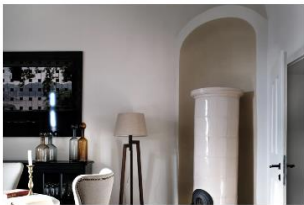


Bethlen Estates, Transylvania: a design-lover's haven in the rolling Romanian countryside

A family's decades-long passion project makes for a chic and fascinating stay, says *Lizzie Pook*



By [Lizzie Pook](#) | 19 hours ago

Where is it?

Nestled amongst crumbling buildings and traditional Saxon farmhouses in the go-slow village of Criș. This part of Romania, cut off

from the rest of the country by the vast Carpathian mountains, rarely gets a look in beyond being the (much disputed) birth place of 'Dracula'. But you'll hear none of those stories around the Bethlen Estate, an impossibly chic clutch of three sensitively restored guesthouses surrounded by spindly fruit trees and bristling emerald hills. Bears roam the surrounding valleys here and the soft breeze carries the liquid trill of birdsong. The air is also some of the cleanest in the world, so a stay is like a big deep breath for the soul.



Philip Vile

Style

Rustic elegance abounds. Following the death of her husband in 2001, the Countess Gladys Bethlen – who can often be found chatting with guests and pottering around the gardens – made it her mission to buy and restore the dilapidated buildings of his old ancestral village.

Working alongside her son Nikolaus, she has since devoted herself to bringing the buildings back to life, painstakingly sourcing traditional period fixtures and collaborating with local artisans to ensure every detail remains historically authentic. Interiors-wise, things are more contemporary, washed in soft whites, creams and putties, replete with natural jute and wicker accents and lashings of pale marble. But there are still fascinating period fittings everywhere, from eighteenth century oak beams to unusual round tiled stoves to warm the rooms when thick snow falls in winter.



Food & Drink

Head Chef Robert is creative in his approach, sourcing fresh produce every day and finalising his menu depending on what he has gathered. The resulting dishes taste (and look) divine: foraged chanterelle mushrooms with truffle mousse; pressed duck and beef cheek with baked beetroot salad. Traditional Hungarian and Romanian fare takes pride of place, with hearty beef goulashes cooked over an open fire on the terrace and pillowy fried papanasi doughnuts for dessert. After-dinner brandy made using foraged fruit from the estate is perfect for warming the cockles, and oenophiles will find an intriguing selection of up-and-coming Romanian wines to try (the crisp Villa Vinèa Diamant goes down particularly well...).



Philip Vile

Facilities

The estate is less of a hotel and more a collection of exclusive use properties, although the newly-finished four-bed Corner Barn is now available to be booked by the room. There's a communal dining space (the lovely, cosy kitchen barn) but the rigidity in schedule – all guests at the estate must eat at the same time, and usually fairly early in the evening – won't suit everyone. There's no spa, communal pool or wellness space yet, but local therapists can be brought-in for treatments and there's a wonderfully atmospheric cellar in the yet-to-be-renovated Manor House, where guests can partake in lantern-lit wine tastings.

Extracurricular

Architecture buffs will adore the nearby old city of Sighișoara. The UNESCO World Heritage site is the only citadel in Romania with residential houses inside of its fortification, and the pastel-paint-box facades, quirky clock tower and higgledy piggledy buildings are well worth the climb up the hill. The city also lays claim to being the 'birth place' of Vlad the Impaler, the inspiration for Bram Stoker's Count Dracula (an interesting story, although local historians have many reasons as to why that simply cannot be true). Elsewhere, and with enough notice, the team at Bethlen Estates can also arrange more high-adrenaline pursuits, from snowshoeing and heli-skiing in the winter, to horse-riding and birdwatching tours in the long summer evenings. But simply spending time on the estate – lulled by the tinkle of cow bells and the tapping of woodpeckers as lilac mist pools in the valleys – is a rather lovely way to pass the time.



Philip Vile

Which room?

The most luxurious option is the lofty Caretaker's House – an exclusive-use four bedroom property filled with Tom Dixon light

fixtures and Egyptian linen (there's also a private garden, sanarium and pool). But couples and solo travellers should opt for a room in the petite and pretty Corner Barn, which looks out onto the estate's central garden and is a peaceful, stylish place to rest your head.

Best for...

Award-worthy design features and hearty comfort food.

Details Rooms at the Corner Barn cost £260 per night, based on two sharing. Depner House costs £606 per night based on four sharing (exclusive use only) and The Caretaker's House costs £1,212 per night based on eight sharing (exclusive use only). All rates are on a bed and breakfast basis; bethlenestates.com