



FRANCESCO LAURICCI FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL. MAP: JASON LEE

WHEN IN ROMANIA The grounds of Transylvania's 7-year-old Inn on Balaban, modeled after a traditional country house.

Transylvania Doesn't Bite

The Romanian region made famous by a Gothic ghoul is far more inviting than many necks of the woods

BY DYAN MACHAN

MY HUSBAND and I shifted our locally built Dacia into gear at dusk, setting out on a two-hour drive north from Bucharest, Romania's capital, to Transylvania, a mountainous region in the center of the country. A mist turned into ravaging rain just as the road turned twisty and treacherous near the Carpathian Mountain pass.

Romanian friends told us this area of medieval villages and fortified churches had little to do with the fiction of "Dracula," yet the night was turning into a vampirish cliché. In his 1897 novel, the Irish writer Bram Stoker described the Carpathian pass as "an imaginative whirlpool" where every known superstition gathered. I saw how he

might get that idea.

Our windshield wipers at max, we soldiered on toward our hotel in Bran, a small town that's also home to Bran Castle, otherwise known as Dracula's Castle. Though it remains the country's largest tourist attraction, the castle might disappoint true fans of the famous bloodsucker: Yes, it fits Stoker's description of the fictitious count's humble abode, but Vlad the Impaler, the 15th-century prince who some scholars say inspired the character, lived in another principality. More interested in the real Transylvania, past and present, we had planned to spend a few days driving around the region, where several picturesque villages lie within easy driving distance from one another.

Exhausted and relieved, we finally pulled up to our first

hotel eager for a glass of plum brandy we heard Romanian hoteliers often provide arriving guests. But the proprietor behind the counter wore a thin smile. I had confused one of the dates of our stay and he was displeased. We were brusquely shown to an available room; no brandy was offered.

In the morning, after deciding to save the obligatory visit to Bran Castle for another day, we set out to explore Brasov, a neighboring town to Bran and one of the seven citadel cities established by Teutonic knights in 1211. Transylvania, an autonomous principality long ago, adheres to its own history distinct from Romania's; for centuries, it was yanked back and forth by the Hungarians, Austrians and Romanians. Germans too, or Saxons as they



BRAN IDENTITY Bran Castle, aka Dracula's Castle.

are known here, settled in the region, dominating its well-to-do merchant class. They built the most striking houses with ornate carving, pastel-washed facades and windows flanked by wood shutters. These dwellings stand out like orchids in the field of more practically built Romanian-style homes encircling the wide Brasov square. We strolled over to the dripping Gothic Black Church, where a life-size statue of a boy peers eerily above the entrance. On the edge of Brasov sit squat Communist-built apartment buildings, and just beyond we passed horse-driven wagons, fields dotted with haystack domes and sheep tended by shepherds on cellphones.

At the suggestion of Alex Priscu, the personable marketing manager for Bran Castle and our volunteer guide for the day, we planned to stop for lunch at the Country Hotel, in the neighboring town of Harman. Feeling peckish, I suggested we drop in early. But Mr. Priscu was firm: "We may not appear

prior to 1:30 because the chef was cooking us slow food." It was grown slowly and cooked slowly and we would appear slowly.

At the appointed time, we crossed the front porch of the Country Hotel, past piles of autumn squash and sprawls of overgrown grape vines, and straight into the kitchen

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to meet our hostess, the chef-innkeeper, Marcela Cosnean. Pots of herbs and dainty antiques lined the windowsills as Ms. Cosnean dished out portions from a porcelain tureen full of root vegetable soup glistening with pumpkin seed oil. After she served us the soup in the adjoining dining room, Ms. Cosnean, who lived in the U.S. but returned home to open this abundantly charming guesthouse and res-

taurant, brought out pork loin with home-harvested peppers and tomatoes, dishes of cooked cabbage and a cauliflower gratin bursting with flavor. "Give love to your vegetables, they love you back," she said. Quaffing local blackberry-scented wine stoked us for exploring Harman in the afternoon.

The town highlight is a 13th-century fortified church built by German settlers leery of Tatar raiders. Something of a local specialty, 150 such fortresses are found throughout Transylvania. Rather than erect walls around the entire village, settlers fortified churches where townspeople and their livestock could huddle for safety. Harman's church had an iron-toothed gate that could dispel, one imagines, any fire-breathing dragon that might find its way there.

Back on the highway, on our way to the Inn on Balaban, a guesthouse near Bran that was situated down a dirt road, our Dacia nearly disappeared into a pothole the size of a goat. The inn, built in 2010 but modeled on a traditional Romanian peasant house down to its wooden pegs, is filled with folk-style hand-painted furniture and surrounded by mountain views. A large, wooden pen on the property harbors livestock, protecting them from bears and wolves. When we asked the hotel manager about the bumps on the road, she was nonplussed. "What bumps?" she said, conjuring the scene from the film "Young Frankenstein" in which the disfigured Igor is asked about his obvious hump and deadpans: "What hump?"

Guesthouses, we know now, are the way to go in Transylvania. At Cincsor Guest House in the tiny village of Cincsor, our next overnight stay, owners Michael and Carmen Schuster artfully renovated a former parish house and religious school in 2008. A stone's throw away is a 1421 fortified Romanesque church that still holds services.

When, on our last day, we finally made it to Bran Castle, tour buses mobbed the parking lot. But inside, hidden passageways, cavernous rooms and age-old bearing justified its popularity. An enormous bear rug sprawled across the floor of the music room; its eyes followed us as we snaked through.

We learned little about Dracula as we toured the house, but picked up several other colorful tales about Bran Castle. One is how its one-time inhabitant Queen Marie of Romania so adored the castle she had her heart cut out to remain there. Her heart was put in a jeweled case and buried in the castle grounds. The box with her heart has since been moved, but the story was testimony to a deeply romantic act of a time gone by. To my taste, that beats a vampire tale any day.

THE LOWDOWN // TRAIPSING THROUGH TRANSYLVANIA

GETTING THERE Most flights from New York to the Romanian capital of Bucharest make a stop in Western Europe. The drive from Bucharest to Brasov is 100 miles. Several airlines also fly from European cities directly to Sibiu in Transylvania. Either way, you'll want to rent wheels to explore. The local bespoke travel company Beyond Dracula can help with arrangements and suggestions (beyonddracula.com).

STAYING THERE With 360-degree views of the Carpathian Mountains and plenty of room to roam, the Inn on Balaban, near Brasov, is as good a place as any to unplug (from about \$177 a night, including breakfast and dinner, gobtf.com/innonbalaban/home). The Country Hotel, once a Saxon estate in Harman, offers charmingly furnished rooms and

home-cooked meals; non-guests can arrange to stop by for lunch. The proprietress also arranges food-themed tours (from about \$83 a night; 40-740-090-987). The Cincsor Guest House, in the tiny town of Cincsor, has 13 rooms, all decorated with a stylish airiness (from about \$70 a night, transylvania-cincsor.ro/en).



CASTLES, COUNTS AND A PRINCE

Though its connection to Stoker's Count Dracula is dubious, Bran Castle remains a trippy adventure through ancient times (bran-castle.com). Peles Castle, in Sinaia, has a shorter timeline but more storybook grandeur (peles.ro). In northern Transylvania, the U.K.'s Prince Charles, a descendant of Vlad the Impaler, adopted and lovingly preserved the village of Viscri (viscri25.ro).