

COUNTRY LIFE



EVERY WEEK

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A world worth waiting for

Travel 2022

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FUTURE



Romantic

BOUTIQUE

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Baroque

Wheeling free

An electric bicycle is the key to exploring the medieval landscape and villages of Transylvania, discovers Mary Miers

GRANDFATHER MEZEI, in trilby and suit, plays the viola clamped vertically to his cheek, together with his daughter, as her brother saws away at a double base. Her husband and son, in trainers, jeans and Puffas, deftly swing a pair of fiddles, their haunting, squeaky folk tunes soaring as we tuck into steak, spicy sausages and potatoes fried in a huge outdoor cauldron. Surprised by the troupe's arrival just as we're discussing the unconnected origins of the words Romania and Romania, we tap and sway happily to the rhythm. Between the sets, the musicians throw back glasses of wine; on departure, they purloin our last bottle for their journey.

We stay that night in a restored farm complex in Criș, where my bed has a lower pull-out shelf for a child. A group of barns—one housing a huge wine press, another with a mesmerising array of wooden implements—encloses

a courtyard festooned with roses, beyond which stretch an orchard, a paddock of donkeys, cages of white rabbits and various ancient ploughs. After breakfast, we walk above the village, stopping to examine

the fresh imprint of a large, big-toed paw. Deep in the beechwood, we meet Ghita foraging for truffles that earn him €350 (about £300) a kilo. Glancing nervously around for the bear, we watch as his two hounds rootle out tubers from the mast, each earthy mouthful delivered back to their master in exchange for a treat. At lunch in a converted barn, we grate black truffles over egg noodles and homemade cheese.

As with the gypsy gig, our encounter with the truffle hunter and, later, a traditional weaver, depends on the network of local contacts and careful coordination of The Slow Cyclist and its guides—in our case, Szabi and Misu, who delight us with their humour, impressive discourses on history and wildlife and enviable knack for mending bicycle chains. The company specialises in light-footed travel through places that seem lost in time and nowhere offers a better model for this particular brand of eco-tourism than a five-day cycling tour of Saxon Transylvania.

As a child, I imagined Transylvania to be a make-believe land of werewolves and vampires, dark forests and haunted castles with witch's-cap towers. The reality, it turns out, is not unlike a fairy tale, with medieval citadels and villages enfolded by the bear-filled foothills of the Carpathians. The story of this region on the eastern edge of Europe is a Gothic epic of Magyar horsemen, marauding Tartars and Mongols, Ottoman overlords and Hungarian princes—a complex web of shifting borders and allegiances peopled by invaders, colonists and traders of diverse culture, language and religion.

Prominent among the settlers were the so-called Saxons, who arrived in the 12th century from Flanders and the Lower Rhine to guard this Christian borderland for its Hungarian rulers. Sober and industrious, they built seven self-governing citadels, embraced Lutheranism and flourished as artisans, burghers and farmers until the ravages of the 20th century drove most back west after 800 years.

We spend a night in the walled city of Sighișoara, above the valley of the Târnava Mare. German craftsmen came

to work on the churches and civic buildings and each distinctively quirky tower belonged to a different guild. Wandering the cobbled streets, one can almost believe the legend of the Transylvanian Saxons—that they were the children spirited away to this 'land beyond the forest' by the Pied Piper of Hamelin. Fiction is blended with fact at the tourists' favourite site, the alleged birthplace of Vlad the Impaler, son of a Wallachian ruler and inspiration for Bram Stoker's Count Dracula.

Much has changed since Romania embraced capitalism, yet, although Saxon culture has been uprooted and the ecosystem endangered by the decline of traditional husbandry, Transylvania still feels like a forgotten outpost of the Middle Ages. Above the valleys, breathtaking medieval oak pastures preserve trees more than 500 years old, a remarkable →

Sighișoara, one of the seven Saxon citadels and alleged birthplace of Vlad the Impaler

'The reality, it turns out, is not unlike a fairy tale, with medieval citadels'





Left: A farmhouse dresser, Criș. Right: Transylvania's oak pastures are a unique survival, now threatened by encroaching hornbeams

survival. Villagers draw water from communal sweep-wells and, at dusk, goats and cows amble up the main street on their return from the meadows, instinctively peeling off as they reach their respective yards.

There's something both graceful and impenetrable about the colour-washed village houses, with their sweeping roofs, Dutch gables and occasional flourishes of Baroque. They stand end-on to the street, vine-draped courtyards, barns and vegetable plots secure behind huge gated cart-entrances. Churches, not castles, fended off the Ottomans and these fort-like structures, with towers that stored victuals and barns built into curtain walls, are the high point of Saxon architecture. Many preserve Gothic carving, frescos and furnishings intact.

October is a fine time to visit, when the woods are ablaze and the days not too hot. Cycling into a village, we stop in an orchard carpeted with autumn crocuses to gather apples and nuts. A jangle of bells and barking fills the air as a herdsman with a pack of snarling hounds shepherds his flock down from the summer pastures. Wood piles stand newly stacked; horses dash along with cartloads of logs. As the woods turn to copper and gold, the villages are preparing for winter.

Much of our route comprises cart tracks and forest trails, with exhilarating descents over high plains. Occasionally, we pedal along country lanes between maize fields, the odd concrete wreck mocking Ceausescu's modernising dreams. Villages are never more than half a day's ride away, with lunches provided by enterprising local families: soups and stuffed cabbage; *zacusca* and homemade cheeses; cured meats and *slanina* (smoked pork fat), apple curd cakes, and always the obligatory glass of *pălinca* (plum brandy).

‘Churches, not castles, fended off the Ottomans and are the high point of Saxon architecture’

Village farmhouses offer unpretentious accommodation, with simple painted furniture, vases of wild flowers and usually a barn converted as a dining/sitting room, with Wi-Fi, shelves of books and a fire.

One night, we put up at the restored Mălân-crav Manor, a flagship project of the Mihai

Eminescu Trust, which has done so much to protect Transylvania's heritage. Built by the Apafy family and later owned by the Bethlens, the colonnaded house with its gracious rooms and well-stocked library preserves something of the cosmopolitan world of the Hungarian nobles who played a central role in the principality's history until they lost everything under the Communists.

At nearby Criș, famous for Bethlen Castle's Renaissance splendour, Countess Bethlen and her son Nikolaus have bought back lands and a manor house associated with the family for 800 years. A few nights at Bethlen Estates (*below*), where a programme of regeneration is under way, provides a luxurious alternative to the rustic comforts of village guesthouses. The vivacious Countess is a warm and welcoming presence, full of stories of the past and plans for the future as she orchestrates this exciting new venture for rural Transylvania.

‘The British are the best guests,’ she tells me, ‘they're always so appreciative and never complain.’ Not that I found a single thing that grated during my adventure—except, perhaps, for the loudspeaker of an enterprising local farmer, whose vanload of cabbages seemed beset on preceding us to every village. ↪

At a glance

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