

Weekend long reads

Europe holidays

Transylvania's growing reputation as the new Tuscany

Ancient Saxon villages and rustic cuisine are luring travellers to the bucolic region in Romania

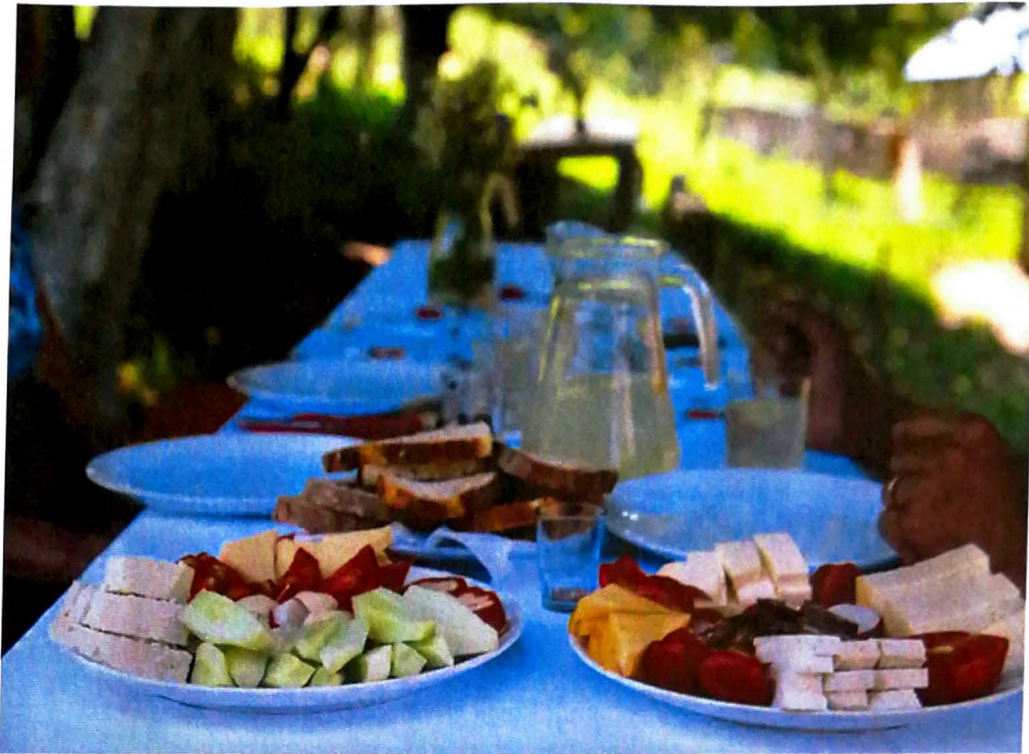
Andrew Eames AN HOUR AGO

It was an Italian, the son of a count, who aired the idea. Transylvania, said Giulio da Sacco, was the new Tuscany.

We were tucking into an al fresco lunch beside a Transylvanian sheepfold, talking about the increasing appeal of this relatively obscure region of eastern Europe to a certain kind of traveller. The moment he mentioned Tuscany, I looked again at our immediate surroundings. The long, linen-covered table under shady oaks in a valley of wildflower meadows, above an Italian-sounding village — Floresti — of elderly ochre-tiled houses dominated by an ancient, fortified church, shimmering in the summer sun. Yes, this could be Tuscany, by another name.

And at another price, too. On the table were nine different types of freshly made cheese — goat's, sheep's and cow's — with tomatoes, peppers and bread made with potato flour. There was grilled goat on the fire, which we were going to have with polenta, known here as *mamaliga*. All made by the shepherd and his wife, just for us, for the princely sum of €10 a head.

So I could see what Giulio meant. I could close my eyes and imagine myself in "Chiantishire", especially as the colourless liquid in my glass, a homemade plum brandy called *palinka*, had enough velocity to fly me there all by itself.



Al fresco lunch © Andrew Eames

Until 100 years ago Transylvania was part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, but at the end of the first world war it was handed over to Romania, trapping hundreds of thousands of German-speaking Saxons behind a new border. The Saxon villages, and their lifestyles, were preserved in aspic by the change.

Floresti, aka Felsendorf, was one of them. The village, along with hundreds of others, was once home to self-sufficient Saxon farmers, craftsmen and winemakers. But after years of persecution under the communist regime, the vast majority left in a hurry as soon as the borders started to open during the 1980s and 1990s, leaving swaths of empty houses behind them. Now an increasing flow of foreigners are picking up the slack, attracted by an unspoilt bucolic world.

Seeing that I was intrigued by the whole “new Tuscany” idea, Giulio, who is married to a Romanian, volunteered to show me “his” village.



Apafi manor in Malancrav © Gelu Toaipa

En route, he developed his Italian analogy. Tuscany, he said, had been discovered as a holiday destination by the British aristocracy doing the Grand Tour. Transylvania, similarly, has attracted posh Brits led by Prince Charles, who has bought several houses here, visits every year and is a massive enthusiast for its pristine state. "The prince has been a gift from God," said Giulio. "He is making this place cool." Other movers and shakers are from the British aristocracy too: William Blacker, author of *Along the Enchanted Way* and old Etonian who has houses in both Transylvania and, yes, Tuscany; and Jessica Douglas-Home, chairperson of the Mihai Eminescu Trust, an organisation that has been steadily buying up handsome, empty Saxon houses, restoring them and renting them out as holiday homes, more of which later.

Giulio's village, Mesendorf, seems very sleepy when we arrive. There are more horses and carts than cars, and few of either. Many of the houses are still unoccupied, and they can be irresistibly inexpensive, he says. So far he has bought four, starting from as little as €10,000, and he has plans to buy the old school and maybe even open a restaurant here. He already has an Italian restaurant, Grano, in Bucharest, but Mesendorf is where he wants to live with his children: "My wife made me fall in love with all this stuff. This is my new tribe. I breathe and sleep and do everything better here."



Saxon houses in Malancrav, a village that dates from the 14th century © Andrew Eames

Like all other Saxon villages — and unlike hilltop Tuscany — Mesendorf nestles in a valley, its houses arranged on either side of a stream in an orderly herringbone of ochre roofs. In fact, these villages are so orderly that if you peer down from the tower of any of their churches it looks as if the Almighty had decreed that Transylvania's valley bottoms should have parquet flooring.

The houses themselves are very appealing. Their stuccoed gable ends are pastel-painted, often with some kind of scrollwork flourish and religious motif, and between each is a high wall with a formidable gateway, protecting a large interior courtyard where family life is led; that courtyard extends rearward to a finger of orchard and vegetable garden sufficient to feed the household.

Tracking down the owners of these places can be tricky, especially when they may be unaware it is theirs. In Mesendorf's neighbour village, Saschiz, I meet Jim Turnbull, a Scot who paid €20,000 for his house, including all its furniture, but only established its ownership after making inquiries among the remaining locals and the "Summer Saxons" — families who return once a year. "When the Saxons left, they couldn't even give their houses away. In 2010 when we first arrived here, the village was full of empty places." It transpired that his property's original owner had died in Germany, so Turnbull, who has a fruit preserves and gin business based particularly on the prolific wild elderflower, had to find the owner's sons and get them registered as official heirs before he could buy it.



This kind of detective work has been par for the course over in the village of Richis, some 30 miles west, where I'd heard that some 11 different nationalities had settled. They've done so partly at the instigation of Paul Hemmerth, a German of Transylvanian heritage I meet within the walls of his Casa Noah, two original side-by-side houses that he has converted into eclectic guest accommodation. Many of Richis's new residents originally stayed with him as guests, fell in love with the place, and asked him to help them find properties for themselves.

Hemmerth tells the story of how he tracked down one of Casa Noah's original owners to Germany, to return some old black-and-white photographs he'd found during renovations. It wasn't the happy moment that he'd envisaged. "He tore them up without looking at them and threw them in the fire. The memories of leaving were too painful."

Fortunately, you don't have to buy one of these houses to experience them. I am staying in the village of Crit, whose huge fortified church dates back to the 15th century, with its caretaker Dietmar one of only six Saxons left in the community. The place has an age-old rhythm: in the early morning the herdsman comes through town, cracking his whip, the signal for householders to open their gates and release their cows into his care. Then comes the rattling of

- the horse-carts bringing the churns to the milk collection point, followed by the cry of the fruit and vegetable man, doing the rounds in his van.

I am in an old Saxon house directly opposite the church, one of a stable of traditional houses restored by the Mihai Eminescu Trust, and rented out via its agency Experience Transylvania. There's an Amish-like simplicity to its interiors: floorboards and rough-hewn wardrobes, basic bathrooms and embroidery on the walls that spell out heartfelt messages in old German. "*Wenn du im Herzen Frieden hast, wird dir die Hütte zum Palast*", reads one ("If you have peace in your heart, even the smallest hut becomes a palace").

Each of Experience Transylvania's properties has its own housekeeper, and here Sorina brings me breakfast every day, a plateful of eggs, local goat's cheese, cucumber and tomatoes, bread and homemade jams, coffee and a jug of elderflower juice, for €5. One evening I also request dinner (€11), and she brings a starter of vegetable soup followed by smoked sausage on cheesy polenta, accompanied by *palinka* so disguised in a crochet-wrapped bottle that I don't quite know how much I've drunk — until I almost fall off my chair.

Next door to me on one side is La Hansi, a converted farm which offers lovely traditional guestrooms and an airy barn for breakfast, and beyond the church is Casa Kraus, a new-build option for those who simply must have boutique bathrooms in their overnight accommodation. There's a huge amount of choice for such a small place.

So much for the accommodation. But if you come here, instead of Tuscany, what can you actually do? Tuscany, after all, has Florence and Siena, and a whole raft of cultural attractions.

Transylvania's equivalents are a bit more limited, although many of its 150-odd fortified churches are Unesco-registered. The territory has the handsome old towns of Sighisoara and Sibiu, the former a walled hilltop citadel surrounded by towers where Vlad Dracula was born, which makes it very popular with tourists. But the main prize is surely just being here: roaming up into the forest on wildflower-lined footpaths, renting a bicycle to bump along back lanes in an odyssey of villages, or hiring a horse-cart to take you out into the hills for a picnic. The simple things.



There are more horses and carts than cars in Transylvania © Andrew Eames

There is a developing formal cultural agenda too, and for my final stop on my Tuscany-Transylvania quest, I find myself in the library of a manor house on a hillside above the **ancient** village of Malancrav. I've selected a concert from the schedule of the Icon Arts festival, which makes a speciality out of staging events in the Saxon villages. As far as I can see it's a mix of student and professional musicians, with pianists, guitarists and opera singers performing a compendium of recognisable classics and original pieces. Unexpectedly, the concert ends with a pair of Japanese musicians tackling a new composition from a Chinese composer, who is sitting directly behind me.

Afterwards, both musicians and audience mingle outside in a circle of chestnut trees to one side of the manor house lawn. Here a row of trestle tables groan under mounds of cabbage-wrapped pork, aubergine salads and goats cheeses rolled in caraway seeds, all made by the women of the village.

It's a summer's evening. The sound of dogs barking and horse-carts rattling comes drifting up the valley. The Chinese composer has started to tell me his story. There's local wine.

I predict that this place will give Tuscany a good run for its money.

Details

Andrew Eames stayed in Crit courtesy of Experience Transylvania, whose houses in the Saxon villages rent from €30pp per night

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