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Travel discoveries of 2021



Biertan, Transylvania

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At the castle of Cris in Transylvania, the archaeologist led me outside to the excavations they had opened the previous week. In an exposed trench wall was a narrow line of black ash. The Mongols, he said, 1241. We ran our hands over the burnt layer. The Mongol invasion of Europe, and the torching of all that lay in their path, was suddenly palpable in the crumbling earth. It stained our fingertips.

There are many moments in Transylvania when the past looms. It probably helps that the region feels like the Europe of our great-grandparents — horse-drawn wagons, unfenced pastures, shepherds with long crooks, virgin forests where bears still prowl, dangerous geese patrolling village greens, and everywhere carpets of wild flowers uncontaminated by pesticides. In the villages, the churches are ecclesiastic fortresses among the old Saxon houses, as if they feared the Mongols might return at any moment to interrupt Sunday mass.

In the village of Biertan, three colossal citadel walls, studded with towers, ring the church. A long wooden stairway leads upwards, like Jacob's ladder, to the north entrance. Stepping inside you pass from anxieties about enemies to the certainty of salvation. The interior is elegant and delicate. In swaths of filtered light, vaulted ceilings soar heavenwards. You could believe here, as the arrows of your attackers rained over the walls, that you had God on your side.

And, hopefully, your spouse. Marriage was sacrosanct here. High up in a tower at Biertan is the divorce chamber where the community locked quarrelling couples into a spartan room with a single plate, a single spoon, a single cup and a single bed, until they learnt to get on, until the battles subsided.

Details: Stanley Stewart was a guest of Bethlen Estates (bethlenestates.com), which offers a range of accommodation in the village of Cris from €125 per person per night
