



A canter along a stretch of mountaintop above the village of Lunca Ilvei

A Transylvanian Riding Adventure

Story by **Laura Nugent**
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Transylvania was a surprising suggestion for a riding holiday, but the brochure described it as one of the great, undiscovered trail-riding destinations in Europe. Compared to the bustle of Romania's crowded capital city, Bucharest, entering Transylvania was an exciting journey into a romantic land of tall mountains and deep forests. The train wound through a succession of curves, over tall viaducts and through tunnels before halting at Lunca Ilvei station.

Our hosts, Julian and Danielle Dayen, waited on the platform, ready to conduct us to a horse-drawn carriage for the last few kilometers to the equestrian center. We had entered a world of small farms and horse carts, neat vegetable gardens and hay meadows, sheepfolds and forest. Traveling the village road, we passed more horse-drawn vehicles than cars.



The Clock Tower, circa 1360, built by a guild in the 12th century Saxon city, Sighisoara

After settling into our rooms in the center's new guesthouse, the eight group members from Britain, Ireland and Australia met for dinner. Romanian cuisine uses a wide range of fresh, locally grown ingredients, and we enjoyed a hearty bean soup, a salad of fresh seasonal vegetables, a

main course including local chicken and pork, and Danielle's home-baked carrot cake for dessert. After dinner, Julian gave a detailed briefing about the ride, preparing us for the terrain we would encounter and how to negotiate it safely. He discussed the overall schedule of departures, arrivals, and mealtimes and what we would need to take with us each day.

After breakfast the next morning we met our horses. The equestrian center uses a variety of breeds local to Romania, including the tough Hutul mountain horse and various cross-breeds. The Hutul is the characteristic horse of the Carpathian Mountains and a close descendent of the Tarpan. It is strong, calm, agile, and frugal—perfect for the mountain terrain that we would be crossing. Each horse was equipped with English tack, including a breastplate and crupper that would prove invaluable on steep slopes, and saddlebags for our lunches, water bottles, and extra layers of clothing.

We set off southward, climbing onto a grassy ridge from which a broad panorama spread before us: waves of

mountains as far as the eye could see. The area is quite varied geologically; pointed cones of long-extinct volcanoes poking through waves of deeply folded sedimentary rocks. The flora varied according to the geology, and meadows never sprayed with chemicals were strewn with a mass of colorful wildflowers, while forest glades harbored mosses and orchids. Higher areas were home to juniper, blueberry, and dwarf pine.

In the afternoon we crossed a surviving stretch of Roman road, the historic stone pavement intact as it traversed pastureland. Our first overnight stop, Hotel Castle Dracula, came into view. Located on the site where Bram Stoker set Count Dracula's castle in his famous novel, the hotel includes a bar at the top of a tower where we enjoyed an evening drink amidst spectacular scenery. An after-dinner treat was a visit to the castle's crypt, where we found Count Dracula's coffin. And then—well, you'll need to visit Transylvania to find what happens next!

Tuesday's ride took us through the Carpathian forest, a place where one can



A group riding through mountainop pastures. The vast pine forests are interrupted by centuries-old grazing pastures throughout this area of the Carpathians.

soak up solitude. Wading our horses through a river brought us to a tranquil picnic spot, where hardier riders paddled in the clear mountain water.

The following three days took us high into the mountains, following historic trails. In days long past, these trails were used by Roman frontier guards, invading Mongol horsemen, marauding Tartars, and colonizing Austrians. It was strange to imagine Romans, some of them legionnaires from Britain, staring at the far horizon. To envision the great Mongol horde—countless thousands of horsemen followed by baggage trains of horses and yaks—passing by in 1241. In the 18th century, this was frontier territory between the great empires of Austria, Russia and Turkey, leading the Austrians to create a



A neighbor brings hay down from a stack in the mountains to his barn in the village along the street in front of the ranch. This cart is a typical mode of transportation in the village, and the foal accompanying his mother is a common sight in the spring time. It is not unusual to see a working mare and stallion pair pulling a cart with a foal tagging along.

A remote settlement along the trail is still without running water. Power lines were raised in the area only in the past year. The church is brand new, and, like nearly all churches in Romania, is Romanian Orthodox.





A shepherd tends his flock near a mountain lake. The flocks are herded up into the mountains in May, and shepherds live in the huts that proliferate the mountainsides until October, accompanied by numerous ferocious Carpathian sheep dogs.

Local women make mashed potatoes in front of the wood-stove typical of the village. Potatoes are a staple food, along with sheep's milk products, pork, chicken, and lettuces, beans and vegetables such as tomatoes and cucumbers grown in household gardens.

network of trackways through the mountains.

Now grassy and silent, used only by shepherds, these trackways make for lovely riding. Level stretches provide long, comfortable canter. Wide views spread out all around us, seemingly the only travelers in these vast mountains. This expansive

place gave a tangible feeling of remoteness, a sense of being somewhere timeless. We were not alone, however, for the mountain pastures are home to traditional shepherds between May and September. Each sheepfold has several hundred sheep, tended by three or four shepherds and guarded by half a dozen or more great hairy dogs. The

Romanian mountains still harbor wolves and bears, so the sheepdogs need to be large and fierce. Occasionally, a muddy patch in the forest revealed the large, unmistakable print of a European brown bear.

Our hosts on Wednesday night own a sheepfold as well as a pleasant guest-house. It was to the sheepfold that we headed for dinner, ascending a steep track in an old yet robust jeep. While we sat out on a veranda enjoying a meal that included freshly made curd and whey cheese, lamb stew, polenta and salad, two shepherds made the next batch of cheese in a hut behind. Football-sized cheese cloths hung full of drying curd cheese. Fragrant wood smoke drifted from their fire as a great cauldron of milk heated, getting ready for the whey cheese to be skimmed off. As dusk settled, the younger shepherd treated



Pausing to look over the Carpathian mountains

us to a demonstration of his alpenhorn, a three-meter-long metal instrument used to communicate with shepherds on adjoining hillsides.

Each morning our horses were prepared for us by Julian's chief horseman, Cornel, and guide, Diane. Morning and evening, the horses received a feed of corn, giving a steady energy release rather than the fizziness of oats. Each night our horses stayed near our guesthouse in a stable or convenient field.

A constant companion on the trail was Julian and Danielle's dog, Mina. A small terrier-like dog, she ran alongside the horses, darting here and there, often stopping to check that we were all still present. At night Mina faithfully guarded the horses, waiting patiently each morning for us to arrive—with her next meal, of course!

Romania's Carpathian Mountains ascend to 2,543 meters, and even the ridges where we rode reach 1,932 meters. Our trail ride reached around 1,600 meters, leaving us to ascend (and descend) as much as a

thousand meters daily, requiring substantial stamina from the horses. Ours climbed steadily and surefootedly on terrain for which their ancestors had been bred for hundreds of years. Going downhill can seem nerve-wracking to those unaccustomed to mountain riding; however, our calm, well-balanced mounts reassured us, never putting a foot wrong.

On the final afternoon, as we crossed the last rise, the village of Lunca Ilvei appeared spread out at our feet. We wended our way downhill, passed the first rustic farmsteads, entered the village, and made our way to the equestrian center—where there was a surprise in store. Julian and Danielle had arranged for an ensemble of folk musicians from the village to visit that evening. They played while we enjoyed local beer, wine, and plum brandy, and when we'd drunk enough, we danced to traditional tunes and waltzes. It made a fitting end to a wonderful week riding lovely horses amidst splendid scenery.

Though he obviously enjoyed his many years in Romania, Julian had to make the difficult decision to return to his native England this past winter. By the time this article goes to press, Julian and Danielle will be married and settled in Britain. Nevertheless, Romania holds dozens of interesting locations still unexplored by most Americans, such as the painted monasteries of Moldavia, the 10th-century Saxon villages, and the Carpathian Mountains. Visit www.transylvaniancastle.com for travel options.

Laura Nugent will be in Romania under a research grant this summer, studying the sixteenth century monasteries and reveling in the fascinating, rich culture of Romania.

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