

WORDS & PICS: NIK

TRANSYLVANIAN TRAVELS

PART SIX

Waking in Hotel Castle Dracula, the first thing I did was to check me neck, 'specially as I'd slept with the window open again (I'm 'ard, me).

Yep, me head was still there and no one appeared to have been using me as an all-night buffet. The Sun was baking the earth around the hotel again and it promised to be another hot day. The air was completely still, not a hint of breeze, and despite the fact that it was barely nine by the time I'd made me way down for breakfast and back, and packed up and loaded the bike, all around us crickets were chirping. Yep, it was going to a warm one ...

I must've missed the briefing on what was happening today because, as we set off, I realised I had absolutely no idea where we were going. Oh well ... I slotted in as Tail-End Charlie as usual, revelling in the fantastically smooth and grippy Borgo Pass tarmac as we went down the other side towards ... umm ... wherever we were going. I'm good at this navigation lark, aren't I?

No matter, the run down the Pass was wonderful. Heat haze shimmering off the tarmac, long flowing sweeping downhill bends, dual carriageway (unheard of!), very little traffic (just the occasional truck or slow-moving Dacha or horse and cart) and, best of all, much less horse shit on the bends than on the way up! Bliss!

In fact it was over all too soon when after twenty or thirty miles, it felt like, of heavenly riding the lead bike pulled into a petrol station. We all needed fuel, I know, but it was such a shame to have to stop. After re-filling, we set off again and not long after turned off down a more 'normal' Romania road and were



Fantastic spires on the Orthodox churches...

Fantastic old Soviet era train abandoned by the side of the tracks ...



I've absolutely no idea what this was, apart from derelict, but I want to live there!

LONG, DEEP VALLEYS STRETCHING OFF AS FAR AS THE EYE CAN SEE, REAL LORD OF THE RINGS STUFF

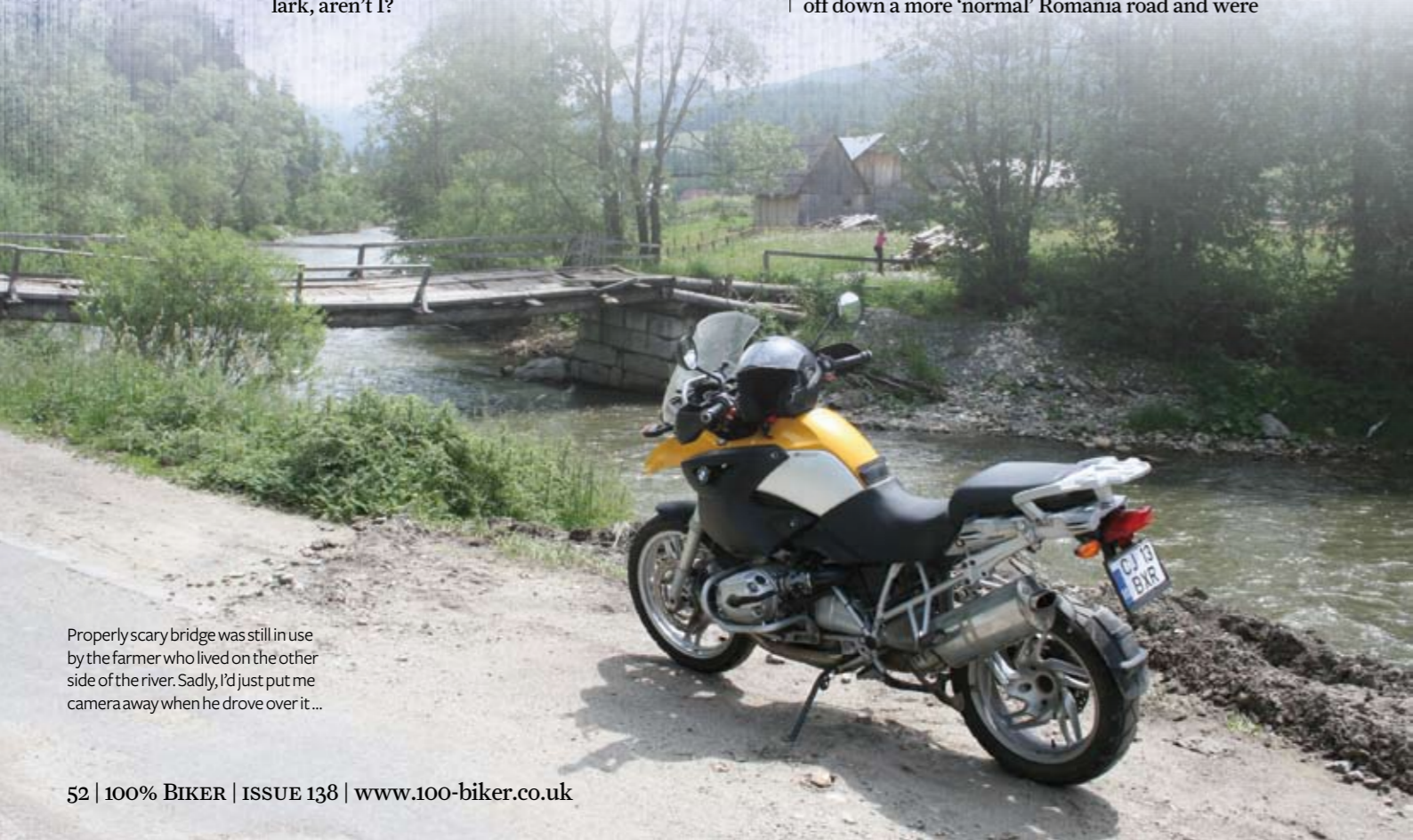
back to pot-hole dodging. We were heading for the historical area of Maramuresh via the Prislop Pass which, at 1416m (4645 feet) at its highest point, isn't perhaps the highest pass in Romania, but is pretty damn high. The climb up the Pass was amazing, up between the trees of the forest that blanket it on a narrow road with, usually, a huge drop-off on one side and, worryingly, quite battered crash barriers. I can sort o' see why they were battered, though, as the views down into the valleys as you climb higher and higher are breathtaking - long, deep valleys stretching off as far as the eye can see, real Lord Of The Rings stuff - and it'd be easy to lose concentration and come a real cropper. Add to that the fact that the road itself is of the 'bear's arse' classification, and the fact that the edges have been washed away in a few places, and it probably explains why the Armco looks like it's gone ten rounds with a pissed-off silverback.

Near the top you break out of the trees into alpine meadows that stretch off for miles in every direction, and a series of tight tarmac hairpins takes you to the very top itself. If you look up as you exit the tree-line you'll see a huge and imposing black structure with towers and turrets perched on the highest point and the first thing I thought upon spying it was 'now THAT's Dracula's castle!' and, as you get closer and closer to it, the feeling of otherworldliness about it intensifies. It's dark, massive and seemingly abandoned, just like a vampire's abode would be during the hours of daylight, and I just had to have a closer look. It turns out that this amazing place wasn't actually the haunt of upper-class blood drinkers, but an Orthodox church that was still under construction (so it'll suck the life from the land in other ways then), and Alex, the support truck driver and spanner-whirler, almost had a sacrilegious fit when I later told him that it would be a better home for Dracula than that place on the top of the Borgo Pass will ever be. Oh well ... ☹

Now that should've been Dracula's castle, shouldn't it?



Turns out to be an Orthodox church under construction - right on top of a remote mountain top!



Properly scary bridge was still in use by the farmer who lived on the other side of the river. Sadly, I'd just put me camera away when he drove over it...



Wonderfully ornate grave markers all have their own rain hats!

WHAT THE BLOODY HELL WERE THEY DOING WITH AN ENORMOUS PIG IN THE BACK OF A VAN UP THERE?

Oh yeah, parked up outside the uncompleted church too was a old big red Renault van which, as I stood taking pics, occasionally rocked on its springs and made odd noises. Really odd noises. Unable to contain my curiosity, I walked round the side of it to where two Romanian farmer blokes were leaning on the open passenger door and passing back and forth a battered hip flask. They looked at me and nodded and, encouraged, I pointed at the back of the van and said, in English 'cos I'm a pillock, 'umm ... pig?' Looking back now, I seriously doubt either of them could speak a word of English, and I can't even order beer in Romanian to my everlasting shame, but one of

them wandered back towards me and leant over and opened the side door of the van. Inside was, indeed, a pig. A fookin' 'uge pig. Laying contentedly in a bed of straw. It looked at me, I looked at it and the farmer bloke nodded and shut the door again, and I smiled and walked back to me bike, slightly nonplussed. I mean, there was sod all there apart from a part-built church on top of a mountain - no other buildings, no fields as such, nothing - so what the bloody hell were they doing with an enormous pig in the back of a van up there? Taking it for a day out? Your guess is as good as mine ...

Anyway, we set off down the other side of the Pass which, I've since learnt, crosses the Rodnei mountains. Now, I'm sorry, but Rodnei is not a good name for a mountain, it really isn't. It's a good name for a talentless pillock on a TV programme, yes, but a range of mountains? Really? Whose idea was that then? Rodnei ... I ask you. The road down though, as if to make up for the silly name, was bonkers - rough-arsed, cambered hairpin after hairpin after hairpin and, apart from a close encounter with what I think was Juha Kankkunen in a taxi coming the other way, I got to the bottom with a pounding heart and a stupid, slightly fear-induced, grin. Mind you, mine wasn't quite as fear-induced as Glen from Canadian bike mag Motorcycle Mojo's whose chain had jumped off and locked the back wheel just as he was approaching a tight bend with no barrier and quite a drop off the side of it. He was okay though and, once Alex had caught up, put it back on and adjusted it back up, he was off again.

The clouds had been lowering all morning and, by the time we stopped for lunch, the sky was starting to spit with rain. By the time we'd finished, though, it was lashing it down and so we hung about for a while to try and let it pass before setting off and, sure

A CLOSE ENCOUNTER WITH WHAT I THINK WAS JUHA KANKKUNEN IN A TAXI COMING THE OTHER WAY

enough, after some world-class dilly-dallying the majority of it had indeed bugged off by the time we'd mounted up. The rain, though, hadn't stopped any local ladies, and stunning ones at that, from wearing very small shorts, as had been evident all over Romania. I tell you, it's no wonder there are vampires here - I wanted to bite most of them too.

The next stop was to be the village of Sacel where we'd meet a local sculptor ... yawn. Not my thing at all that, seen much better wood carving at Strawberry Fair for instance, so we'll gloss over that and move straight on, shall we? The rain'd stopped by the time we left Sacel, but we had some miles to go before the

overnight stop at Barsana and so, while there were lots and lots of photo opportunities, I didn't really get much chance to stop to take them. We wound our way through stunning countryside - it's that time-travel thing again - and eventually arrived at our destination to be greeted by the most amazing monastery with spires like hypodermic needles, and the coolest chainsaw-carved spiral staircase at our resting



Chainsaw cut spiral staircase at the overnight stop was a masterpiece of simple engineering!



Just so you don't forget that this was once a Warsaw Pact country ...

place for the night. Okay, so I haven't actually seen that many chainsaw-carved spiral staircases, I have to admit, but this was just a work of art - beautifully done, but not prissily so, y'know? Big logs - fitted together very cleverly. Well, it impressed me anyway.

After the day's heat (and rain) and miles, the customary après-ride and pre-dinner shower was more than appreciated and I think I stayed in there so long I may have developed rudimentary gills. Dinner was to be held in the small restaurant in the grounds of the monastery (which turned out to be a nunnery) and was cooked by the nuns themselves. They also supplied their own liquor that they made somewhere on the premises (in the fuel tank of their minibus presumably) which smelt almost exactly like gone-off petrol. What did it taste like? I don't know, I quite like my kidneys and I could do with keeping them for as long as possible ... ☘



Glen's chain decided it didn't want to be friends with the sprockets any more ...

Climbing into the mountains again, the scenery was just lovely. The Armco has, worryingly, seen a bit of use though ...



So annoyed that I didn't manage to get the pic of the two cows shagging in the middle of the main road!

Book your Transylvanian tour of a life time on this free 'phone number - 0808 101 6781 - or check out the website at www.motorcycle-tours.travel

NEXT ISSUE: last day, boo!

