

Discover Transylvania's romantic side

Sibiu is setting its sights on Unesco heritage status

Isobel Shepherd Smith



The snowcapped Carpathian Mountains rise above Sibiu's cobbled streets and vibrantly coloured medieval houses

Transylvania conjures up the usual clichés but its snowcapped Carpathian Mountains also embrace one of Romania's most romantic and historic cities. Sibiu still carries the scars of Nicolae Ceaucescu's regime but since it became European Capital of Culture (with Luxembourg) in 2007, it has worked hard to overcome its chequered past.

The roads leading to town pass through rural landscapes reminiscent of a bygone agricultural age: horse-drawn carts, fields of potatoes and sweeping banks of snowdrops. Derelict Saxon villages that cry out for preservation orders, and Roma settlements, identifiable by their unplastered walls, appear intermittently, close to the roadside. This is bear country but none is to be seen, only imminent signs of storks with nests perched precariously on terracotta chimney pots.

Closer in, communist-era blocks of flats serve as a reminder of its brutal history (nearly 100 people died here during the 1989 revolution). But once inside what remains of the walls, the upper and lower Old Town is enchanting and its cobbled streets and squares are easy to get around on foot. Many of the medieval buildings are painted in vibrant colours and some of the roof tiles are works of art in themselves.

Of 39 watchtowers, which were built and maintained by various guilds, only three remain. Scenes from *The Reader* were filmed here and the city is becoming known for its cultural events. It also has its own orchestra and Brukenthal Museum is the oldest in Romania, with works by Rubens and Van Dyck.

Everywhere there are the ever-watchful eyes of Sibiu; these curious windows were built into the lofts to ventilate the larders underneath the rooftops. Food is hearty, plentiful and meaty and representative of the country's past: Saxon, German and Hungarian. Almost every dish is pork-based with the odd bit of mutton thrown in; lots of pickle, cheese, not many greens. The only fruit was in a sauce on papanași, a deliciously sweet dumpling.

Making up for the fat attack are the delicious wines, particularly the reds. Service is slow, so slow that in one restaurant it was midnight before the main course was finished. Smoking is also rife. At one cellar restaurant a sign positively welcomed smokers.

A few kilometres from the city centre, in Dumbrava Forest, is the open-air Astra museum, dedicated to keeping alive folk tradition. Farther afield is a trout farm, where your catch is cooked on the spot, and an ice hotel in the mountains, weather permitting.

Hotels are plentiful and most of the usual suspects are represented, including the four-star Ramada Sibiu, with its well-appointed suites and views of the mountains and where single rooms with breakfast are from £139 a night and doubles from £159. The hotel has a fitness centre, restaurant and Jazzy Bar and is within easy walking distance of the historic district.

Sibiu has applied for Unesco World Heritage status for its historic centre and squares. Fly from London via Munich with Lufthansa, which offers

return fares from £149. It is well worth it because the city is an extraordinary slice of European history and makes for a riveting weekend away.

And if you really want to see Vlad, go to the walled fortress town of Sighisoara (a Unesco World Heritage Site), where you can visit the house where he was born and gaze at his bust behind the church of the Dominican monastery.

● www.turism.sibiu.ro
 ● www.ramada.co.uk - 0800 1000783
 ● www.lufthansa.com - 0671 9459747

Venture out from a luxury lodge to enjoy the forest

Communing with nature without roughing it is becoming increasingly popular as comfortable lodges spring up in forests in the UK, Sue Mallia writes.

The latest crop is 12 luxury cedar lodges that make up The Sherwood Hideaway, nestled in Sherwood Forest on the Thoresby Estate in Nottinghamshire. The operators have aimed to create a boutique hotel-style atmosphere for guests seeking a tranquil retreat, where they can hide away or explore the countryside.

Each lodge has a state-of-the-art kitchen, a wood-burning stove, deck and flatscreen TV. Some have outdoor hot tubs but guests receive a discount on treatments at the spa in Thoresby Hall Hotel, within the park. The more energetic can cycle or walk for miles along trails and paths on the estate.

Prices for long weekends in June start at £590 for a two-bedroom lodge sleeping four (check in at 4pm on Friday and depart by 10am Monday). A week starts at £835 on the same basis. Two dogs are allowed in each lodge at an extra charge of £40 a dog.

Cabins in woodland and lochside sites on Forestry Commission estates are also available from Forest Holidays. Each site has a ranger and activities include night treks to spy on bats and owls. Bicycles can also be hired.

The cost of a four-night midweek break in a four-bedroom Golden Oak Plus cabin, sleeping eight, in the Forest of Dean, has been reduced by 50 per cent to £626 for arrivals this Monday or on June 21. A break of the same length starting on June 20 at either the Cropton or Keldy sites on the edge of the North York Moors National Park costs £343 in a two-bedroom Silver Birch cabin sleeping four. Both types of cabins have hot tubs and guests can take dogs for an extra £6 a night.

● www.sherwoodhideaway.com
 ● www.forestholidays.co.uk/cabins

Late deals Three nights' full board at a New Forest inn for £269; a week's B&B in Majorca from £299; 14 nights in Phuket, Thailand, for £699

British Isles

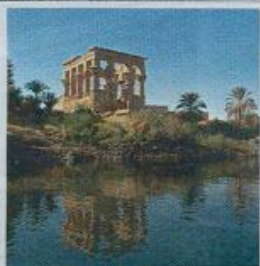
● Watch a fisherman pluck your lobster from waters off the Roseland Peninsula, Cornwall, then learn how to cook and dress it before it is served to you with wine on a terrace overlooking the sea. Lobster Catch & Cook weekends are on offer this month at the 17th-century Luggar Hotel, nestled in a cove at Portloe. Guests can also fish for sea bass and mackerel. The package costs £440 for two people for two nights and includes another dinner and breakfast both days. 01872 501322

● More culinary treats are in store at the Bridport Food Festival in Dorset. Arrive at Briar Cottage, in a quiet village four miles from the market town, on Friday, June 17, in time to enjoy the carnival atmosphere of the closing celebrations the next day. A week's stay at the cottage, which sleeps six, costs £603 through Classic Cottages. 01326 555555

● Enjoy a taste of summer at the Cheltenham Food & Drink Festival, while staying near by at a 17th-century manor house in the Gloucestershire countryside. A two-night weekend break at Hatherley Manor Hotel, which is set in 37 acres, starts at £100 B&B from June 17 to 19, which coincides with the festival, and from June 24 to 26. 01452 730217

● The grand Victorian hotel in Harrogate where Agatha Christie hid away in 1926 has an attractive offer this month to lure today's guests. A double room for two people at The Old Swan Hotel, including dinner, breakfast and a bottle of wine, is now £119 a night, saving almost £100, when booked through classiclodges.co.uk. The hotel, in five

Book early...



Book now to save more than £200 on a seven-night Nile cruise on the four-star *MS Magic*, cutting the price to £579. The Hayes & Jarvis offer is for departures on September 19 and includes meals and Egyptair flights out of Heathrow. 0844 4151918

acres of gardens, is a short walk from the centre of the spa town. 0845 6038892

● Stay three nights for the price of two at The Montagu Arms in the New Forest National Park this month and July. Guests at the four-star 17th-century inn in the Hampshire village of Beaulieu pay £269, which includes breakfast, dinner in the Michelin-starred restaurant on two nights, a cream tea on arrival and a bottle of champagne. Book with Pride of Britain Hotels. 0800 0893929

Short haul

● Fly to Turkey on Monday and 14 nights in a boutique hotel on the Datca Peninsula. In the South West, costs just £567 B&B, a saving of £563. The Asina Hotel sits on a hilltop overlooking the Mediterranean and is within easy reach by taxi of the picturesque Old Town and its little harbour, a popular port of call for yachts. Flights are from Gatwick with Anatolian Sky Holidays. 08445 719128

● Get together a party of friends or family and stay in an attractively converted farmhouse in the mountains of Valinco, Corsica. Based on six sharing, the price per person has been cut to £449 for seven nights from June 19. £410 off Corsican Places' original price. Choose between the Bergerie Murtetu

and the Bergerie Olivella in Olmeto. Both have three bedrooms and a pool and are available on a self-catering basis. Flights are between Gatwick and Ajaccio or Heathrow and Figari. 0845 3302113

● Cities Direct has a three-night break in Berlin for £259 B&B departing from Gatwick on June 21. Stay at the four-star Golden Tulip Berlin Hotel Hamburg in the Tiergarten area. 01242 536900

● Make sure the Guggenheim Museum is top of your sightseeing list on a three-night city break in Bilbao, priced from £269 room only. The package with Corona Holidays, the Spanish specialist, includes the four-star Hotel Barceló Avenida and flights from Stansted. Depart on June 24. 01582 390939

● Corona is also offering a week in the pleasant resort of Puerto de Sóller, on the northwest coast of Majorca, from £299 B&B. The hotel, the three-star Sulair Palace Hotel, is set on the slope of a hill just above the old fishing harbour. Fly from Stansted on July 5. 01582 390930

● Stay seven nights on the Greek island of Zakynthos (Zante) from £286 B&B through lowcostholidays.com. Depart from Gatwick on June 20 and stay at the three-star Hotel Captains/Commodore Complex near the centre of Argassi. 0800 116271

● Save up to £450 on a seven-night fly-cruise of ports in Scandinavia on Holland America's *MS Ryndam*. Prices start from £699 when departing on June 26 and include flights between Gatwick and Rotterdam, where the trip begins and ends. The ship calls at Helsingborg, Copenhagen, Skagen and Oslo. Book with idealcruising.com. 0845 2961832

Long haul

● Pay only half the cost of a 14-night holiday at the four-star Kata Beach Resort & Spa on the southwest coast of Phuket in Thailand, now reduced to £699 B&B by Hayes & Jarvis. Depart on June 29 with Thai Airways from Heathrow. 0844 4151918

● A swim with dolphins is included during a seven-night luxury self-catering holiday in Cancún, Mexico, departing from Gatwick on June 19 with theholidayplace.co.uk. Stay at the Royal Cancún on the beachfront from £869. 020-7644 1755
 Sue Mallia

All prices on this page are per person based on two travelling together and sharing a room unless stated otherwise.