In 2009 Oli Broom quit his job and spent a year cycling across the world. Now he lives in a Transylvanian village and runs slow cycling holidays.

Our house sits above the tiny village of Meschendorf in the Saxon region of Transylvania, central Romania. It is a simple collection of rooms that have been added to occasionally since the early 18th Century. I know this because in each, on the vast, stained oak ceiling beams, are carved the German names of the people who put them there, along with the date. We have electricity, a well and three old stoves for cooking, each fuelled by wood.

Vines cover our grassy courtyard. Blackcurrant bushes threaten to overrun our vegetable garden. Directly below the house is the village’s 14th Century church, recently refurbished but otherwise abandoned. The beautiful Saxon parish house lies empty next door. Above the house, rising towards endless oak and beech forests, are ten hectares of orchard – plums, pears, apples and walnuts – in a wildflower meadow of staggering intensity. The peace and quiet, interrupted now and then by owls, cuckoos and deafening music from our friendly gypsy neighbours, took some getting used to when we moved here from London in March.

It is cycling that has brought me to this magical outpost of medieval Europe, which sometimes surprises me, because I wasn’t always a fan of two wheels.

When I first graduated I spent six years working at a desk, staring at spreadsheets. I commuted by bike occasionally and relished the freedom. But I was certainly not a cyclist, which is why my family and friends could not have been more surprised when, in 2009, I quit my career in order to travel to the other side of the world by bicycle. On 10 October 2009 I rode out of Lord’s Cricket Ground with 17 friends. They all turned around in Dover but I carried on, cycling alone for the next 412 days. My destination was the Brisbane Cricket Ground, and the first Ashes Test Match of 2010.
I cycled 16,000 miles across 23 countries and four continents. I moved gradually from one village, city, country to the next and in doing so I felt a sense of continuity and slow adjustment in my travels.

Arriving in a new country by aeroplane can be overwhelming, with the differences between home and destination accentuated by the speed and ease of the journey.

But on my bicycle I rarely felt out of place; always had a sense of belonging, and that was certainly helped by the unconditional kindness I met with everywhere. I may have looked like, and occasionally acted like, an alien in a funny part of the world, but I did not feel like one; was never made to feel like one.

On my only morning in France a young man called Frank dug out some apples and a cabbage from his car boot and handed them to me, wishing me luck on my journey; outside Frankfurt I was set a treasure hunt by a man I had met fleetingly on a dark riverside path on my way into the city. The prize: a set of bicycle lights, hidden under a picnic table on my route onwards the following morning. I slept in army barracks in Jordan, police stations in Malaysia, mosques in Syria and private homes everywhere. I partied with the ruling communists in Kolkata, exiled freedom fighters in the Thai jungle and Eritrean refugees in Khartoum.

On that journey I discovered the saddle of a bicycle to be one of the most exciting and rewarding places from which to explore the world. Returning to London I relived the adventure when I got down to writing a book. I yearned to be out of the city again, to be rolling across the Australian outback, a couple of dirty socks wrapped around handlebars, legs turning gently and wheels taking me onwards, towards another night in a strange place. More than that, perhaps because I had cycled all that way alone, I began to feel a desire to share with others the joy of bicycle travel.

A bicycle offers a wonderful opportunity to slow down, to take time to get under the skin of a place

So in late 2014 I founded The Slow Cyclist, a travel company that takes people to parts of the world my team and I know and love. The Saxon region of Transylvania is one such place. While celebrated as the birthplace of Vlad
the Impaler, one of history’s greatest villains and, of course, inspiration for Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, there is so much more to this far-flung corner of Europe. The region was first populated by ethnic Germans – or Saxons – in the 12th Century at the request of King Geza II of Hungary, who invited inhabitants of modern-day Luxembourg, Saxony and Flanders to build fortifications to protect the region from invading Ottomans and Tatars. The most important towns – there were seven, the so-called Siebenburgen, including Sighisoara, today one of Europe’s best-preserved medieval citadels – were fully fortified, and in the smaller communities, like Meschendorf, fortifications centered on the church. Many hundreds of thousands of Saxons remained in Transylvania for more than 800 years, retaining their own language – said to be similar to ancient Luxembourgeois – and distinct culture. The population began to decrease after World War II, when many returned to Austria and Germany, and this continued during Ceausescu’s communist rule under a “cash for countrymen” deal paid for by the West German government. Between the collapse of the Ceaucescu regime in December 1989 and the spring of 1990, as many as half a million Saxons – 90% of the German-speaking population – fled Romania for West Germany in one of the least reported ethnic migrations in modern Europe. In a flash, eight centuries of history was committed to the past. Fewer than 35,000 Saxons – including Romania’s recently elected President, Klaus Iohannis – live in Transylvania today. Those who remain in the Saxon villages inhabit a land of extraordinary cultural and natural beauty the size of Wales. While the people have almost all gone, the grid-planned villages, with their schools, dignified houses, smallholdings and barns remain, colonised now by Romanians and gypsies.

On a morning in late April I woke to the sound of bells and, peering out of my bedroom window, watched five hundred sheep labouring through our orchard, encouraged along by a teenage shepherd and five huge sheepdogs. They were on their way to the rich grazing pastures above the village. I watched them disappear, grabbed my mountain bike and set off down Meschendorf’s dusty main street, pausing briefly to watch our neighbour’s horse feed the foal she had given birth to the previous evening.

At the bottom of the village I saw a group of ducks sitting in the shade of a plum tree. They scattered as Iulien, a young Romanian cowherd who had seen me coming, ran out to offer me a lift up the hill in his horse-drawn cart. I had accepted his offer a few times this season already but this time declined and rode up out of the village on a rutted cart track that weaved its way through wildflower meadows carpeted with ragged robin, cowslips, helle-
bore and wild orchids. It was the last chance I would have to ride alone for the rest of the summer.

I reached the dappled shade of the towering, ancient beech and oak forests that cover so many of the hills and rode on along forests tracks, dipping in and out of the woodland and pausing occasionally to take in magnificent views of the high pastures. In summer shepherds live up there with their flocks, protecting them from Europe’s largest populations of bear, wolf and lynx, and making cheese to sell locally. It is a practice and way of life that has disappeared almost everywhere else in Europe.

The meadows and forests were mine; I saw no-one but the odd shepherd. Deer fed silently, watching as I rode by. On the brow of a small hill I glimpsed a large shape moving quickly to my right. I came to a halt and it bounded across my path not more than six metres away, before disappearing into the trees. It was a brown bear; a cub, thankfully without its mother.

I rode faster after that, continuing for an hour until the forest ended and the UNESCO village of Viscri appeared, its imposing 12th Century Saxon church dominating the valley below. The Prince of Wales bought a house here in 2010. From above Viscri, it is easy to see why he fell in love with the place when he started visiting in the late nineties. His house is now owned
by his Romanian charitable foundation and it hosts training courses for local people in all sorts of traditional crafts. I rode down through meadows with not a fence or hedge in sight and stopped on the main street to pick up some honey from a beekeeper. I then turned for home, completing a loop along a rough tarmac road bordered by one of the richest wildflower meadows in Europe.

A few days later we began welcoming guests to Transylvania on five- to seven-day-long journeys through this enchanting land. Hosting groups of between eight and twelve people of varying age, fitness level and experience has been a thrill. May, June and July saw us on two wheels, on foot, and in horse-drawn carts as we travelled through the region, guided by local experts during one of the best wildflower seasons for years. We have danced with gypsies in apple orchards under a full moon, tasted a mass of shepherds’ cheese, wine and plenty of home-brewed plum brandy, or “palinka”. We have enjoyed wonderful picnics prepared by local friends on high meadows, stayed in charming homes and guest houses and, of course, had lots of incredible bike rides down remote valleys and through silent beech forests.

It has been a privilege to find this place and I am delighted to have explored so much of it with local friends and guests at our own pace, on two
wheels. And these days I do call myself a cyclist. Of course, I don’t fit the modern notion: lycra-clad and competitive. It’s not for me, that kind of cycling. Quite simply, I am a cyclist because I like to ride a bike. In a world that is obsessed by speed, a bicycle offers a wonderful opportunity to slow down, to take time to get under the skin of a place. Those are things we all need to do every now and again.

The Slow Cyclist operates tailor-made private and group trips in Transylvania and Rwanda, and is launching in Georgia in 2017. If you would like to know more visit www.theslowcyclist.co.uk or email Oli Broom on oli@theslowcyclist.co.uk

Oli has offered Idler readers a 5% discount.