

TRANSYLVANIAN TRAVELS

PART TWO

So, day one of the tour proper - time to get some miles under our wheels!



Traditional horse and cart - these are everywhere in Romania...

Well, actually not that many to start with - the first stop of the day was to be at the salt mine in Turda, just a few miles up the road from the hotel (which, incidentally, as we left gave us all keyrings with a picture of a shopping trolley engraved on them... no, I don't really know what that was about either). Now a salt mine might not seem the most interesting of places to visit but, trust me, this place was just fuggin' amazing.

The mine is now closed, but they'd been digging salt out of it for hundreds of years and so it's ridiculously vast and it's the use they've put it too since the closure

that makes it so impressive - it's now a tourist destination complete with funfair and boating lake. That's right, you descend hundreds of feet into the earth and the first thing you see as you exit the lift is a Ferris Wheel... There's also a bowling alley, other rides and a restaurant and then, if you descend still further into the bowels of the earth, there's a lake where you can rent rowing boats and bob about in the semi-lit blackness to your heart's content. Where the salt has been cut, the machines (and the hand tools too, I s'pose) have left almost Gaudiesque patterns on the walls of the caverns that just have to be seen to be believed, and the whole place just has this almost palpable air of surrealism about it.



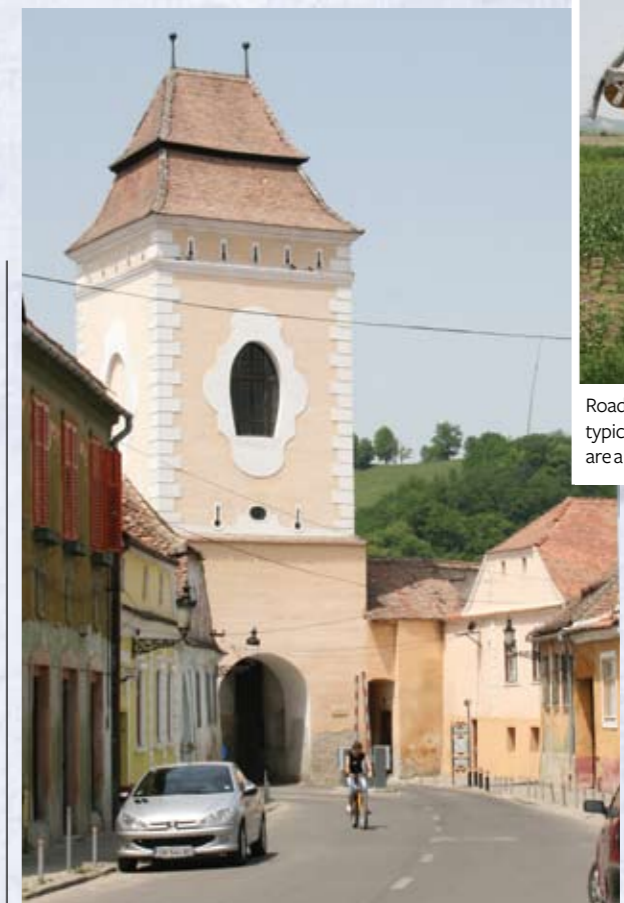
Back on the surface, we came out to find that while we were underground Alex, the support truck driver, hadn't put the Jeep's handbrake on properly and it'd rolled forward and knocked one of the bikes over. And, what's more, it was my feckin' bike! Thankfully it hadn't gone all the way over and so nothing was broken as it'd landed on, and was being propped up by, Sabine's 650. The other thing of note, apart from the woman nude sunbathing next to the road on the way in, was the British-registered, but Romanian logo'd, ice cream van parked outside doing a brisk trade - hmm, wonder how that got there?

So, onwards, ever onwards. The roads are actually not too bad, surface wise - they're very good on the main 'A' roads and okay on the lesser 'A's too, but they're as rough as a bear's arse in the villages (just as they used to be in Ireland - if you ever toured over there before the influx of EU money you'll know what I mean) and the B-roads are ... umm ... interesting with their potholes so large and deep you could lose a small car in 'em. You can see why Transylvania Live use trailie bikes, you really can.

Sadly I didn't get the pic of the bloke selling the piglets from the boot of his car so this was the next best thing.



It's quite amazing what you find down salt mines in Transylvania!



Roadside shrine with its typical rain shelter - there are a lot of these.

THAT'S RIGHT, YOU DESCEND HUNDREDS OF FEET INTO THE EARTH AND THE FIRST THING YOU SEE AS YOU EXIT THE LIFT IS A FERRIS WHEEL

Leaving Turda mid morning the temperature was already soaring and we passed little rivers full of cows stood up to their bellies in the cooling water being washed by kids, horses and carts sheltering in the shade of trees and, just to remind you of the country's Communist past, a half-track parked on the side of the road. We also stopped at the most amazing half-finished gypsy houses that'd been started by two brothers out to out-do each other in terms of ostentatiousness and then been bankrupted by them - quite, quite mad.



Gypsy houses - madder than a box of chocolate frogs!

Amazing artwork made from cobwebs made by Emil Muresan



That's the trouble with these medieval cities, the state of the plumbing is shocking...



Bastards, I know I've put on a few pounds, but there's no need to rub it in...

The next stop of the day, after some lovely twisties that had me scraping the 'pegs of the big GS (sorry Alin!), was the quaint medieval town of Medias where

we were going to have lunch and meet a famous artist, Emil Muresan, who makes the most amazing pictures using nothing but spiders' webs. It's a lovely quiet place with some stunning old buildings, sitting sweltering in the heat, that probably hasn't changed much in the last couple of hundred years.

Back on the road we passed through a village called Slimnic (aah, those were the days) and onto the beautiful old fortified city of Sibiu. Like most places in Romania, Sibiu was always under constant threat of invasion from the Turks back in the Middle Ages and so the city's walls enclose all the major parts of it. The centre is just stunning - as are a hell of a lot of the ladies walking around inside it, it has to be said, East European ladies have always had a reputation for being beautiful (Olympic shot-putters and hammer-throwers aside) and the last time I was in Hungary I was told that Romania women were even more stunning than the Hungarian ones were (no mean feat that!) - with parts of it dating back nearly 1000 years. Sibiu was once listed by the prestigious Forbes magazine (the one for the ultra-rich) as being in the top ten most pleasant places to live in the world, and it really is rather impressive.

The Sun was setting as we set out again for our final stop of the day in the little city of Sibiel in the foothills of the Carpathians and we headed into it,

almost magically huge and fiery orange in front of us. Twenty kilometres of back-roads jinxing later, we were pottering up the dirt road that lead to the traditional mountain guesthouse where we were staying. The bikes were parked in the walled courtyard of the place and we were shown to our rooms, very nice, simple, lots of carved wood. After twelve hours on the road, in soaring temperatures, the water in the shower (real water too, none of yer vampire rubbish) was almost sexual and the first beer of the evening was heavenly. But that wasn't the end of the day, oh no...

After food and three or four beers and a half a bottle of wine, we were called out into the courtyard again and found ourselves confronted by some very medieval-looking ladies and some big 'erberts in chainmail with very large swords. They were the Gladius Dei Knights www.gladiusdei.org and they were there to do a display of sword fighting. Now, I don't know about you, but after a long day on the road, and with some beer inside me, I'm not really that interested in things like this but, as I watched them lay about each other (and I really mean lay about each other too), I suddenly twigged that the reason there were such big sparks off their blades when they hit was that they were real swords - as in big, metal, heavy and sharp. These guys weren't messing about!

Then, just to make things extra-interesting, they made us come forward and taught us to use them. Now, bear in mind that I've just said that we've all had three or four beers and some wine after a long day on the bikes and you can see why I was slightly concerned about being given a real sword and told

Sword fighting with proper swords!



Arise, Sir Smeghead!



Some of this Romania food is, it has to be said, a bit spicy!

RIVERS FULL OF COWS STOOD UP TO THEIR BELLIES IN THE COOLING WATER BEING WASHED BY KIDS, HORSES AND CARTS SHELTERING IN THE SHADE OF TREES AND, JUST TO REMIND YOU OF THE COUNTRY'S COMMUNIST PAST, A HALF-TRACK PARKED ON THE SIDE OF THE ROAD

A lot of the architecture is very Eastern, almost Chinese ...



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NEXT MONTH - the Transfarag asan Pass ... it was awesome!

to attack someone with it. Of course, the Knights were more than capable of dealing with even the most kak-handed amateur and all was well, but it was a slightly disconcerting thing at first. All those of us who had a go were duly knighted at the end of the session, and the sword fighting (and quarterstaff and sword-and-shield fighting) was followed by a bit of courtly dancing and some rather cool fire eating/juggling. Like I said, I'm not usually into stuff like this, but it was a good night and they'd go down a storm at a big rally or bike show, I'm sure.

At close on midnight, shattered and slightly hoola'd, I made me way up to bed. The air was still hot and sticky from the day's heat and, as there was no air-con in my room, I decided, against everything you're told in horror films, to sleep with the window open - bollocks to the vampires...☘

