

Through Transylvania on a 'slow cycling' holiday

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Historic villages, long lunches, tots of fruit brandy —
and a total lack of Lycra



What is the goal of a group cycling holiday? To freewheel through idyllic countryside, relishing the cool breeze and glorious scenery sweeping by? To make new friends and admire cultural sights? To enjoy jovial banquets of local food and wine, somehow hoping that the kilos gained will be miraculously offset by the next day's furious pedalling?

All this came true on my four-day ride through the forests and valleys of southern Transylvania, but there was an unexpected bonus. It was a cultural discovery that elevated an enjoyable break into a brush with the extraordinary, and it begins in 1153 with a long-forgotten king, Géza II of Hungary.

At that time this bucolic plateau cradled by the Carpathian Mountains, which only became part of Romania a century ago, was forever fearful of invasion from the east. In response, the monarch invited German-speaking mercenaries from the Rhineland and Moselle region to defend his borders. Collectively known as Saxons, they settled here for more than 800 years, building robust villages with deftly fortified churches. Devout and talented craftspeople, this industrious community farmed and worshipped with a zeal still evident in the sturdy towers, monumental barns and majestic oak forests that now form the picturesque backdrop to our 115km ride.



A Slow Cyclist lunch overlooking the village of Stejareni

Then, in 1989, following the collapse of communism, almost all of them went home — invited back to their ancestral soil by the German government. “There were 1,200 Saxons here before the second world war,” reflects Rosemarie Müller, a teacher in the village of Altina. “Today there are 54.” As she shows me round its elegant church, Müller explains how when a departed villager passes away its bell is rung in tribute — most recently for a 94-year-old man who had fought for the SS and recently died in the United States. A Sunday service still takes place here, with a congregation of 20 at best, stoically singing hymns beneath walls adorned with exquisite 15th-century frescoes.



A typical Saxon roofscape in Mesendorf © Daisy Honeybunn

All this makes poignant viewing, but we are not touring ghost villages. While some Saxon houses are boarded up, many have new residents — principally families of Romanians escaping the urban rat-race and savvy western Europeans who have snapped up a cut-price second home. “You can buy a house here with two plots of land for €10,000,” says Marco Nawijn, one of our two guides. A lanky Dutchman, he moved here in 2000 after falling in love with Transylvania’s fence-free grasslands and venerable forests filled with truffles and brown bears. His wife, Donate, is one of several talented chefs who prepare the marvellous feasts for our 12-strong group, where we sit at one big table tucking into dishes of spiced cabbage stuffed with minced pork and farm cheeses drizzled in local honey, all followed by plum cake and fiery tots of *palinka* (fruit-based brandy).

Our first night is spent in Richis, a village that once traded barrels of wine for Turkish carpets, where I’m billeted in an enchanting Saxon house with an enclosed courtyard, barn and orchard. The next morning we kick off with a 27km ride, and I’m pleased to find our tour company, The Slow Cyclist, advocates both the “slow” lifestyle and a modest rate of pedalling.



Descending from the forest into Sighisoara

Oli Broom, its genial founder, is clearly at home in the saddle having cycled from London to Australia in 2009-10 to watch the Ashes cricket series. That epic journey took him almost 14 months, and setting up our impeccably structured ride has taken nearly as long. "Most of our clients are over 50," he says, "and only two per cent sport Lycra." This is borne out by my fellow cyclists who hail from the US, Australia, New Zealand and the UK. Many are retired and while one couple has done some serious long-distance cycling and others regularly "chew the handlebars", the rest of us are content to simply work off the lavish breakfasts. Thanks to the miracle of electric bikes, no one is left behind panting in the buttercups. Half of us have booked one and the benefits don't just come when a hill looms. They are a boon pedalling into the wind, on boring busy roads, and fleeing ferocious sheepdogs.

Almost half our route is on tarmac
back-roads, the remainder on forest

tracks or across meadows. Soon we are strung out like a row of fairy lights with a guide at each end, happily ducking in and out of conversations and admiring the fields and vineyards where the Saxons toiled. Seven of their most impressive villages have been inscribed on Unesco's World Heritage list, including Biertan, where Nawijn shows us its citadel-like church, pointing out the "bacon tower" where food was stored during sieges and a chamber in which couples considering divorce would be locked up and told to sort themselves out.

While this flagship attraction is in healthy condition, elsewhere a battle is being waged to save the splendid buildings the Saxons walked away from. In Copsa Mare, where we stop for lunch, we find a large sign erected by conservationists urging residents to renovate their new homes in a historically sympathetic manner. A big "DA" next to photographs of wooden shutters and terracotta tiles makes it clear that a traditional look is desirable, while gaudy pink walls or a bright red modern roof are most definitely "NU!".

Some of us feel such advisories are an interference too far, but others, myself included, are in full support. One such campaigning group is the sweetly named Ambulanta Pentru Monumente (Ambulance for Monuments). When I later meet Veronica Vaida, one of its leaders, she explains that their motivation stems from nothing more than the fact that “these buildings are beautiful and we can’t bear to see them fall apart”.



Rescue methods take many forms, from the establishment of a kiln that makes authentic roof tiles to “interventions” when a volunteer team descends on a building to carry out preservation work. This recently happened in Copsa Mare, where the church roof has been repaired, and Vaida admits it is easier to protect such communal buildings rather than private dwellings. “How do you feel about garden gnomes?” I ask when we spy a few chuckling away by a garden fence. “They are necessary kitsch for someone,” she sighs.



Homemade likiu, a semolina cake made in an outdoor oven © Tom Hanslien

We don't always cycle. After a hearty meal of chicken stew, fresh strawberries and an excellent Liliac wine, Nawijn announces that we will now walk 3km uphill. He doesn't lie. "When will they invent electric legs?" one of us wails, but the Transylvanian countryside is so captivating it deserves appreciation on foot. Travelling in early May we are too soon to catch its famous wild flower meadows in their full glory, but the landscapes are sufficiently enchanting to make us wonder why the Saxons left all this for the traffic-filled streets of Munich and Nuremberg. We are told their lifestyle was already on the wane — after the war thousands were sent to Soviet labour camps, and then their lands were taken away by the communist regime.

That night we slip back to the 18th century with a stay at Apafi Manor, a hilltop mansion in Malancrav restored by the Mihai Eminescu Trust, which is dedicated to the regeneration of Transylvanian villages. With its formal gardens, pared-down bedrooms and huge library of English-language books, some of us wish we could hole up here for a day or two, playing the piano and reading Rousseau. But no — we have 40km to gobble up in order to reach Sighisoara, a city that has the misfortune to be the birthplace of Vlad the Impaler and has the plastic axes and Dracula souvenirs to prove it. Conscious of this tacky side, Broom checks us into the well-appointed Fronius Residence, where we march in like a weary, mud-splattered platoon then later emerge clean and refreshed for a slap-up private dinner of wild garlic soup, stuffed eggs and cured meats.



Apafi Manor, a hilltop mansion in Malancrav, where the group spent a night

Over the next two days, as we cycle and hike to Crit and then Mesendorf, we hit our rhythm. By now we are bonded and fit, and we adore our magical rides across hills like green corduroy and long descents on narrow trails that weave through the silent heart of ancient forests pierced by sunbeams. At Viscri, ahead of our farewell meal, we sit outside a bar chatting till the cows come home — literally. Their daily return from the fields, along with a clutch of horses, is a thousand year-old spectacle, a bovine paseo that brings every villager into the main street to watch as each animal dutifully peels away from the herd to enter its respective barn.



© Tom Hanslien

Transferring back to Sibiu airport by minibus the next morning, I look out from the motorway at the flat fields and dull industrial buildings and think how easy it would be to pass through Transylvania and assume there was little to see. As this most stimulating journey reveals, rich rewards await those who explore its hidden corners on two wheels, from the utter joy of whizzing downhill at 40kph dodging cowpats to the compelling story of the pious Saxons who farmed and flourished here for eight centuries. As one of their many wall-hangings, lovingly embroidered in Gothic lettering, reminds us: *Ein fröhliches Herz nicht Gold und Pracht ist was den Menschen glücklich macht* (A cheerful heart, not gold and splendour, is what makes people happy).

Details

Nigel Tisdall was a guest of [The Slow Cyclist](#) and [Wizz Air](#), who fly from London Luton to Sibiu from £84 return. Guided cycling holidays in Transylvania run from May to October, from £1,550 per person for five nights including accommodation, meals with wine, airport transfers and bike hire. Private journeys for groups of six or more cost from £1,600 per person for five nights.
