Don’t like group holidays, I haven’t ridden a bike since I was 15 and padded Lycra shorts are not something I ever thought I’d own. I’d nonchalantly keyed “Is Transylvania hilly?” into Google a couple of days before our departure and the almost goading response – “Transylvania is hilly, sometimes very hilly” – had left me anything but nonchalant about my five-day Romanian escapade with The Slow Cyclist.

Touching down on the tarmac at Cluj-Napoca, Mark and I are greeted by the intimidating mass of the Carpathian Mountains on the horizon. I berate myself for having preferred sauvignon to spinning as a heatwave engulfed London in the previous weeks and inwardly curse my mother for drilling an enthusiastic “can-do” attitude into me, hoping that “slow” refers to the cycling speed rather than the wholesome nature of the trip. The phrase “all the gear, no idea” barges into my head with increasing frequency and I stifle an involuntary gulp.

This is the story of the reluctant cyclist.

Dances with Wolves

Blood, sweat, tears and rosé fuel a cycling adventure past the villages, hills and wild dogs of Transylvania.

Words by India Dowley
Photos by Mark Leaver
Our starting point is Richis, a minute Saxon village three hours’ drive from the nearest airport in deepest, darkest Romania. We’re staying in a former priest’s house attached to a fortified church. It sounds deliciously ghoulish, and I’m expecting a tumbledown residence with damp bed linen where spiders scuttle into gossamer-strung corners and a sour mustiness clings to the air. The kind of place I might just stumble across an antiquated velvet cape and blood-stained stake forgotten at the back of a Narnia-esque wardrobe. Instead, a golden labrador puppy falls over its own feet as it dashes out of a welcoming terracotta-roofed house, while a mammoth stove awaits beside a kitchen table groaning under fresh produce that will later become steaming bowls of paprika-piqued goulash, aubergines slick with olive oil and oozing cheese, and baskets of fresh bread. I do spy a wardrobe, but alas, it’s empty.

We meander into the village for “a quick drink” which turns out to mean tasting a local family’s wine in a rustic barn as the sun sets. We can practically see the vineyard from our perch and the rosé is as dry and pale as any from Provence. As the week goes on, I will come to recognise that a casual “Oh, we’re just popping out to do this…” from our brilliant guides Marco, Sabbi and Bree usually means we’re in for something pretty special. I’m already feeling more inclined towards organised fun.
We’ve slept a solid ten hours but it’s not enough to shake the gogginess induced by the two we’d had the previous night. My eyelids are heavy and I can’t stop worrying about being the slowest; my breakfast small talk borders on pitiful. It’s also pouring with rain. Mark is remarkably perky and “helpfully” points out that at least my sluggishness is in line with the magazine’s theme, before spotting the unsightly bulge produced by my padded shorts and collapsing onto the bed, cackling with mirth.

Brilliant.

Our bikes are of the hard-tail, front-suspension mountain variety (basically, very good ones) and the plan is to get used to them on some scenic tarmacked back roads. However, Transylvania has had three months’ worth of rain in three days. Instead of cruising along whistling like a jolly Enid Blyton troupe, we’re faced with torrents of mud so thick that it stops us in our tracks and the air around me is most certainly blue. Glutes already beginning to burn (did you know Transylvania is sometimes very hilly?) and rain running off the end of my nose, I notice a giant snail serenely inching its way across the sludge. It looks so unperturbed by the tempest raging around us that I can’t help but laugh. No one is rushing today.

By 1pm we’ve completed a not-too-shabby 27km, the rain has stopped and we’re rewarded with a garden feast that begins with a shot of pálinka (an eye-wateringly poignant home-distilled brandy made from fruit such as plums, cherries or apricots), continues with shots of pálinka (punctuated by rich pork stew and sweet ricotta pancakes) and ends with a shot of pálinka.

It turns out to be absolute rocket fuel – how else do the Transylvanians get through the harsh winters? By the time we arrive at Apafi Manor just as golden hour casts its spell, I’ve nearly wobbled off my now not-so-slow bike several times and the backs of my legs look like they’ve gone through a blender, following repeated stand-offs with both bramble bushes and my own pedals. A restored 15th-century Hungarian mansion in powder pink, Apafi is an ode to humble grandeur. The evening light streams through large bay windows and softly illuminates the duck-egg-blue walls. Plump chairs are upholstered in jewel-toned silks, well-stocked bookcases smell like stories of virtue and immorality, and I wonder how many hands have caressed the keys on the grand piano. After dinner we retreat to the drawing room to play charades. I feel like I’ve stepped into the pages of a Jane Austen novel and keep my fingers crossed that no one suggests we take it in turns to provide the entertainment.
DAY THREE

My legs feel suspiciously normal as our 28km morning excursion snakes along beside sunflower fields and below cornflower skies, the occasional madcap driver keeping us on our toes. Feeling content following a breakfast banquet, during which I forgo the liver sausage and slabs of pork fat, it occurs to me that so far I have been preoccupied with “getting there” instead of realising that this is it. The adage “it’s about the journey, not the destination” suddenly seems more relevant and (a bit) less mawkish. It dawns on me that I spend most of my life looking forward, whether to something nice like a holiday or worrying about things that haven’t yet happened. A bit late to the party, I think I’m having some sort of cycling-induced epiphany about mindfulness and being present - though that might just be the lingering pálinka. I spend the rest of the day looking around as much as my steering permits. In the forest, cep and chanterelle mushrooms the size of dinner plates cover the floor and I can’t help but imagine tiny woodland creatures using them like beach parasols. Emerging from the trees, we spot a stork swooping overhead with what I assume is a stick in its mouth - it’s not until Marco points skyward and shouts “Snake!” that I notice it wriggle and writhe, understanding why another bird is hot on its tail. I’ve left gentrified Georgian England and stepped into a scene from a David Attenborough documentary.

We arrive in the storybook citadel of Sighisoara, the birthplace of Vlad the Impaler, who was the inspiration for Bram Stoker’s novel. Instagram may have made pastel-coloured houses seem commonplace, but walking around this fabled city is like plunging headfirst into a kaleidoscope. We resist buying Dracula souvenirs – I’m bewitched enough by the antique spinning wheels decorating my bedroom – before heading for dinner at yet another local residence. The level of curation that has gone into the trip means we’re yet to eat in a restaurant and only rarely see tourists. It’s a nod to English founder Oli Broom’s integration into the community having spent six months living in a nearby 18th-century Saxon cottage. Following cured meat, pickled eggs, baba ganoush, fried polenta, sweet pancakes, pork pâté and sheep’s cheese finished with lavender chocolate, I fall into a slumber worthy of Sleeping Beauty.
I wince as I climb onto the saddle. You know when you hammer a steak to tenderise it? That. I consider wearing both pairs of cycling shorts (it was two for £20), but worry that I’ll cut off the blood supply to my legs. It’s also that special time of the month and I worry that I’m going to attract bears as we cut through the dense trees. I decide it’s probably not appropriate group conversation and discreetly ask Bree, who laughs and assures me that bears are fine but male kangaroos would be a wholly different story.

We follow narrow, undulating forest trails and the whole group pants, sweats and digs deep, not helped when those on electric bikes glide past with a telltale hum. But there’s no denying the feeling of sweaty triumph when we emerge blinking in the sunlight and are met with views akin to a Constable painting. I’m starting to understand the people you see zipping around country lanes in full fluoro Lycra on a Saturday morning.

At lunch, heady garlic soup so delicious that I slurp three bowlfuls is followed by home-made dulce de leche generously stirred through yoghurt. For good measure, I knock back several thimbles of thick, black coffee sprawled out under a bountiful green-apple tree in the garden. The subsequent energy-induced burst of speed means I zoom along, fields a smear of avocado green in my peripheral vision. I forget any aches and pains. This is it: I am not only a slow cyclist, I’m a fast cyclist! It’s then that I hear territorial growls that quickly develop into bloodthirsty barks as five or so dogs hurtle themselves in my direction with alarming ferocity. We’d been warned that they roam the countryside protecting flocks from bears (the Carpathian population is the highest in Europe) and lynx – in line with protocol (but contradictory to instinct) I jump off my bike and stand behind it quaking. A few well-chosen Romany chastisements bellowed by Sabbi see the dogs beat a hasty retreat, as I notice Mark has already done, now but a black speck in the distance.
An orchard barbecue the night before had seen us huddle around log fires until only the embers glowed and it’s a jaded shuffle around the breakfast table this morning with the exception of our guides, who seem to possess a perpetual joie de vivre. Slathered in sun cream (the mercury is nearing 30˚C), it’s a relief that the first half of the day is devoted to walking. We traverse meadows so full of wildflowers they look like they’ve been daubed by Monet, the grass vibrating with the happy hum of crickets as they dance between clover, thyme and orchids. Clouds of butterflies flutter so close that I feel like Snow White, and when I get back to my room that evening I am enchanted to discover the nicknames of some of the flora: devil’s paintbrush, dwarf elder, tansy ragwort, hairy broom.

As the trip draws to a close there’s one more “we’re just going to pop into the village…” moment and two horse-drawn gypsy carts pull up outside our lodgings to take us up a grassy knoll overlooking Viscri and its fairy-tale Saxon church. We sit on rugs strewn across the grass and sip yet more icy rosé as we watch hundreds of cows and horses migrate from the planes down into the village for the night, bells tinkling as they go. We make our own music at our last supper, when we’re surprised by a traditional Transylvanian band made up of what looks like four generations of the same family playing everything from an accordion to a double bass as they sing and dance. I’m persuaded to join in and as I twirl about the room, head spinning, I think: I like group holidays, I’ve cycled over 150km aged 27, and I own two pairs of padded Lycra shorts.

THE LOWDOWN

The five-night cycling trip in Transylvania with The Slow Cyclist costs £1,250 per person and includes accommodation, all meals, snacks and soft drinks, wine and beer at meal times, all activities and manual bicycle hire (£250 supplement for electric bicycles).

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