

# HOUSE & GARDEN

## Inside stories

FEBRUARY  
2022

*From city chic in London & Toronto to rustic revivals in Hampshire & the Cotswolds*



*Plus*

**WINTER WONDERLAND**  
**MAPPERTON'S**  
**MAGICAL TOPIARY**  
**GARDEN IN DORSET**

**BRIGHT  
FANTASTIC**

**KATE HAWKINS ON THE JOY  
OF COLOUR AND PATTERN**

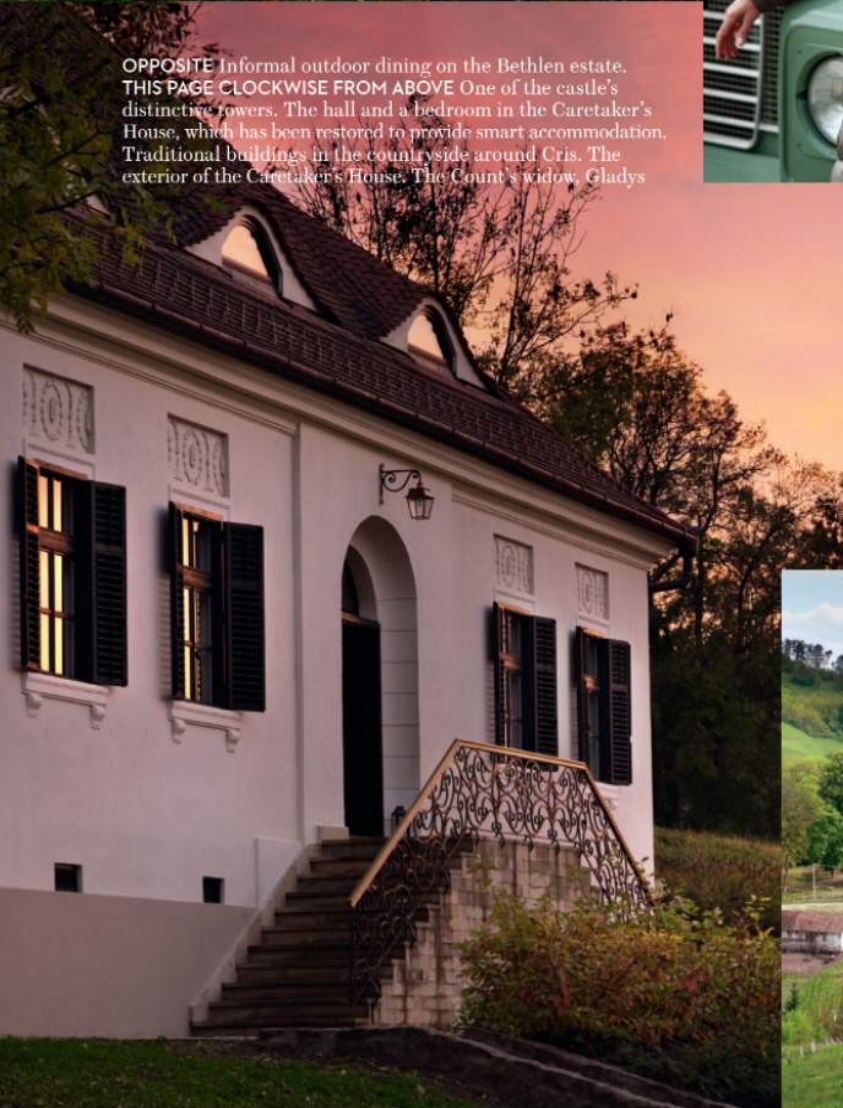
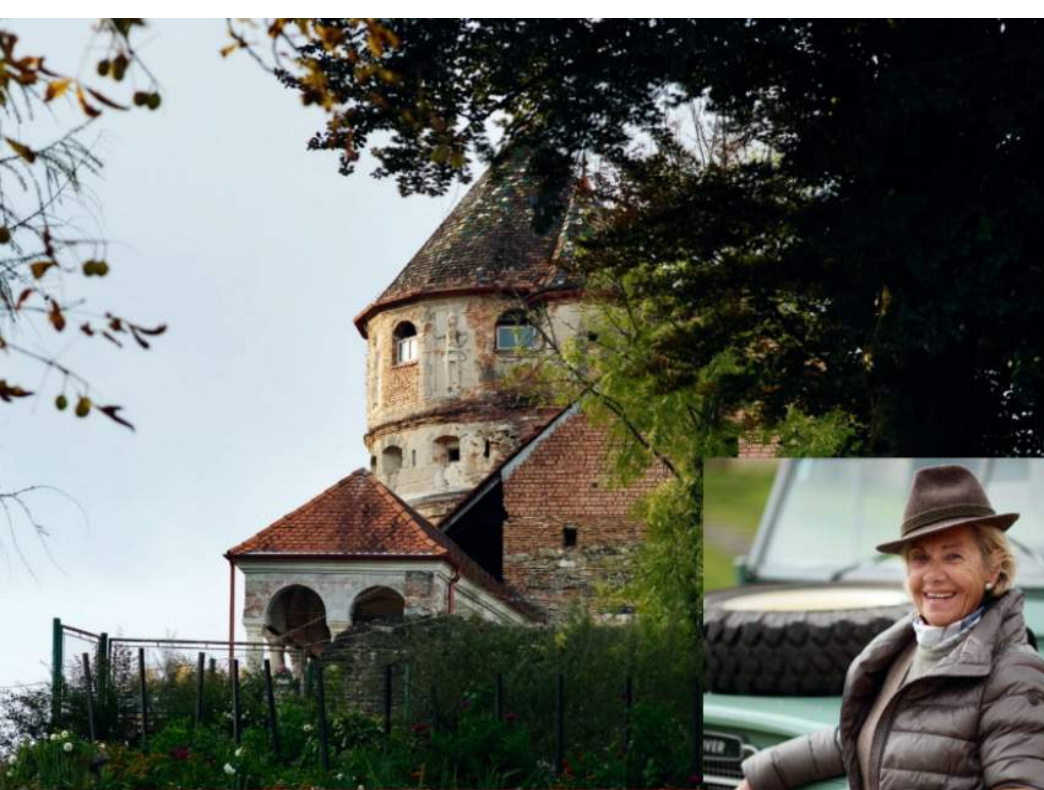
**BOLD AND BRILLIANT  
NINETIES-INSPIRED INTERIORS**

# Recapturing the castle

The architectural heritage of the Transylvanian village of Cris is being carefully preserved as its abandoned buildings are transformed into charming guest accommodation by Count Miklos of Bethlen, whose ancestral family seat is the imposing castle that crowns the hill above it, writes STANLEY STEWART

PHOTOGRAPHS PHILIP VILE





OPPOSITE Informal outdoor dining on the Bethlen estate.  
THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE One of the castle's distinctive towers. The hall and a bedroom in the Caretaker's House, which has been restored to provide smart accommodation. Traditional buildings in the countryside around Cris. The exterior of the Caretaker's House. The Count's widow, Gladys



Some time in the late Sixties, Count Miklos of Bethlen arrived in the village of Cris in Transylvania, shadowed closely by the secret police. For some years, he had lived in exile in Austria and his return visits to Romania were always a concern to a paranoid Ceausescu regime. They need not have worried. The Count was simply making a nostalgic trip home. He had grown up in the castle above the village, part of his family's estates before they were confiscated by the communist government after the Second World War. On the steep, winding stairs of the towers, he had played as a boy. In the courtyard, the family had sung around the Christmas tree. The grand, abandoned rooms held memories of his parents.

I imagined his visit was on a day like today – autumnal, clear skies, the scent of woodsmoke from the houses of the village. Nostalgia seems to filter down like dust through the trees, even for those who are here, like me, for the first time. A gust of wind brings a shower of golden leaves into the courtyard. Children run past, disappearing through a crumbling gate to pick chestnuts in the woods beyond the walls. I think of the Count standing here, all those years ago, tears on his cheeks, as he recalled a lost world.

The castle, one of the largest in Transylvania, has not changed a great deal since the Count and his family were forced into exile over 70 years ago. It is still a ghost, the rooms empty, the old towers vacant. In the courtyard, under the Renaissance loggia, I met the archaeologist who had been working in the grounds. He led me excitedly outside to show me the line of burnt ash that they had recently uncovered in one of the excavation trenches. It marked the invasion of the Mongol Hordes under one of Genghis Khan's sons in 1241, a crucial moment in medieval history made palpable in a line of earth.

There are moments when you feel Transylvania has had rather too much history. In these hills, littered with crumbling castles and ancient manor houses, it seems as if there was never a quiet moment. The centuries brim with wars, purges and revolutions, with invasions, assassinations and migrations, with feudalism, communism and predatory capitalism. It is a mark of the turbulence of this region that even its churches are fortresses.

History may be turbulent in Transylvania but the geography seems to slumber. This is a region of rolling meadows and deciduous forest, of sylvan lanes and old Saxon villages, a vision of central Europe that might have emerged from the pages of *Grimms' Fairy Tales*. Cattle stand knee-deep in streams. Woodsmoke rises from chimneys. Horse-drawn wagons rattle along dust lanes. Old women in headscarves chat by village wells. Shepherds tend flocks of sheep carrying long crooks of cornelian cherry wood – the dense wood that the ancient Greeks used for their javelins.

Much of Europe looked like this two centuries ago. In the forests, bears, wild boar and wolves still thrive. In the pastures, you can walk for hours without encountering a fence. The flora here enjoys a diversity now almost unknown in the rest of Europe with roadside verges rich in medicinal herbs unused since the 18th century – elecampane, marsh mallow, stinking goosefoot. Through three seasons, the meadowlands are cloaked with wild flowers – violet sage, yellow pheasant's eye, white narcissus, meadow saffron.

It is no wonder that Prince Charles was so smitten with the place when he first came here in 1998. It was not just that he likes to trace his ancestry back to Vlad Tepes, aka Vlad the Impaler, supposedly

**WAYS AND MEANS** Stanley Stewart was a guest of Bethlen Estates ([bethlenestates.com](http://bethlenestates.com)); from €1,200 a night, B&B, based on eight sharing in the Caretaker's House; from €500 a night, B&B, based on four sharing in Depner House; rooms from €250, B&B, in the Corner Barn. Wizz Air has flights from London Luton to Transylvania, from £60 ([wizzair.com](http://wizzair.com)).

**OPPOSITE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** The Kitchen Barn offers a locally sourced seasonal menu in an atmospheric setting. Depner House's open-plan sitting area. Restored buildings have been given a new lease of life. Depner House is a stone's throw from the Kitchen Barn. The kitchen of the Caretaker's House

the model for the fictional Dracula. Transylvania contained many of his campaigning passions – vernacular architecture, organic agriculture, ancient crafts and a biodiversity not yet undermined by pesticides. He has lent his support to various local conservation efforts and, in 2006, he bought a village house here.

As for the noble families of Transylvania, like the Bethlens, their pedigrees go back – in the words of Patrick Leigh Fermor, who travelled through the region in the Thirties – to a time 'when God was a boy'. But with the end of the Second World War and the arrival of communism, the Transylvanian aristocracy were scattered to the four winds. Some ended up in Russian internment camps; some fled to Hungary or Austria; and some lived in reduced circumstances in the basements of their own castles. The Countess Gemma Teleki famously sold flowers at the gate of the cemetery in Tirgu Mures. Count Bethlen escaped to Hungary, where he worked initially as an electrician.

Inevitably, history has taken yet another turn here. Communism has evaporated, the old estates are no longer collective farms and, in Cris, the Bethlen family has returned to their ancestral home. The Count himself is no longer alive, but his widow, the glamorous Gladys, and their son, also Miklos, have launched a project to preserve the village's architectural heritage and to develop tourism to support a way of life in the face of a dwindling population. Slowly, Miklos is buying and restoring the empty Saxon houses of Cris and transforming them into smart guest accommodations. The Caretaker's House and Depner House (for exclusive use only) are complete, as is the central restaurant. The Corner Barn opens in March (available by the room), with plans afoot for a fourth house.

With shelves of books and old photographs, and bootjacks and walking sticks in the hall, they feel like homes in a way that hotels never can. The architecture is quirky and marvellous, with roof beams, white walls and pale pine floorboards; the bedrooms have a 19th-century romance. A sumptuous kitchen anchors the Caretaker's House, with french windows opening to the gardens. From the formal dining room and the parlour with its deep sofas and open fire, tall windows overlook the village. As I strolled downhill to dinner each night, where the chef Robert Tordai conjured magic from an array of local ingredients, I felt a sense of peace.

That perhaps is the irony of Transylvania. For a place with so much turbulent history, there are moments and places where it seems as if there is none at all. In these old Saxon villages, with their horse-drawn wagons and their shepherds, it is as if the modern world has left the region behind, as if history in this corner of Europe had stopped in the time of our great grandparents. This is the kind of sweet nostalgia that all of us can savour □

