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 swiftly and effortlessly across a magnificent flower-filled meadow, before us a breathtaking panorama of picturesque, gently rolling hills stretching 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 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 traversing the magnificent forests, meadows and mountain landscapes a truly unique experience! We often feel as though we have been transported back to days of yore: 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% organic and homemade.

We set off from the historic village of Miklósvár, which, like the entire Romanian region we will be travelling through, was originally Hungarian, which is why almost exclusively Hungarians live here and we will therefore be spending the week with Hungarians. 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

The next morning, I'm curious 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 will be transporting our luggage during the riding tour and is now driving us to Countess Anna Kalnoky's stud farm in Korospatak. There, saddled horses are already 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 enduring 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 bid farewell to the home stable and, together with our guide Boti, backup guide Sandor and Anna-Kata – who is joining the tour for the first time with her young horse – the five of us set off into the wilderness of Transylvania!

First, we cross flower-filled meadows until we reach a mountain ridge, where we are 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 beauty of it: in this area, where you often don't see a soul for hours on end and where there are also almost no fences, you can ride pretty much anywhere. We feel as though we're in paradise and look forward to the time ahead, when we'll be conquering this dreamlike region of the Carpathians on horseback! Over the next few days, we even spot the occasional bear tracks along the way and repeatedly come across herds of cows and sheep, as well as a few 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 is only a short while later that we notice the stallion driving his charges past us at a gallop. Our horses take all this in their stride, even though at the start of the ride you can feel their excess energy and eagerness to move forward.
Throughout the trail, they prove to be well-trained, sturdy and very sure-footed on the sometimes challenging terrain. What's more, they are 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 have 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 takes excellent care of us and the horses. So we're in very good hands!

We spend our first afternoon in Malnas Bai, a sleepy little village in the valley, where we are warmly welcomed by the hunter family who are hosting us that night. Whilst Sandor lovingly tends to the horses next door in a barn, we sit under a lush

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

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 discover an abandoned calf. Two of our horses immediately want to take the poor little thing under their wing, and so the calf and the horse sniff each other – a lovely sight!
The little one even trots along behind us for a while. We are relieved when, a little later, we meet the shepherd and can tell him about the lost baby.

Once we arrive in Kisbacon, after a refreshing siesta, Boti leads us through the pretty village, past lovely houses covered in vines – of which there seem to be many in Transylvania. Almost every Transylvanian farmstead also appears to have its own small fields, as well as 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 around his mill and even grinds a little flour for us as a demonstration – we are quite amazed at how perfectly the various machinery in the stream, the engine room and the mill room are coordinated!
Afterwards, the miller's mother invites us into her parlour, where we too feel 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 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 wanderings now take us to another villager, who welcomes us most warmly into her cosy dining room and serves us a variety of local and 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 are 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 deer, the horses are stabled for the night in a spacious barn, where the odd chicken scurries between their legs – a funny sight to behold! After visiting the village church, a short transfer takes us to a hunting lodge in the forest that belonged to the former dictator Ceausescu, where Boti tells us about his terrible regime. After Boti has demonstrated various whipping techniques to us outside 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 look at the flora and fauna of Transylvania and where we also find mushrooms, which our cook for the evening spontaneously serves us with another excellent dinner. We also pass a farm, whose owner gives us a quick tour, during which we meet a cheeky little pig: he actually manages to lock his two mates in the barn! 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 following day, we let the horses loose in front of Count Kalnoky's elegant hunting lodge in Miklósvár, where they roll around 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 again 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. Today there is no saddlebag picnic; instead, a hearty snack awaits us at Prince Charles' charming holiday home in Zalanpatak, one of the most secluded areas of Transylvania. Towards evening, we arrive back at the stables and bid a heavy-hearted farewell to our faithful four-legged companions

and are then invited to Countess Anna's for tea. 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 have stayed 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 incredible wealth of knowledge about 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 people's lives. We will never forget this week!

Lara von Breidenbach

Link to the trip: http://www.equitour.com/dra007.htm