

VOGUE

TRAVEL

THE BIG CHILL

*Sensational CITY breaks, WINTER on the
Riviera & Europe's last WILDERNESS*

Bethlen Estates
in Transylvania.
Below: the Caretaker's
House bedroom and
kitchen; Lake Tarnița

WHEN *in* ROMANIA

*Eclectic, EERIE and oh so charming, TRANSYLVANIA
is having its moment, finds LUKE ABRAHAMS*

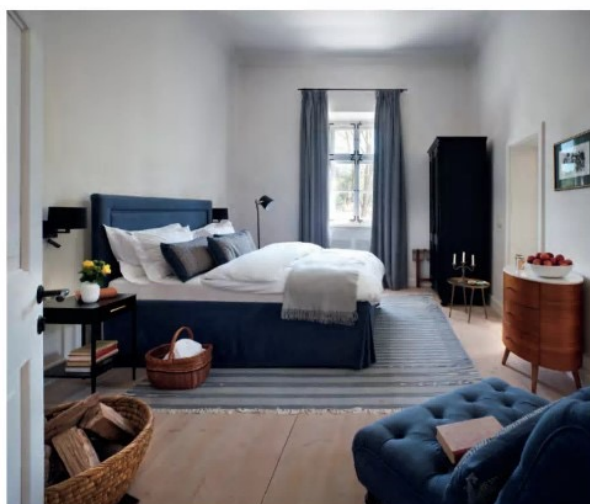
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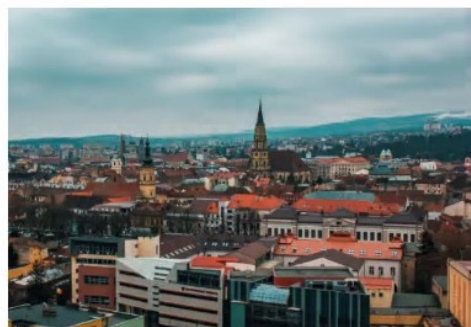
ransylvania. The name alone conjures up thoughts of literary nostalgia: dark fairy tales, Gothic castles, occasional vampires. But, beyond stories of a bloodthirsty count, for too long many travellers have known too little about the rural wonders of Romania. Hidden from the world by the icy plumes of mist that top its share of the Carpathian Mountains, it has remained a scandalously overlooked time capsule; a secret sonnet to Europe's great lost wilderness.

That's beginning to change though. A new wave of travellers has begun to trickle into the region. Tired of Instagram tourism, these holidayers are searching for adventures that have all the natural, historic beauty of, say, a trip to the Dolomites or the lakes of Croatia, but with a sense of the unknown, and far fewer tourists to compete with.

Within a few minutes of landing in the unofficial capital city, Cluj-Napoca, I'm glad I followed their lead. As I drive out into the countryside, modernity fades and a pastoral landscape reveals itself. This is a place of higgledy-piggledy rolling hills, wildflower meadows and ancient oak forests. Wood smoke rises from the chimneys of charming Saxon villages. Brown bears, lynx, wolves, deer and chamois roam the hiking trails. And horse-drawn carriages, loaded with working men, trundle down narrow Sylvan lanes.

It takes three hours to arrive at Bethlen Estates, my home for the next two nights. It's a cluster of pretty cottages where visitors can enjoy the slow-go pace of rural life – and learn about Transylvania's





Clockwise from far left: Depner House at Bethlen Estates; Cluj-Napoca; the region's vast countryside



turbulent history while they're at it. The area was passed between Hungary and Romania until the end of the Second World War. It remained behind the Iron Curtain until 1989, when Nicolae Ceausescu's regime fell. During that time, lands were stolen, castles ransacked and some families ended up in Russian internment camps or fled to Hungary or Austria. One such family was that of Count Miklos of Bethlen, who had grown up in a castle – once at the centre of his estate – set above the Sleepy Hollow-like village of Cris.

He spent years sneaking over the border from Austria to revisit his ancestral homeland. "My husband never cut ties with the place or his roots," his widow, and now castle matriarch, Countess Gladys Bethlen tells me, a cigarette in one hand and a wicker basket in the other. She's giving me a tour of the building, a place she confesses she's not visited in years because it's too painful. "The mission was always to restore my husband's family's home to bring some form of life and normality and presence back to the village," she says.

Once considered one of the finest Renaissance fortresses in Transylvania, much of the building is still in disrepair, but in recent years, Bethlen and her son Nikolaus have worked to renovate many of the other ancestral properties on the family's estate, turning them into pit stops for travellers. The result is a unique holiday experience – a quiet escape built for reflective nomads in surroundings that look like the backdrop of a Netflix Christmas movie.

The village of Cris is all about the simple life – only 800 or so people live here. There's no baker, no farmer, no caretaker. A feeling of no-fuss luxuriousness cocoons many of her restored residences. "That's what everybody wants! Simplistic elegance... to the point, no fuss, luxury... to hide away from the world and disappear after all this Covid and this terrible war," Gladys insists.

Her headliner is the four-bedroomed Caretaker's House, a picture of soft linens, library-chic and rooms with views of dewy pastures. There's also Saxon Cottage Depner House, pretty in blue limewash, which has reclaimed beams on its low ceilings and shelves stocked with a medley of curated books, old photographs and fine china.

Food is whatever the chef can find on the day, served in the Kitchen Barn. More spaces, the countess promises, will open soon.

While Bethlen is a place of stillness, the rest of Transylvania cries out for exploration. The countryside is dotted with imposing medieval and 19th-century architecture. Bran, just outside the mighty Carpathians, is world-famous for its starring role in the myth of Count Dracula. Peleş, an hour or so away, is even more ornate: think neo-Renaissance design topped off with great big spires, glistening tiles and storied portraiture. Meanwhile, up north, you'll find Sighişoara, the small Unesco-protected medieval city full of colourful houses, ancient churches, artisan boutiques and cobbled streets. (Rumour has it, it's also one of the most haunted on the planet.)

If you tire of stripped-back pomp and idyllic pastures, there are places to find a glimpse of everyday Transylvanian life. In Cluj you'll find a thriving cultural scene. The Interest Centre brings the best contemporary art out there to the locals, and the National Art Museum is brimming with works from the likes of Ion Andreescu to Nicolae Grigorescu and Stefan Luchian. If you're into jazz and blues, Sibiu is dotted with atmospheric speakeasies to disappear in.

To me, the whole of Transylvania has the allure of a mumble-jumble speakeasy: it's off-grid that you'll find its charms. Whether you're here to find retreat in a half-restored aristocratic estate, to dip your toe into kooky Eastern European theatre or to hike through meadows filled with tuberose, white narcissus and violet sage, there's a romanticised chaos to it all. It's a place to get lost in, rather than seen in. And, that's very much part of its growing appeal.

Rooms from £178 per night. Bethlenestates.com