



Riders Digest

IN THIS MONTH'S DIGEST

Transylvania Tour

Would I be free in the middle of June? Would I be interested in joining a guided biking tour of Transylvania?

It certainly wasn't the worst email that I'd ever received, but I had two burning questions. Did 'Transylvania' really exist and did the word 'Free' also refer to the price of the tour?

I dipped my hand into the crash helmet and pulled out an unfamiliar set of keys. I'd done that sort of thing before and the results had always been mixed. This time I got lucky. The tag attached to the keys told me that I'd be riding the biggest bike there, the BMW 1200 GS. It was good news for me, but it would leave the others in the group to choose from the selection of older and smaller BMW 650's. The others in question were Chris Pickett and Glen Thackeray from Australia's Cycle Torque Magazine and their respective wives, Kerry and Sue. Coming over all British, I threw the keys back into the helmet and picked out another set for a canary yellow BMW 650 GS. The Australian couples applaud my generosity but if the truth were ever told, I really didn't want to be riding the bigger bike. The 1200 GS is lovely, but the smaller 650 is much more manageable over the rough stuff and I suspected that at some time during the seven-day tour, the tarmac roads would eventually give way to dirt. The bigger GS would be great on the roads but when it came to the first taste of gravel, I really didn't want to end up looking like a complete knob.

I'd arrived in Romania as a guest of 'Transylvania Live', an award-winning travel company who were expanding their range of services to include guided motorcycle tours. I was joining their 'Best of Transylvania' tour, a seven-day guided tour through the northern region of Romania. I'd arrived on a £200 Malev Airways ticket with my own riding gear and just enough money to cover my fuel, beer and food. According to the literature that I'd received, everything else would be provided.

This would be my first guided tour and I'll admit to being very sceptical. One of the main reasons that I ride bikes is for the feeling of 'Freedom' and I was worried that by joining a guided tour I'd be seeing things that were only of interest to other people and even worse, I'd be keeping to somebody else's timetable. It wasn't something that I would ever have chosen to do myself, but the holiday was free, I was available and it would have been to refuse. So here I am, the luckiest man in the world on a freebie to Transylvania and I'm moaning like a resting actor and his movie star mate. You have permission to kick me.



At Cluj Napoca International Airport, we were met by Alain Todea, our official guide from Transylvania Live; the paperwork for each bike was completed, a brief lecture on the rules of riding in Romania was ignored and the journey began. I was riding one of Transylvania Lives BMW 650 GS's with lots of miles on the clock and just enough tread on its tyres to keep life interesting. It was a decent bike that was easy to ride, difficult to break and just old enough so that I didn't need to worry about adding any more scratches to its paintwork. A huge watertight topbox carried everything that I'd need for the day and the Transylvania Live support vehicle carried the remainder of my luggage. I'd never toured like that before, but it's something that I could easily grow accustomed to. I didn't need to think about where I need to be going, I didn't even need a map, I could just sit back and enjoy the leisurely pace of the holiday.

The first night was spent in the four-star splendour of the Sun Garden Hotel on the outskirts of Turda. The beds were soft, the food was good and the beer was cold and refreshingly cheap. Four-Star living is another thing that I could quite easily grow accustomed to and it was a great opportunity to get to know the rest of the riding group.

After dinner, the team from Transylvania Live entertained us with a theatrical demonstration of how to kill a Zombie. This traditional play was called the 'Killing of the Living Dead', but in Transylvania a Zombie is called a 'Strigoi'. The preferred method for killing the Strigoi was the traditional wooden stake through the heart technique and it was a great evening that had us all roaring with laughter. However, if I had encountered any real Zombies in Transylvania, I think I'd have just followed Shaun's advice and "head down to the Winchester until it all blows over."

Each day of the tour began with breakfast at the hotel, a brief explanation of that day's itinerary and a safety check of each bike. It's fair to say that I really hadn't done much homework before arriving in Romania and for some reason I'd expected everything to be cold, damp and painted in various shades of grey. Thankfully

of course it wasn't. It was bright and vibrant, happy and cheerful. The sun shone and in my totally inappropriate winter riding gear I sweated like a proper Englishman abroad. Every day of the tour, along ribbons of gloriously winding tarmac, the local inhabitants gathered on the steps of their houses and waved as we passed. The laughing kids ran alongside us shouting enthusiastically miming the riding of giant motorbikes. Whenever we stopped, people came over to talk and invited us into their homes. They baked us cakes, made strong coffee and often insisted that we drank a local plum brandy called 'Palinkas'. We visited local artists and craft centres where artisans practiced their trades and invited us to try the techniques for ourselves. Spinning wool, fashioning masks to ward off the evil Strigoi and weaving fabric from hemp. Always they greeted us with a smile and looking into their small vegetable gardens, perhaps the reason for their smiles was obvious. Maybe not all of the hemp was cultivated for fabric?



There was also far more to see in Transylvania than I had ever imagined and they were mostly things that I would have missed if I'd been travelling alone. Just outside of Turda, we visited ancient salt mines with an ultra modern visitors centre at its entrance. Walking deep underground and seeing the amazing Gaudi-like patterns of the salt was an experience that I'll never forget. I stared in amazement at underground cathedrals created by two thousand years of mining and wondered just how much of it was created by workers and how much by prisoners of conscience.

Then there was the orphanage that was once quite clearly a very grand mansion. It was a palatial home that had been confiscated by the communists in 1945 and given over to the workers for communal housing. Unmaintained for forty years, the house was finally handed back to its original owners after the week-long revolution of 1989. Today it acts as an orphanage for teenagers. No electricity, no plumbing, broken glass in every window and more holes than tiles on its seriously leaking roof. The kids who lived there didn't seem to mind. They overlook the many things that they didn't have and seemed to concentrate on the things that they did. Laughter poured from every broken window and we all rode away from there feeling uplifted and eternally grateful for our own good fortunes.



In the hills above Ierlut, we came across a field of giant sculptures created during the time of Nicolae Ceausecu. A hundred huge pieces of rock had been given to a hundred different artists and the results form an amazing field of art that nobody else seems to visit. Then there was the town of Sibiu, the 2007 European City of Culture. It's an absolutely charming town centre where every building has been respectfully restored to its former glory. The historical city centre has been cobbled and given over to pedestrians and there's not a single Starbucks or McDonalds in sight. They've created a café society where a skinny latte won't break the bank and it really works well. I could see why Sibiu had been chosen as a European City of Culture, but having now toured through the remainder of Transylvania, there were many more potential contenders. The city of Brasov where the hotel overlooked the red roof tops of the historical town; Medias, where we sheltered from a torrential storm and watched driverless cars float past on what minutes earlier had been the main road. There is something about the

cities in Transylvania that fascinates me but I can't put my finger on exactly what it is. They're just amazing places to visit.

In the old town of Bram, we visited Dracula's Castle. The historical links to Bram Stoker's Dracula or Vlad the Impaler upon whom the character was based seemed a little tenuous, but it was still a place that was well worth visiting. Perhaps of more significance to the cult of Dracula was the place of his birth in the town of Sighisoara.

Sighisoara is a walled town that appears to have been lifted directly from a movie set. It's one of the most picturesque towns that I've ever visited and the Sighisoara Hotel where we stayed was absolutely stunning. As part of the itinerary, a night was also spent at the Dracula's Castle Hotel high in the hills above Borgo. It's a very pleasant hotel with a Count Dracula theme, but once again any real links to Bram Stoker or Vlad the Impaler are probably only imaginary. I guess that somebody saw a wagon with a band on it and decided to climb aboard.

The best thing about Count Dracula's Castle Hotel, is the road that we took to get there. The Borgo Pass is one of those unique roads that will always live in the memory. It's an endless string of long sweeping bends, always climbing on beautifully smooth tarmac with magnificent views and precious little traffic. Even in the pouring rain it was a pleasure to ride the Borgo Pass, but it certainly wasn't the best road in Transylvania.



In 1968, the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia and Nicolae Ceausecu thought that Romania could well be next on their shopping list. In order to repel any attempted Soviet invasion, Ceausecu needed a way of moving his forces quickly across the Carpathian Mountains. At great expense, in both human and monetary terms, the DN7C was built. 'DN7C' is probably not the most memorable or romantic of names for a road, but you might know it by another name, the 'Transfagarsan Highway'. Ninety kilometres of winding tarmac across the Carpathians linking the cities of Sibiu and Pitesti.

Because of the high cost, the Transfagarsan Highway became known to Romanians as 'Ceausescu's Folly', but with respect to those who gave their lives in order to build it, I'll simply remember it as 'Biking Heaven'.

A road like this can't be described, you simply have to ride it and let it get inside of you. The first thing that you notice is that not a single piece of the road is straight and the second thing you notice is that you're always climbing towards, and then far beyond, the snow-line. The third thing that you'll probably notice is that the tarmac is really quite shoddy, but the fourth thing you'll notice is that you really don't give a damn. Engage first gear, disengage reason and let the fun commence. You don't have to ride this road at an amazingly fast pace, it just demands that you enjoy it. It really doesn't matter what bike you're riding because at ninety kilometres in length, there is something of everything that you love. Top Gear rated the Transfagarsan Highway to be the best driving road in the world and although I'd have to say it's not the best road that I've ever ridden on a bike, it certainly worked its way into my current all time top ten.

Everyday Romania surprised me with something quite amazing and just when I thought that all of the surprises had been revealed, it presented me with something quite new. In the small village of Sapanta, we came across the Merry Cemetery. A cemetery attached to a church, but a cemetery like no other that I've ever seen. Each of the eight hundred burial plots is marked by a carved wooden plaque with a painting depicting the life of the incumbent below. Each plaque also has a story written in the first person and one that caught my eye was for a three year old girl: "1995-1998 I am Anita of Nafur and I leave my parents with sorrow in their hearts. They no longer sing in their vineyards because I was hit by a car. But my parents should not have sad hearts because God has simply taken me to his bosom". In stark contrast to European culture, the Merry Cemetery is a celebration of life and along with the generous warmth of the Romanian people, it is something that I will always remember.

Before visiting Transylvania, I firmly believed that the best way to travel on a bike was 'Freestyle'. However, if in the future I'm ever limited to just a week or two of travelling, then I wouldn't hesitate in joining another guided tour. It's a very efficient and amazing way to experience a new area in a short space of time and in the case of Transylvania Live, it represents excellent value for money.



The seven-day 'Best of Transylvania Tour' costs around £800 including breakfast, most evening meals, bike hire and amazing hotels. The riding is suitable for bikers with any level of experience and the Transylvania Live team do everything in their power to make your tour as memorable as possible. Romania reminded me of Russia and that is the biggest compliment that I could possibly pay to any country. Like Russia, Romania gets under your skin and around every wonderful corner on its amazing roads, there is something new that just simply makes you smile.

For those who are still not convinced, Transylvania Live will be happy to rent you a bike or provide you with maps and routes for your own bespoke touring holiday. Whichever way you like your travelling to be wrapped, Transylvania is certainly somewhere that should appear close to the top on your list of places to explore. I'll certainly be going back there.

Many thanks to Alain Todea and the team from Transylvania Live for an absolutely amazing experience.

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Words & Pics: Blue 88