Adventure ride in the footsteps of bears

A travel report from Romania

The yellow moon appears large and round on the horizon. The white moonlight shines down on the earth, and only faint outlines and shadows give a vague picture of my surroundings. Stones hit the bottom of the off-road vehicle as it struggles up the winding, rough roads. After a three-hour drive from Cluj Airport, I am now almost at my destination, the starting point for my adventure ride through Romania!
As far as I can tell in the darkness, the bumpy ride ends at the top of the mountain range. Here I am greeted by my host Csaba and his curious dogs. I already met Csaba's partner Kinga on the way here; she picked me up in the valley with the off-road vehicle.
Continuing the journey in the airport shuttle's normal car without four-wheel drive would have been unthinkable.

The adventurous journey has already hinted at it – even though I am only a few kilometres away from the town of Gheorgheni, I am in a completely different world. There is no electricity here and my mobile phone shows zero bars of reception.

Csaba and Kinga show me their home, an old farmhouse that is the first stop on our horse riding tour. I am the last participant to arrive. Everyone else has already arrived and is asleep. After a delicious candlelit dinner and a nice chat with my hosts, I quickly

quickly find my bed with the help of my headlamp so that I am well rested for the next day.

The next morning, I meet my fellow riders: a colourful group consisting of a family, a married couple, friends and a few solo travellers. Most of them are from Germany, the others from Poland and Hungary. They all make a good impression and have the necessary spirit of adventure required for this trip. Over the coming week, we will be riding together through the Szeklerland in eastern Transylvania. This part of Romania is named after the Hungarian ethnic group that settled there, the Szeklers. To my surprise, almost everyone in this region actually speaks Hungarian. This includes Csaba, who also speaks very good German.

Now, in daylight, I can finally see the magnificent panorama that stretches out around us. It's hardly surprising that Csaba and Kinga chose this place to live. A wonderful mountain idyll spreads out in front of the farmhouse. Deep green spruce forests as far as the eye can see and no other sign of human life in sight!

Csaba and Kinga bought the 100-year-old farmhouse a few years ago, dismantled it and rebuilt it here in its original form. Since then, they have been living up here in the mountains all year round, even in the snowy winter! Their horses also live here outdoors all year round. There is an open stable, but they only use it to provide shade in hot weather. There are currently 18 horses living here, including a few young ones. Just like our riding group, the herd is also very diverse. Most of them are warmbloods, some with Arabian and Lipizzaner bloodlines. There are horses of virtually every height, so there should be something suitable for every rider.

After a truly generous and delicious breakfast with lots of vegetables, sausage, local cheese, homemade bread and jams, fresh milk from the "neighbour" and other delicacies, we spend the morning stowing our essential luggage in the saddlebags. We won't have access to our suitcases again for two days, when we meet up with the support vehicle.

Then we get to know our horses. I am assigned the grey gelding "Stefan". We are given instructions on how to attach the saddlecloths, military saddles and saddlebags and prepare our horses. The pack horse also has to be made ready for departure with the help of several people. It carries our tents, sleeping mats, food, cooking pots and a few other items we will need, as we will be camping for the next two nights.

We set off around midday. Our first day of riding takes us away from the farm through the surrounding forests, which are interspersed with clearings and plains. We make our first short stop at a small spring. This is where the River Olt rises. It is hard to imagine that this small stream will become the second largest river in Romania, which eventually flows into the Danube. We continue uphill and downhill in bright sunshine.

On the way, we stop for a short lunch break on a hilltop. We prepared our sandwiches for this at breakfast in the morning.

In the early evening, we reach a clear mountain top at the edge of the forest with a fantastic view of the wide valley and the Harghita Mountains on the horizon. Here we set up our camp. Everyone quickly finds a task to do, so that in no time at all all the tents are pitched, the horses are watered and the potatoes for dinner are peeled. Csaba conjures up a delicious pot dish over the campfire, which even consists of two courses. There is also a tasty alternative for the vegetarians in the group. After a few convivial campfire stories, we all gradually disappear into our tents.
"Coffee's ready!" echoes across the meadow in the morning. Gradually, the zippers of the tents can be heard opening. Blue skies and sunshine make getting up easier, and hunger drives everyone outside anyway. The fire is still burning from the evening. Wood was added to the fire throughout the night because bears live in this area. Fortunately, none of them showed up at the camp. While we enjoy our scrambled eggs with fresh chanterelles and homemade ricotta, the horses, which always spend the night roaming free, slowly trickle in. A bell around their necks helps us find them, but they don't stray far anyway, knowing full well that a portion of concentrated feed awaits them in the morning.

We set off on our second day of riding in perfect weather. The route is mainly downhill, initially across wide meadows and alpine pastures, past a small village and through sections of forest. It is already apparent on the horizon: dark clouds are gathering, lit up by flashes of lightning. During our lunch break, the rain catches up with us. Dressed in our rain gear, we continue through the now gloomy forest. Shortly before we reach our new campsite, it starts pouring down. In the heavy rain, we unsaddle the horses and set up camp. At least

the rain eases off a little in the evening, but the forecast for the next day is not very positive. Fortunately, Kinga is there with the support vehicle and we can get some fresh, dry clothes from our suitcases.

The next day of riding is indeed as rainy as we feared. We trot silently through the dense, fog-shrouded forests. Everyone is in a slightly subdued mood, but we bravely accept our fate. That's all part of an adventure ride in the mountains! Towards the afternoon, the weather improves considerably and as the sun comes out, our spirits rise again. We reach today's accommodation, a nice, newly built guesthouse in a small village, dry. The hot shower does us all good and the comfortable bed quickly makes us forget the rain!

The next morning, we repack our saddlebags a little, as we won't be camping anymore and no longer need our sleeping bags and camping equipment.

In the morning, we ride across beautiful, wide plains with wonderful grassy paths that allow us to trot and even gallop. We repeatedly see shepherds with their flocks of sheep or herds of cows, farmers harvesting hay or producing charcoal, and mushroom pickers who find a veritable El Dorado of porcini, chanterelles and other varieties in the forest. We are often eyed curiously by semi-wild herds of horses that we encounter. We have a brief moment of shock when our cheeky pack horse (loaded with our clothes for the next few days) tries to enjoy a refreshing bath in a wide stream. We are just able to prevent it from lying down. Today we are once again staying in a small guesthouse that was only recently built. We are once again surprised by the comfort of the guesthouses. We had expected much simpler accommodation.

Slowly, we are now heading back home.
Today, we finally get to see bear tracks! We discover fresh paw prints in the mud and fresh bear droppings on the path. According to Csaba, bears love the raspberries that grow wild everywhere at this time of year. We also help ourselves to the berries from our horses. Our last night away is spent in a former riding stable that is now a guesthouse. As everywhere else, we are welcomed with schnapps and fresh tea and coffee. There is a special highlight at dinner. For dessert, we are served huge quantities of homemade doughnuts, which are so delicious that we simply cannot leave them.

The last day of riding is also the longest. Today we cross the large valley to get from the Harghita Mountains back to the opposite Carpathian ridge, where Csaba's farm is located. In the morning, we ride across the vast, huge flower-filled meadows until we reach the town of Gheorgheni. From there, we work our way up the mountain, along the same rough track that I travelled a week ago by car. This time, in daylight, I can see more. Again and again, we see beautiful log cabins in idyllic locations in the forest.
If you didn't know better, you could almost think you were somewhere in the Rocky Mountains in North America. After a few steep passages, we reach Csaba's farm. The horses that stayed behind are happy to see their comrades return, but they have to wait a little longer until everyone has been unsaddled and showered. They have to stand still for a few farewell photos before they are released into their well-deserved freedom.
After a wonderful shower in the rustic, stove-heated outdoor showers, we enjoy one last dinner together. Early the next morning, I set off for the airport. With homemade blueberry schnapps and jam in my luggage and the realisation that you don't have to fly halfway around the world to experience a real sense of adventure away from civilisation in unspoilt, beautiful countryside, but just two hours, I climb into the off-road vehicle. It rumbles down the stony path...

Information about the "In the Footsteps of the Bears" horse riding tour can be found at: http://www.equitour.com/bae008.htm