

Transylvania: A Nature and Culture Trail through the Carpathians

Transylvania: Pure culture and nature on a journey through time on horseback through the fairytale Carpathians, 9–15 June 2013

We gallop briskly and effortlessly across a magnificent flower-filled meadow, with a breathtaking panorama stretching out before us of picturesque, gently rolling hills that rise up into the clouds, through which a herd of wild horses roams in the distance – not a sign of human civilisation far and wide – pure idyll! We are in Transylvania, where we spend a week being enchanted by its charm – by its culture, way of life and hospitality, unspoilt nature, wilderness and authenticity, stories and legends. These glimpses into the soul of Transylvania make our journey through the magnificent forests, meadows and mountainous landscapes a truly unique experience! We often feel as though we've been transported back to a bygone era: instead of cars on tarmac roads, we encounter horse-drawn carts on unpaved tracks; the grass is cut with a scythe; and the culinary delights are 100 per cent organic and homemade.



We set off from the historic village of Miklósvár, which, like the entire Romanian region we'll be travelling through, was originally Hungarian; this is why the population here consists almost exclusively of Hungarians, and we'll therefore be spending the week with them. In Miklósvár, we'll be staying in historic guesthouses, furnished with rustic, cosy farmhouse furniture, yet offering modern comforts. After my late arrival in the middle of the night,

I'm curious the next morning to see what the farmstead looks like in daylight, and I'm delighted: from my room, I'm straight out into the countryside, where I find comfortable sun loungers, an old wooden covered well, a carefully tended garden and an enclosure with chickens, goats and little ducklings. Seating areas, romantically shaded by vine leaves, are grouped around the kitchen cottage – what a place to start a holiday! After a hearty breakfast of golden-yellow scrambled eggs, sweet elderflower cordial, fresh cow's milk and butter, homemade jam and honey, cheese, sausage, farmhouse bread and muesli, Joseph is waiting for us; he'll be transporting our luggage during the horse-riding tour and is now driving us to Countess Anna Kalnoky's stud farm in Korospatak. There, horses already saddled up are waiting for us, and after a few laps of the riding arena, we check whether the chemistry between horse and rider is right. Shagya Arabians, Lipizzaners, Huzuls and crossbreeds: with around 30 horses, the selection is impressive. The intelligent, strong, good-natured and hardy Huzuls are a historic breed from the region and are descended from the Tarpan, the original wild horse. Once everyone feels comfortable with their horse, it's time to say goodbye to the home stable and, together with our guide Boti, the backup guide Sandor and Anna-Kata – who is joining the tour for the first time with her young horse – the five of us horse-riding girls set off into the wilderness of Transylvania!

First, we cross flower-filled meadows until we reach a mountain ridge, where we're treated to a fascinating view over hills, forests, picturesque villages nestled in the valley and seemingly endless meadows. All these meadows are just waiting to be conquered at a gallop! The best bit: in this area, where you often don't come across a single soul for hours on end and where there are hardly any fences, you're allowed to ride almost anywhere. We feel as though we're in paradise and are looking forward to the days ahead, when we'll be exploring this dreamlike part of the Carpathians on horseback! Over the next few days, we even spot bear tracks now and then along the way and repeatedly come across herds of cows and sheep, as well as some wild horses. On one occasion, we encounter a rather large herd of wild horses, which eye us curiously but let us ride past in peace. It's only a short while later that we notice the stallion driving his flock past us at a gallop. Our horses take all this in their stride, even though at the start of the ride you can sense their excess energy and eagerness to move forward.

Throughout the trail, they prove to be well-trained, hardy and very sure-footed on the sometimes challenging terrain. What's more, they're all very friendly, and each of us grows fond of our little horse on the very first day – it goes without saying that we share our apples with them during our picnic in the countryside. Over the course of the week, our guide Boti turns out to be one of the best I've ever experienced. From morning till night, he happily explains everything we want to know (he has a wealth of knowledge – he really does have an answer for everything) and tells us about his country, its history, the people, their way of life and, of course, the natural world and its inhabitants. Sandor, our ever-smiling and sometimes cheerfully whistling backup guide, also looks after us and the horses with great care. So we're in very good hands!

We spend our first afternoon in Malnas Bai, a sleepy little village in the valley, where we're warmly welcomed by the Jäger family, who are putting us up for the night. Whilst Sandor lovingly tends to the horses next door in a barn, we take our seats beneath a lush

canopy of leaves and are treated to plenty of fresh apple cake, coffee, tea and schnapps. Malnas Bai used to be a thriving spa resort, so we set off on a short walk to take a look at some of the mineral water springs – and to taste the mineral water, which takes some getting used to but is very healthy. For dinner, our hosts serve us a very tasty soup, salad and macaroni with venison goulash (hunted by the host himself, of course), as well as a delicious dessert. We'll also be treated to delicious three-course meals on all the other evenings.



The next day we head back up into the mountains, where inviting mountain pastures and forests stretch out before us, offering us fabulous views once again. In some spots, you feel as though you've been transported into a fairy tale, such as when we come across a village hidden in the woods today, or the picturesque little birch grove at the edge of which we enjoy our saddlebag picnic. On the way to Kisbacon, our destination for the day, we also come across an abandoned calf. Two of our horses immediately want to take the poor little thing under their wing, and so the calf and the horses sniff each other – a lovely sight!

The little one even toddles along behind us for a while. We're relieved when, a little later, we meet the shepherd and can tell him about the lost calf.

Once we arrive in Kisbacon, after a refreshing siesta, Boti leads us through the pretty village, past lovely vine-covered houses, of which there seem to be many in Transylvania. Almost every Transylvanian farmstead also appears to have its own small fields, as well as, in many cases, a veritable profusion of flowers in the front garden. Proud storks, with

their young. Finally, we arrive at an old watermill, where the miller shows us round his mill and, as a demonstration, grinds a little flour for us – we're quite amazed at how perfectly the various pieces of machinery in the stream, the engine room and the milling room are coordinated!

Afterwards, the miller's mother invites us into her parlour, where we too feel as though we've been transported back a century – until she shows us photos of herself with Prince Charles and Prince Harry, who have also visited her before. She shows us her loom and some of her woven work, and tells us about her life, which gives us a sense of just how difficult it must have been to feed a family here over the past few decades. Moved by her very modest way of life, our wander takes us to another villager, who welcomes us most warmly into her cosy dining room and serves us a variety of local, painstakingly prepared specialities. She has been cooking for two days – we feel honoured and thoroughly enjoy this special feast. On the way back to the guesthouse, a few villagers rattle past us on the dusty roads, on their way to fetch milk with their milk carts – once again, we are reminded of times gone by.

Today begins with a visit to the museum and former home of Benedek Elek, the famous storyteller who published more than 200 books in his lifetime – we're thoroughly amazed and listen intently to Boti's tales of Elek's remarkable life. After another wonderful day's riding, during which we startle a fox, a hare and a roe deer, the horses are stabled for the evening in a spacious stable, where the odd chicken scurries between their legs – a funny sight! After visiting the village church, a short transfer takes us to a hunting lodge in the woods that once belonged to the former dictator Ceausescu, where Boti tells us about his terrible regime. After Boti has demonstrated various whipping techniques to us outdoors in the countryside, dressed in his beautiful traditional costume, we set off on a walk through woods and meadows, during which he gives us a closer insight into the flora and fauna of Transylvania and where we also find some mushrooms, which our cook for the evening spontaneously uses to prepare yet another excellent dinner for us. We also pass a farm, where the owner gives us a quick tour on the spot, during which we meet a cheeky little pig: he actually manages to lock his two mates in the sty! However, afterwards he politely asks them if they'd like to come out again and actually opens the door for them!

After a brisk ride the next day, we let the horses loose in front of Count Kalnoky's elegant hunting lodge in Miklósvár, where they roll about contentedly against this magnificent backdrop. We, on the other hand, tour the lodge, which is currently being restored and houses an exhibition of black-and-white photographs depicting life in Transylvania. Today we get to enjoy our stylish guest rooms from the first night once more and spend the evening over an elegant and refined dinner in the wine cellar by the fireplace, by candlelight and with subtle background music. On our final day of riding, we feel a touch wistful and savour our ride through rivers, valleys, forests and across the many lush meadows once more. There's no saddlebag picnic today; instead, a hearty snack awaits us at Prince Charles's charming holiday home in Zalanpatak, one of the most secluded areas of Transylvania. Towards evening, we arrive back at the stables, bid a heavy-hearted farewell to our faithful four-legged companions

and are then invited to tea at Countess Anna's. Our final dinner takes place once again in Miklósvár, in the cosy wine cellar. The next morning, we finally set off after breakfast – how I would have loved to stay a little longer!

Behind us lies a thoroughly successful week with fantastic horses and a brilliant riding route through unspoilt countryside with almost no fences. Thanks to the incredibly vast knowledge of the land, the people, the history of Transylvania and nature that Boti shared with us, he also gave us many different impressions and insights into the lives of the local people. We'll never forget this week!

Lara von Breidenbach

Link to the trip: <http://www.reiterreisen.com/dra007.htm>

