

ROMANIA-OCTOBER 1ST-8TH 2013

The air is biting cold. Snow forms abstract linear patterns on the branches of trees, as the mountain falls down to the valley stretching far below. Behind are the shouts of track-suit clad herdsmen and the ringing of cattle bells. The snow has fallen early this year and the stock has to be driven down to the lower pastures. Later passing through the Biraz Gorges the road becomes narrower and narrower. The grey limestone cliffs lower above, almost meeting to encircle us. A huge outcrop carries a dominating cross. The river bounces down its stony passageway. Here there are more herdsmen with their brown lowing cattle and complaining sheep. Any two way flow of traffic is now impossible. The coach hesitatingly tries to nudge around them.

These are the Carpathian Mountains in Romania where we spent a week, traveling over 2,000 kilometres and visiting the regions of Wallachia, Transylvania and Moldova. It is a land of these challenging contrasts.

Horses and carts transport goods and people almost as frequently as petrol powered vehicles. In one field the men are cutting crops with scythes: in the next a tractor is working. On one side of the road is a grey concrete skeleton of a pre -1989 factory: on the other the original product is now being processed in a new modern factory, financed by foreign investment.

The old ways dominate the majority of the agricultural production in these regions. Houses cluster together in small hamlets. Each is organised in rigid strip formations like medieval messages. The plot is gated and the house faces inward looking onto its own smallholding. The back of each house forms a wall for the side of the next smallholding. Styles are varied and charming to the western eye, but the formation of land and house remain the same. Outside of the villages the fields follow the same small strip pattern. Decollectivisation created myriads of these small individually owned plots.

In hot Autumn sunshine we eat apples and taste apple juice in a small neo-classical villa, which once belonged to the feudal Apafi family. This is Malancrov, a small village amongst the now burning brown, green and red foothills of Transylvania. Here returning to traditional methods of farming is celebrated, and older varieties of organically produced apples have been reintroduced. They sell the juice in the local region and have some outlets in Bucharest.

The Mihai Eminescu Trust has been active in the area. Villagers have been taught traditional skills to restore their houses. They have been encouraged to weave and embroider. They have linked into the rural regeneration scheme to create locally owned pensions.

To the tourist the rural countryside is indeed picturesque. Yet it is twenty-three years since the overthrow of Ceausescu, but agricultural methods seem to have returned to a pre-second world war model in the areas we visited. The produce is organically grown, primarily because there has been no money to introduce other

methods. There can be no eco-celebration of the approach to the deforestation of the woods in these mountains. The bulk is being sold abroad in a laissez-faire manner and in its unprocessed state.

The former orthodoxy has gone to be replaced by a far older one. Local communities have restored their old churches and built new ones. Romanian Orthodox, Catholic and Lutheran churches dominate the landscape with domes and spires. Crosses abound by the road side; on people's houses or in their gardens.

But above all there is the Carpathian landscape itself. It is spectacular with its towering snow-capped mountains; its rolling foothills; the wide river plains and narrower gorges.

Invasions and plundering from the Ukrainian Steppes, the sovereignty of the Ottoman and Magyar Empires have dominated the buildings in these regions. The influence of much of the construction is Saxon. The Magyars used their expertise to both defend the lands and develop artisan skills and trading. There are amazing fortified painted churches; amazing fortified unpainted churches; amazing fortified castles and amazing fortified cities.

Only after the 1918 Treaty of Versailles did Little Romania absorb these outlying regions. Especially in Transylvania there is a dynamic imprint of the Austro-Hungarian Empire with a riot of Art Nouveau detailing.

For those interested in sputnik architecture there are plenty of renovated and unrenovated apartment and civic blocks, as well as a scattering of Social Realist sculptures.

The tourist industry is still to capture the numbers of the Czech Republic, Poland and now Hungary. Foreign chains have created good quality European standard hotels. The cost of food and drink is very attractive.

Meanwhile the Romanians themselves slowly find their modus operandi in the twenty-first century.

So, as the women pickle their cucumbers and watch the hens scavenging for food in the yard, McDonalds is prospering in the retail park outside Sibiu.