

WORDS & PICS: NIK

TRANSYLVANIAN TRAVELS

PART FIVE

So, waking in Sighisoara with much less of a hangover than I perhaps should have had, first things first - the morning walking tour.

Sighisoara was actually first recorded as a settlement in 1191 and retains many of its medieval buildings - in fact it's been preserved in such an exemplary way that it's been listed by the UNESCO as a World Heritage Site and is considered to be one of the most beautiful and well preserved inhabited

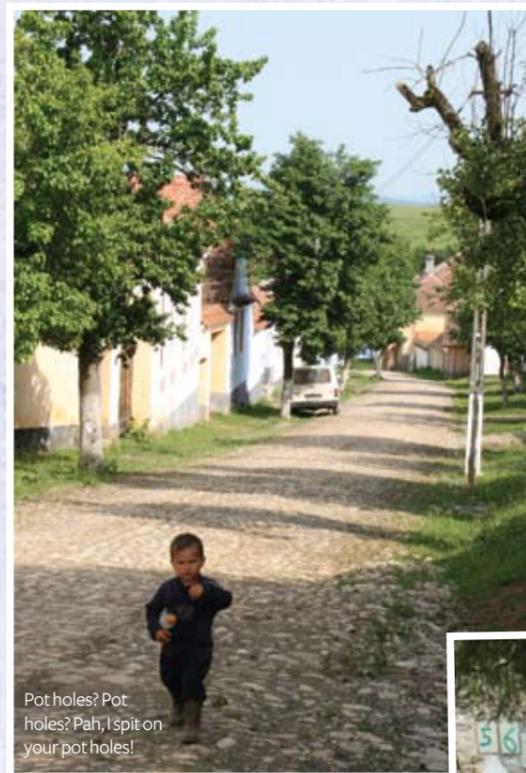
medieval citadels in Europe. It's said to be one of the few fortified towns in Eastern Europe that's still lived in as it was intended to be with the medieval stronghold on top of the hill, and known as the 'Citadel', and the lower town down in the valley of the Târnava Mare river. It's also the birthplace of Dracula himself - Vlad Tepes, the Impaler. He was, allegedly, born in a house in the centre of the citadel which is now a restaurant and is marked with a bust and a plaque and decorated with dragon logos - 'Dracul' means 'dragon', you see.

It was starting to get hot again as we began walking the tiny little streets of the ancient town and the climb up the Covered Staircase to the Church On The Hill, where you can get an amazing view out over the countryside, nearly killed my poor old bashed knees but was worth it. Coming down I elected to go the long way down, along a steeply slanting road, rather than deal with them bloody steps again ... I know, I know, wuss!



Man driving horse and cart ... in his pants.

Good to see them keeping with tradition - new builds being built in the style of old ones.



Pot holes? Pot holes? Pah, I spit on your pot holes!



You have been warned! No playing the trumpet!



'Vampire' girl in traditional dress ... she can bite my neck (and any other parts of my anatomy she cares to) any time!

TODAY'S ROADS? ASPHALT OR DIRT? I ASKED THE GUIDE AND HE REPLIED, 'ASPHALT ... PERHAPS FIFTY YEARS AGO'

Back in the centre and on (nearly) level ground, we wandered the streets, eating ice cream and generally wondering how the hell they built the incredible old buildings, like the main church and the 200 foot tall 13th Century Clock Tower, without cranes and stuff. You can see how they do it now as, looking down from the citadel into the old town, we spotted a new building being put up in a style so sympathetic that, probably five years from now, you won't be able to tell it isn't hundreds of years old like its neighbours. You can see why, can't you, when a Dracula 'theme-park' was proposed nearby back in 2001 it was universally rejected for fears of lowering the tone of the area ...

By mid-morning we were back on the road again. Thankfully this time there was another way out of the citadel so we didn't have to re-cross the rocky hellhole we'd had to brave on the way in. I would imagine my clutch was particularly thankful. Today's riding was always going to be interesting - I knew that from the moment I asked the guide, 'Today's roads? Asphalt or dirt?' and he replied, 'Asphalt ... perhaps fifty years ago'. Right then ... And he wasn't kidding - today was another time travel experience. We left Sighisoara and did a few miles on good tarmac and then turned off again down smaller roads that, it felt, took you back 200 years into the past again. I know I mentioned this last issue, but it really is so far removed from what we're used to that it's worth

It's quite incredible really, isn't it, what they were able to do without cranes n' stuff back in the Middle Ages?



talking about again. You see, the thing about this trip, the thing that makes it special, apart from the Transfaragasan of course, is the fact that it is probably the closest thing you'll get to riding in the Third World without the expense, or danger, of having to go to Africa or India or Mexico and Latin America. Before this trip, I'd always assumed that if you wanted to go and ride through countryside untouched by the passing of time and the coming of the modern age of mobile 'phones and motorways and drive-through McDonalds, then you'd have to go to the wilds of Mexico or the mountain passes of the Himalayas, and incur the not inconsiderable expense of doing so, but this tour of rural Romania gives you the same thing at a fraction of the cost. Even riding in the Highlands of Scotland or out on the islands of the Hebrides, the most undeveloped parts of the UK, doesn't prepare you for the culture shock that you get from riding in

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There's a road sign you don't see every day...



This rather fantastic-looking place is what I thought was Hotel Castle Dracula...

...but it turned out to be a monastery. This is Hotel Castle Dracula.

Transylvania where, it appears, apart from the tarmac and the cars nothing much has changed since the 18th Century. It's a proper rural idyll – an unspoilt simple way of living that goes back centuries – but, as is often the way with rural idylls, back-breaking work with none of the creature comforts of the modern age. As the old saying goes, 'the past is a good place to visit, but you wouldn't want to live there'.

The destination for today was the Hotel Castle Dracula on top of the Borgo Pass. Now, as any Dracula-ophile will know, in the book Bram Stoker has our fanged 'ero living up in a big ol' castle on top of the Borgo Pass but, I'm sorry to disillusion you, there isn't and never has been a big ol' castle up there. Mr Stoker actually saw the castle at Bran (mentioned last issue ... or the one before, I forget) and thought, 'that's where a dreaded aristocratic vampire would live ... except it's down in the lowlands, in a valley' so he used literary licence and moved the castle lock, stock and figurative barrel a good few miles to the top of the remote and wild Borgo Pass. Writers, eh?

We'd been told, at the bottom of the Borgo, that, as you went up the Pass, as you near the top, you'll see a hotel that 'looks a bit like a castle'. We weren't all riding together at this point, you see, and so with those, somewhat vague, directions in my mind I set off. At this point, after more than one or two subtle and not-so subtle hints from Paddy from MAG, I'd temporarily relinquished my 1200GS for his 650 –

THE TARMAC WAS INDEED VERY GOOD – IT WAS ALSO SPATTERED WITH HORSE SHIT ON EVERY TIGHT BEND

thankfully he gave it back that evening, complaining that it was too 'vague' for him which was a good job as, after the big bike, the little GS was ... well, a bit pants really. Nonetheless I was determined to enjoy meself, especially as we'd been told that they're recently resurfaced the road up the Pass and it was 'very good'.

And that's true – they had resurfaced the road up the Pass and the tarmac was indeed very good. It was also spattered with horse shit on every tight bend which made barrelling into them with your 'pegs on the floor, taking full advantage of said good tarmac, more than a bit of a bowel-loosener. It was fun, though, and I got to the top, and the 'Hotel Castle Dracula' sign, with my heart pumping like a good 'un and a big grin on my face. It'd been quite a short day, riding wise, at this point and so, now that I was there, I thought I'd see if I could get a decent arty shot of the place ... or what I thought was the place anyway. You see, up on the hill above me was a long building with towers and spires, and a feckin' great cross on the hill beside it, that, if you squinted a bit, looked a bit (only a bit, mind) like Bran castle and so I assumed that that was it. The Sun was in the wrong direction to get a good shot of it though (very important to us



This telegraph pole had a big stork on ... if you'll pardon my vernacular.

Now I don't really speak Romanian, but I'm fairly sure said this was a therapeutic centre ... for bears.



Seen on every road, from sleepy little back roads to full on motorways ... just to remind you this country is that bit different to ours.

photographic types, that) so I set off further along the road to get a shot back onto it sort o' thing. A couple of miles later, I got the pic I wanted and turned back to head back to it, turned down the road that the sign pointed along and, a couple of minutes later, pulled up outside ... something that, as they said, looked a bit like a castle ... if a castle had been done by Thomas Cook. It turns out that the authentic-looking place on the hill was actually a monastery and the ... umm ... not very authentic-looking place in front of me was the hotel. Ah. Oh well, soddit, as long as it has a shower and sells beer, that'll do me, I thought, and climbed off the bike. ☘



I wasn't aware that Bram Stoker had no legs? Perhaps he could become a posthumous patron of the NABD?

Fantastic old house seemed to be in shadow even in bright sunlight – if there are vampires in Transylvania, this is where they live!



Book your Transylvanian tour of a life time on this free 'phone number - 0808 101 6781 – or check out the website at www.motorcycle-tours.travel

NEXT ISSUE: Impossibly scenic valleys, rain (!) and a pig in a van ...