

TRANSYLVANIAN TRAVELS

PART ONE

'I'm sorry, sir, there's no water 'til five o' clock', the nice lady in reception said brightly. Hmm, you can tell this is Eastern Europe, can't you?

I'd not long been off the 'plane from Luton to Cluj-Napoca in Romania, having been up since 3.45am that morning (which is, no matter what anyone tells you, far too early), and to put it mildly I stank. I'd been wearing the bike gear I'd need for the trip and it was warm on the 'plane and, on arrival in Romania, it was thirty degrees Centigrade. It's not usually this hot, they reckon, the area was experiencing an unseasonal heatwave. Can't say I was going to complain, but anyone downwind of me might...

I'd been met by Alin, the boss of Transylvania Live - the company running the 'Best of Transylvania' tour that I was about to go on - who whisked me off on a quick tour of the city of Cluj before depositing me at the hotel in Turda where I was to meet the rest of my fellow travellers. Cluj is an amazing place - a mix of beautiful old architecture and the sort of thick, heavy East European cabling that you always see in films and photographs of places that were once behind the Iron Curtain - and some of the buildings are quite stunning. It's an old city,



The Sun Garden Hotel - lovely place but, I warn you, the home of vampire water...

originally founded by the Romans (as Napoca) some time between 101 and 106AD, and many of the buildings date back to the Middle Ages (as do a lot of Romanian cities) although, like everywhere these days it seems, they've been joined by modern buildings and familiar Western commercial names like McDonalds. The streets are thronged with people and, it has to be said, lots of very beautiful women in very small shorts and, apart from the cabling, it has the feel of any modern city, but venture outside the heart of it and old Romania starts to make its presence felt... I'll get to what I mean by that in a moment.

From Cluj, we drove over the hills to Turda (don't snigger, it's pronounced 'Tour-da') in Alin's 4x4 as he chatted blithely about the country and I sat there smelling as though an elderly dog with an incontinence problem had been intimate with me. The plan was to meet my fellow travelling companions and collect the bikes at Turda, and then go for a quick jaunt to a local landmark to acclimatise ourselves to riding in Romania, and the main part



No matter how suggestively they eye you up ...



of the trip would start the following day. Alin dropped me off at the hotel, a very modern-looking place called the Sunset Garden Hotel, and went off to collect another traveller from the airport, while I headed gratefully to my room and an appointment with (a) the shower and (b) a set of clean clothes. This was when I was greeted with the words at the top of the page ... although not before I ripped all me kit off and then stood in the shower for ten minutes wondering why no water was coming out of it.

So, stinky clothes back on and down to the front of the hotel ready for the first day's ride. Do you know, I'd been told in the UK to get a bottle of gypsy's tears to ward off AIDS but, trust me, the smell of me would've done it quite happily. The others had turned up - Paddy Tyson from MAG (covering the trip for The Road), Glenn Roberts from Motorcycle Mojo in Canada, and Sabine Schermer from MO magazine in Germany - and so it was decided that we would take a ride out to the gorge at Turda. There was just the little matter of who was going to take which bike ...

The Romanian attitude to safety, especially on their bridges, is somewhat relaxed ... as you can see.



Camping huts or v.posh dog kennel? You decide ...



If this isn't a sign from a horror film, then I don't know what is!



Who says Eastern Europeans have no sense of humour?



And deep in the middle of the woods, near the witch's cottage and the scary sign, we met a priest ... Transylvania living up to its reputation already!

There were, you see, a ruck of 650GS BMWs (trust me, you need trailers over there) and one 1200GS. We were to draw lots for who rode which bike and muggins here got the last number to be drawn so I, basically, had to wait until the others'd picked their bikes and then take what was left. We all assumed the 1200 was Alin's and so they all picked a 650 and, when it was my turn, I was about to too when Alin walked across the remaining 650 and got on it. That meant I got the 1200 - result!

So, off we went to the gorge. A quick blat through Turda (like riding in any other foreign city really ... apart from the potholes so deep you could lose a bus in 'em, the stray dogs wandering everywhere and the horses and carts, but I'll talk more about them next time) saw us out into the countryside and soon we were climbing the steep, rough road to the gorge when, suddenly, it got a lot rougher - it turned to a dirt track. We made our way down the other side, again quite steep and very gravelly, to a flat valley area where, Alin said, they used to hold bike rallies. It was a lovely spot - surrounded on all sides



Some of my fellow travelling companions - would you let this lot loose on your moto'bikes?



For sale: Desirable timber and tile construction cottage in woodland location, needs some renovation, would suit witch...

THE CAVE SYSTEM IN THESE HILLS IS CONNECTED TO THE ONE AT HAMELIN IN GERMANY AND, IT IS SAID, THAT ON VERY QUIET NIGHTS YOU CAN HEAR THE CRIED AND LAUGHTER OF CHILDREN HIGH UP IN THE ROCKS

by mountains, lush grass, little camping huts for those too nesh to camp and a bar/restaurant. We left the bikes there and set off to walk into the gorge up the little winding path that cut between the impossibly steep cliffs. 'Don't leave the footpath' a sign said - I don't see how you could've done, guv, unless your name's Peter Parker ...



The surfaces of some Romanian roads leave a little to be desired, it has to be said...

The Ritual of the Undead ... it's still actually carried out in remote mountain villages to this day, apparently.



Actually there's a legend that says that the cave system in these hills is connected to the one at Hamelin in Germany - the one that the Pied Piper lead the children into when the townspeople wouldn't pay him for ridding them of

rats - and, it is said, that on very quiet nights you can hear the cried and laughter of children high up in the rocks.

Back at the hotel a few hours later, and after a much needed (really, I'm not kidding) shower in 'vampire water' (it only comes out at night ...) and a few more beers with dinner than was strictly necessary, we were treated to the Ritual of The Undead. Although primarily aimed at tourists these days, it is, apparently, still performed on certain folk (those who, it's felt, might come back after death) in remote mountain villages and is the basis for the stake-through-the-heart myth of the vampire. Strangely, before Bram Stoker wrote his famous book, vampires were almost unheard of in Transylvania and, amazingly, they don't figure very strongly in the tourist trade either despite what you may think. Even Vlad Tepes, the legendary figure Stoker based Dracula on, wasn't actually regarded as a vampire in his native land - his name, Dracul, actually means 'dragon' in his native tongue. ☘

Court obviously wasn't a Biology major - the heart's a bit further up and to the left, mate.



Next month - the first proper day's riding, salt mines and stolen ice-cream vans, and the first of the mountain roads!

If you want to do this trip yourself, or want more info, check out www.visit-transylvania.co.uk