

The Real Transylvania Beats the Fiction

Equi-distant between the European capitals of Hungary and Romania, the one-third of northwest Romania called Transylvania is more familiar as fiction than it is as fact. Until I visited the region myself, Bram Stoker's 1897 horror novel starring Count Dracula kept running interference in my mind. In real life I discovered that Stoker's unattractive model for Dracula, Prince Vlad the Impaler, ruled briefly in another part of medieval Romania, and that picturesque Bran Castle guarding the southern rim of Transylvania bears no record of Vlad even stopping for a meal there, never mind claiming it as his Gothic stronghold.

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Hungarian Culture Hangs On

Crossing the Romanian border from Hungary in a van with 14 fellow ElderTrekks (Eldertreks.com) we had early warning that our guide, Lajos Németh, was passionate for Transylvania's authentic village experiences envisioned by him and even by Britain's Prince Charles as a way for dwindling rural communities to earn money from grassroots tourism. From now on, Lajos enthused, we would be eating and drinking more in people's homes, barns and cellars than in restaurants!

Our first hosts were 600 villagers of the former gold mining village of Rimetea, as the Romanians call it or Torockó as Hungarian Transylvanians call it. Many towns and villages in Transylvania have two names because the region was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire until World War I. Then the western allies gave it to Romania as a reward for siding with them instead of Germany or Austria. Undeterred, generations of Hungarian Transylvanians still cling to their differences with pride, including settlement names and language.

With cobbled streets still featuring as many horse carts as motor vehicles, we made daily excursions by van and on foot. We walked to ruined medieval fortresses, and learned the intricacies of making delicate, delicious chimney cakes at the home bakery of an elderly couple who supply the whole village. We visited an exquisite hand-carved Romanian Orthodox Monastery with three resident monks, one who had left a successful Internet technology career for a contemplative life.

From another village, Enlaka, we walked to the summer pastures of the village's entire sheep herd and sampled unpasteurized cheeses being made in a simple shed. We watched the last blacksmith in a large region working at his country forge, and we met a soot-covered, charcoal-making family preparing hardwood pyramids to smoulder into a good income of briquets weeks later.

Where Did All the Saxons Go?

Eight hundred years ago, Saxon German settlement in parts of Transylvania brought a cultural richness as well as a highly-skilled, well-educated ethnic minority to the region. Their legacy of architectural and cultural treasures stand today as protected United Nations World Heritage Sites, including imposing fortified churches such as Biertan and medieval fortress towns like Sighișoara. Theirs was a turbulent time of barbarian invaders from the east followed by Ottoman Turk assaults. Impressively, the Saxons took on all challenges to their towns and villages while living graciously and creatively.



Then in 1990, 750,000 Saxon Romanians made an astonishing voluntary exodus back to Germany leaving behind homes, businesses, and just 30,000 fellow Saxons to sustain 800 years of Transylvania heritage. Naturally, Romanians, Moldovans and Roma (gypsies) from the south and east arrived to occupy vacated homes and farms, and more recently Prince Charles of Great Britain became a leading international champion of Saxon villages. He is renovating and traditionally re-furnishing 18th century homes in economically-impooverished villages, renting them to visitors to encourage rural tourism.

Before exiting Transylvania for Romania's capital, Bucharest, I toured the real Bran Castle. Bracing for fairytale disappointment, I was in fact delighted with the petite, authentically-furnished fortress. Guarding a steep mountain pass as it has since 1385, the only horror I detected was a gauntlet of merchants selling Count Dracula souvenirs between the parking lot and the castle entrance.



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