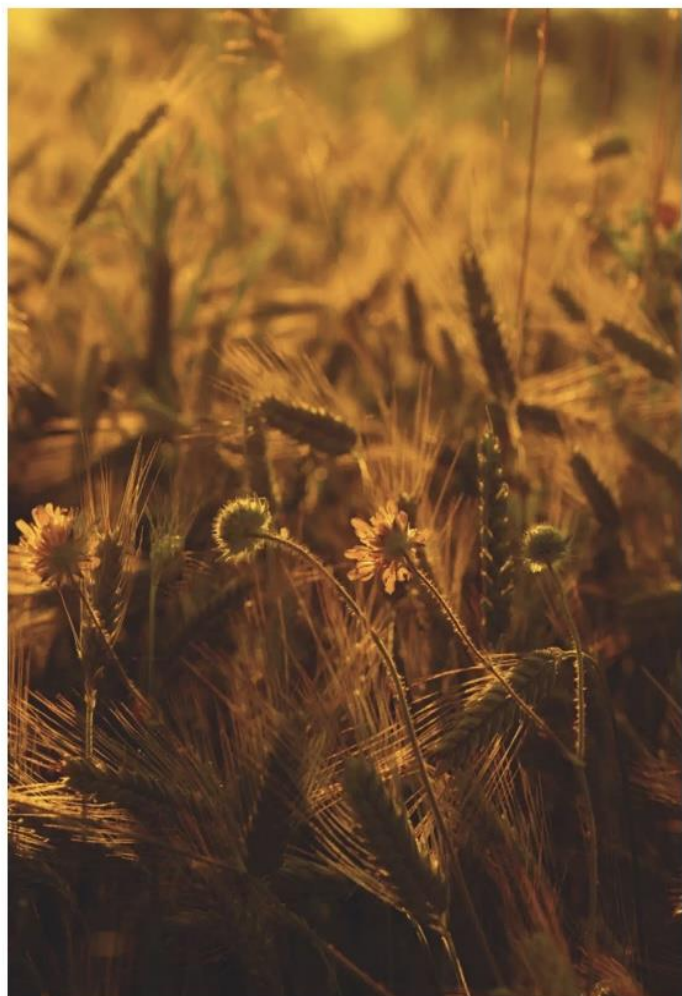
As I pedal along the valley beyond, storks strut in the fields looking for frogs while crested hoopoes fly to a safer distance. There is the flash of yellow of a golden oriole among the willows. Recently, a British ornithologist showed me a list of the 85 different bird species he had seen in a single day in one random area of the region. He would, he said, barely see that number in England in a lifetime.

We lunch at the sheepfold of Florin Coşorean, a local Romanian, above Floreşti. On wooden tables beneath wild apple trees, with ducks and kittens snoozing beside us, we drink elderflower cordial with the water from his well and feast on sheep's and goat's cheeses and chicken soup. 'Everything we eat is from here,' he says. As if to confirm this, his goats come out of the trees, a gruff billy – with great horns like the adornments of a knight's helmet – asserting himself amid a throng of his ladies. The goatherd is from Piatra

From top: old shutters in the afternoon sun; local on a country road near the Saxon villages area. Opposite, picnic set-up by Countess Gladys Bethlen in a clearing at Bethlen Estates







Neamt in Moldavia and with him is his Gypsy wife, carrying a six-month-old baby on her hip. I am told she carries the baby with her at all times and in all weathers: rain, sun and snow. 'He is never ill, nor is his older brother – not like the other children in the village,' said Florin's wife Liliana.

'We work in this way – "bio" – because we love these hills and know that their diversity is a treasure,' says Florin. 'Agri-business is approaching on all sides, and as it does this area becomes ever more important. Where else is there such richness of nature in Europe?' Nearby is Mălâncrav with its frescoed church and Biertan's many-towered and fabled castle-church with a splendid gilded, late-Gothic altarpiece. But what is perhaps even more impressive is the entirely unfenced countryside between the villages, with its myriad flowers, birds, insects, reptiles, bears, pine martens, wolves and even lynx. Romania is like a repository of all that has been steadily lost in the rest of Europe over the past 50 or 100 years – although with the blundering approach of industrial agriculture, which Florin so fears, its survival is clearly at risk.

That evening I emerge from the forest and descend, as I had done 30 years before, to Criș. In 2006, the Bethlen family received some of their properties back from the Romanian state, including the castle, thus keeping their historic connection with the village alive. With great determination, the indomitable

Countess Gladys Bethlen and her son Nikolaus have cut back the undergrowth and rebuilt the houses, which they are gradually turning into evocatively comfortable places to bed down. In the old days, I stayed in hay barns or tents – there was nowhere else – but that night, after a steaming bath to soothe my aching limbs, exhausted from the long bicycle ride, I sleep swaddled in the softest Hungarian goose down and linen. The day has been swelteringly hot, but the tall, cream-coloured terracotta stove in the corner of my room, made in the town of Mediaș, speaks of the shivering, snow-mantled Transylvanian winters.

Visitors are allowed inside the castle, so after breakfast I return for a look around. The ivy has been stripped since my first trip and the trees growing up through the floors are gone, but although it is not quite the romantic ruin it once was, in most respects it is unchanged – the wonderful creaking oak staircase is still there, the fragments of frescoes too.

The pair were also given back the imposing baroque-roofed manor house which dates from the 1650s. On the walls of its vaulted rooms hang 19th-century hunting trophies and a photograph from the 1890s of Nikolaus's great-grandfather on a nearby hill. Standing beside him is a familiar-looking figure, identified in the rubric as *A Walesi Herceg*. The Bethlens are Hungarian, and anyone with a grasp of the language will know that this means 'The Prince of Wales' – an earlier holder of the title, who also loved these rugged lands and who, just a few years later, became King Edward VII.

From Criș, through yet more startling woods which open up to wide, sweeping combs, we cycle, Sergiu still whistling loudly, up to the Breite Plateau, weaving between gnarled and venerable oaks, and then drop along a steep path towards the medieval roofs of Sighișoara, arriving before sunset. Even today Sighișoara is still filled with the clip-clop of working horses' hooves pulling carts, thick red tassels at their temples to ward off flies and the evil eye. In the near-40 miles from Apor I realise we had hardly touched a tarmac road. This may be a landscape shaped by man over nearly a thousand years, with ancient sunken tracks in the forests, trees in the pasture for shade and villages every four miles, but these days it is traversed more by wild animals than humans. 📍

TRANSYLVANIA: THE DETAILS

The Slow Cyclist runs private five- and six-night tours of Transylvania from £1,695 per person for a group of 12, all-inclusive, covering transfers, guides, bike hire, activities and guesthouse accommodation in villages along the route from Copșa Mare to Viscri, such as Giovanna and Paolo Bassetti's Copșa Mare B&B. Guests will have the opportunity to meet locals, including slow-food pioneers and beekeepers, on the way.

Set-date trips are also available. Excludes flights. theslowcyclist.co.uk
Bethlen Estates in Criș is an ongoing restoration project that began in 2007. The Bethlen family has partnered with local artisans to create the interior design of the properties and craft sculptural staircases. For 2021, they opened the four-bedroom Caretaker's House and two-bedroom Depner House, both of which can be taken over privately. Next in the works is the four-bedroom Corner Barn, which will be available to book by the room. Wine tastings take place in the historic Manor House cellars, while meals can be eaten in individual houses or the central Kitchen Barn. Guided hikes, bird- and bear-spotting, fishing and local tours can be arranged. *Depner House from about £230 a night for two; Caretaker's House from about £510 a night for four.* bethlenestates.com
 Mihai and Bianca Barbu's riding centre is at **Villa Abbatis** in Apor, where they offer lessons and lead trails on horseback. villaabbatis.com

For more on **The Ambulance for Monuments**, visit asociatiamonumentum.ro

Above, wheat field at sunrise. Opposite, clockwise from top: on the road in the village of Meșendorf; Caretaker's House interior detail; wheat and honey cake at Viscri 32 restaurant and guesthouse in Viscri