



Riding Transylvania

Vampires optional

By Court Fisher #10060

(photos by Helmuth Kroll and the author)

With apologies to Bram Stoker's Dracula and the contemporary vampire craze, riding in Romania's Transylvania region is more exciting than a bite on the neck or learning how to kill the living dead. Transylvania's mix of cultural histories and conflict, medieval to baroque to modern architecture, horse-drawn carts clopping along European Union-signage highways, the residue of Nicolae Ceausescu's Soviet-era dictatorship, and riding the spectacular Transfagarasan Pass make for a very heady motorcycle jaunt.



I learned this last June on a seven-day moto-journalists' tour sponsored by Adventure Motorcycle Tours—Transylvania Live. Together with long-time friend and German BMW MOA member Helmuth Kroll as photographer, we joined a small band of riding journalists from Canada, Germany and the UK. Helmuth and I took the “long

way ‘round’ to Romania from Germany, riding our own bikes—F650GS twin and R1150R—south across the Italian Dolomites, down the Adriatic Dalmatian coast to Dubrovnik, Croatia, then north through Mostar and Sarajevo, Bosnia, and Belgrade, Serbia, before joining the Adventure Motorcycle Tours group in Turda, Romania.

Opposite: Prislop Pass, Transylvania—new concrete Orthodox church mirrors traditional wood architecture **Above:** Approaching Transfagarasan route DN7C in southern Transylvania.



Above: Transfagarasan road—opening day snow just plowed on June 13



Right: Transfagarasan road—Romania’s stairway to heaven and Brasov Romania’s Baroque city square brings residents and visitors to surrounding cafes.

IT STARTED WITH HEAT

A mid-June week-long heat wave in Romania did not dampen the group’s immediate bonding and riding enthusiasm. We started out riding four F650 singles and a 12GS from Transylvania Live’s rental fleet, with my F650 twin and Helmuth’s R1150R. An early stop on the itinerary was Salina Turda (www.salinaturda.eu/), a deep-underground former medieval salt mine reconfigured as museum and modern amusement park, offering 60-degree respite from the above-ground 90+ heat.

At a break in Sibiu, we met Florin Ciulache, our guide for the week, arriving by heat-delayed train from Bucharest and joining Alec, the ever helpful van driver and mechanic—whose skills would be tested. Sibiu, a beautiful originally medieval city, is a center of the German Saxons who, among Romania’s ethnic groups, continue to play a significant role in the country’s history. Sibiu was a European “Capital of Culture” in 2007, and one of the urban centers of the 1989 revolution against Soviet-era dictator Nicolae Ceausescu; a bronze plaque commemorating the victims is embedded in Sibiu’s Grand Square cobblestones.

RIDING THE TRANSFAGARASAN

One way to escape heat is to go deep underground. Another is to ride as high as

topography allows. Eastern Europe offers the Carpathian Mountains, a 1000-mile arc from the High Tatras of southern Poland sweeping south to form a natural crescent boundary of Romania’s traditional Transylvania, Moldavia and Wallachia regions. We were to cross the Carpathians several times, but the most dramatic ride started southeast of Sibiu, where Route DN7C becomes the Transfagarasan. Ceausescu had this road constructed in the early ‘70s as a military highway across the mountains, reputedly to help defend Romania in the event Soviet troops attempted an invasion similar to the occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968 (despite his own communist dictatorship, Ceausescu often asserted independence from the Soviet Union).

Today the Transfagarasan is primarily a tourist—particularly motorcyclists’—delight. It rises to over 6000 feet in sweepers and hairpins, tunnels through the top of the mountain and descends in similar



curvaceous beauty. Although the road is sometimes closed by snow until late June, we lucked out and arrived the first day that snowplows opened the road on June 13, in brilliant sunshine. It was a Sunday, and seemingly half of Romania had the same idea, so the weekend picnickers, snowball-tossing cagers and tourist buses reduced—a smidgen—our natural propensity to strafe corners.



It mattered not. When you ride Romania, don't miss the Transfagarasan, on a week-day if possible. It's similar to Italy's Stelvio Pass or Norway's Trollstigen. Enjoy a lunch at one of Ceausescu's former private hunting lodges on the south side, now refurbished as the Cabanacapra restaurant and hotel, (www.cabanacapra.ro/index.php). Time permitting—ours didn't—consider a full-day loop 150 miles west to include Romania's Transalpina road D67C, a more austere beautiful and little-traveled alpine road still not fully asphalted.

FROM BRASOV TO VISCRI AND SIGHISOARA

Descending the Transfagarasan put us back into continuing swelter. That heat may have contributed to recurring engine cut-outs on Florin's F650, delaying the group's pace and schedule. Undeterred, we continued, with a stop near Bran Castle, into Brasov. Bogdan Secelean, a guide colleague of Florin, had joined us the previous evening at a delightful rural pensione overnight stay in Saliste, riding his own Aprilia Caponord Raid. Bogdan is a native of Brasov, and a perfect guide to this city's Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque architecture and history, as well as its vibrant nightlife.

Brasov, like Sibiu before, has strong links to Transylvania's German Saxon population, with a German co-name—Brasov's is Kronstadt. The many outdoor cafes in the pedestrian-only city center sport umbrellas bearing the slogan: "Probably the best City in the world." In a time of over-the-top tourism promotion, we wondered if this



Top (L-R) "We're not in Kansas anymore, Toto" – Rte 18 Bistrita River valley bus stop between Ciocanesti-Carlioaba, Romania

24 remaining parishoners try to maintain and restore the medieval German White Church—no boiling oil from this tower!

Left: Relaxing at Dracula's Castle Hotel, Tihuta Pass, Romania Rte 17—www.hotelcasteldracula.ro



was civic pride admirably understated. Unconfirmed speculation was that the slogan might be, instead, a response to some obscure EU regulation requiring all definitive advertising statements to be supported by scientific data!

Regardless, Brasov is indeed among the world's beautiful cities. Its Gothic Black Church, among the largest in Europe, is decorated on the interior with Muslim prayer rugs brought from Ottoman Turkey by Saxon merchants in the Middle Ages to proclaim their wealth—perhaps even their religious tolerance. The day's heat was relieved by a late evening thunderstorm, and some good-natured rebellion against a planned folk dance brought us simple convivial beer and food.

North from Brasov, the heat continued to Viscri, site of the "German White-Church" (www.deutsch-weisskirch.ro/), a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage landmark and superb example of a medieval Saxon fortified church village. Its aging guardian, Sara Dootz, provided a compelling story of the remaining 24 active parishioners' continuing struggle to maintain the church buildings and village tradition.

Tradition is also embedded in the city of Sighisoara, our stop that evening. Alin Todea, a managing partner of the Transylvania Live agency, rode in to meet us on a K1100S, in part to relieve Florin of Alin's own recalcitrant F650. Alin often guides the Adventure Motorcycle groups himself and, together with his operations manager, Claudia Palfi, knows the byways of Transylvania intimately. Sighisoara's beautiful medieval Citadel, also a UNESCO

landmark, was the 15th century birthplace of Vlad III Impaler—inspiration for Bram Stoker's *Dracula*.

INTO MARAMURES AND THE BARSANA MONASTERY

Dracula resurfaced the following day at our overnight stop crossing the Carpathians. Atop the Borgo/ Tihuto Pass on Route 17 sits the Hotel Castel Dracula (www.hotel-casteldracula.ro), a somewhat kitschy developer's monument to Bram Stoker. Despite a fearsome coffin ceremony and an equally fearsome discussion about how Romanian hotel menus display meat prices (don't forget, it's per gram!), the Carpathian mountain setting absolutely justifies a stop.

Equally justified was the next Carpathian crossing heading north into the Maramures Valley bordering Ukraine. Here at Prislop Pass, the Romanian Orthodox Church has constructed a most interesting contemporary church from concrete that mirrors traditional wooden architecture. Churches and monasteries abound now throughout Romania, with the post-communist government providing some subsidies (as governments traditionally do in some other European countries). Whatever your religious or spiritual perspective, some of these are quite extraordinary in purely architectural or aesthetic terms.

We found another at our next-to-last night's stay at the Barsana Monastery (<http://manastireabarsana.ro>), and its adjacent recently opened pensione. Here, a traditional order of Orthodox nuns maintains

a beautiful facility of wooden-spired buildings that evoke the Stave churches of Norway. It is most interesting to rise in early morning fog to find the Prioress conducting her early morning prayers attended only by a single novice. The monastery's own restaurant also serves a wonderful evening meal with beer—not to be missed.

IMPERSONATING THE LIVING DEAD

The last day of this Best of Transylvania tour found our group in Sighetu, close on Romania's border with Ukraine, where Florin and Alex played footsie with the Ukrainian border guard, knowing that none of our group could cross legally without a visa. We also visited the most unusual Merry Cemetery at Sarpanta, and had to cut short a visit to Sighetu's former communist prison museum to victims of Ceausescu's regime. While returning to Cluj, Alex's GPS managed to get us lost on mountain back roads short of gas, but the final group dinner rescheduled to midnight—we managed to impersonate the living dead—was a fitting end to a most fascinating and enjoyable ride.

Adventure Motorcycle Tours—Transylvania Live offers a variety of guided tours, or independent rentals. Romania and surrounding Eastern Europe offer fantastic riding, either on your own or with a guide.

Contact: Adventure Motorcycle Tours - Transylvania Live (Alin Todea/ Claudia Palfi) USA, Canada toll free 866-376-6183, UK free line 0-808-101-6781 office@motorcycle-tours.travel, www.motorcycle-tours.travel



travel 718 B Madison Ave, Cape May, 08204, New Jersey, USA; (or)tel/fax +40 264 313112, cell +40 723 336 512 Alin Todea or +40 726 253 356 Claudia Palfi; Transylvania Live, Republicii Street, 28, first floor, 401167 Turda, Cluj County, Romania (F650, R1200 GS tours from Bucharest and Transylvania, Romania or Budapest, Hungary; rentals from Romania).

Court is a BMW MOA Ambassador and Global Touring volunteer willing to help any member wanting to ride overseas.

Top (L-R): The author's vertical twin with a "forward twin" in Maramures Valley, Transylvania. Barsana Romanian Orthodox Monastery—www.manastireabarsana.ro—among the world's tallest wooden churches

Traditional haystacks at Barsana Monastery Romania—15 nuns host pilgrims and local celebrations

Below: Sarpanta, Romania "Merry Cemetery"—each painted grave marker includes a humorous memorial verse

More Romania riding info:

www.fthmotors.com Romania bike rentals

www.motoromania.com one couple's experience and guide to Romania bike touring

<http://antrec.ro/en-antrec.html> a network of private pensions (B&B) in Romania

www.amoro.ro Romanian Motorcyclist Association

