# Translyvania Live

## Touring Feature-Riding through Romania

Cycle Torque's Chris Pickett took off to deepest, darkest Transylvania, and when he came back he could still stand daylight.



*Outside the salt mine, ready for a week of riding.*

**Transylvania 's touring charms include amazing scenery, ancient architecture, crumbling soviet-era infrastructure and great food, Oh, yeah, there's also some great riding roads and driving a stake through the undead to make them dead, too…**

My wife Kerrie and I were there as guests of tour company Transylvania Live, having accepted their offer of a seven-day tour: I'd had to convince Kerrie the place was not fictional first though: Transylvania is a region of Northern Romania. Once I told her we would be staying in Count Dracula's castle for a night she became a definite starter. She's watched too many Twilight movies I think. Organising it all was easy via email, and although I'll have to admit I was a bit sceptical about it all being kosher I was prepared to give it a go and book flights etc. Plus, when I mentioned

the trip to my good mate Glen, he invited himself and his wife Sue along for the journey, and if Glen got ripped off I knew I'd never hear the end of it. Glen and Sue headed off two weeks before us for a bit of a European holiday and we met in Munich the day before our Transylvanian tour.

**Day One**

When we arrived in Cluj Napoca in Romania, and right in the heartland of Transylvania, our tour guide Alin Todea was there to greet us, which to be honest was a wonderful thing to see. We got to meet the other member of the tour, Geoff Thomas, a freelance journo' representing The Rider's Digest from the UK, so it was to be six people on four bikes, including Alin. He told us he likes to keep the groups small so they are easy to guide, but he can, and has, catered for much larger groups.

Travelling in the backup van from the airport into Cluj Napoca was an experience. I'd never been to an Eastern European country before and in Cluj Napoca you can see the remnants of communist rule, what Alin called, 'Stalinist Architecture', row after row of identical concrete



*The former salt mine, just outside Turda, is now a tourist attraction. Check out the row boats at the bottom of the shaft.*

housing blocks. I'd seen it on television before but to see it in the flesh is something else. It was almost as if you expected to be seeing it in black and white, at least that's how I remember it on TV. The weather was a balmy 30 degrees or so, and the beautiful young ladies walking around the city competed with the architecture for my, and Glen's, attention.

We arrived at a house in the city where Alin informed me one of us would have to ride the BMW F 650 GS to our first overnight stay at Turda, some 30 kilometres away. Negotiating with drivers who don't worry about lanes was another 'first' experience. Another thing I did notice was the difference in wealth: Audis and flash BMWs sharing road space with Dacias and old Renaults.

When we arrived at Turda we booked into a nice hotel and shortly after Alin took us on a short ride to a massive gorge on the outskirts of town, funnily enough called the Turda Gorge. This was

an eye opener and a taste of roads outside of the major city. Much of the housing and infrastructure is in a very rundown state, sort of like your next door neighbour who's been owner-building his house for the last 20 years and hasn't done a very good job. But to be honest this was part of the whole experience I was looking for, and I really enjoyed it. We were to find out later that home owners don't pay tax for their house if it's incomplete, so houses tend to stay that way for many years, if not forever. It then absolutely pissed down and hailed on us but the gorge was a special visual treat.

To cap off day one we had a great meal supplied by Transylvania Live, met the rest of the crew for the first time and were treated to a traditional ceremony where the undead are made dead by driving a stake through the heart. Don't worry, no vampires were killed during the ceremony. I was excited about learning more of the Romanian culture and fellow riders and hosts. Over a few beers, and Vampire Punch, I learned that Geoff basically sold everything he owned, bought a Triumph Tiger and did the 'Long Way Round' trip, inspired by well known travellers Ted Simon, Charley Boorman and Ewan McGregor. As part of the grieving process when both his parents died he placed their ashes on the bike and took them as well. He'd only recently got back from spending three months living on next to nothing in Asia, something he continued to do on our trip.

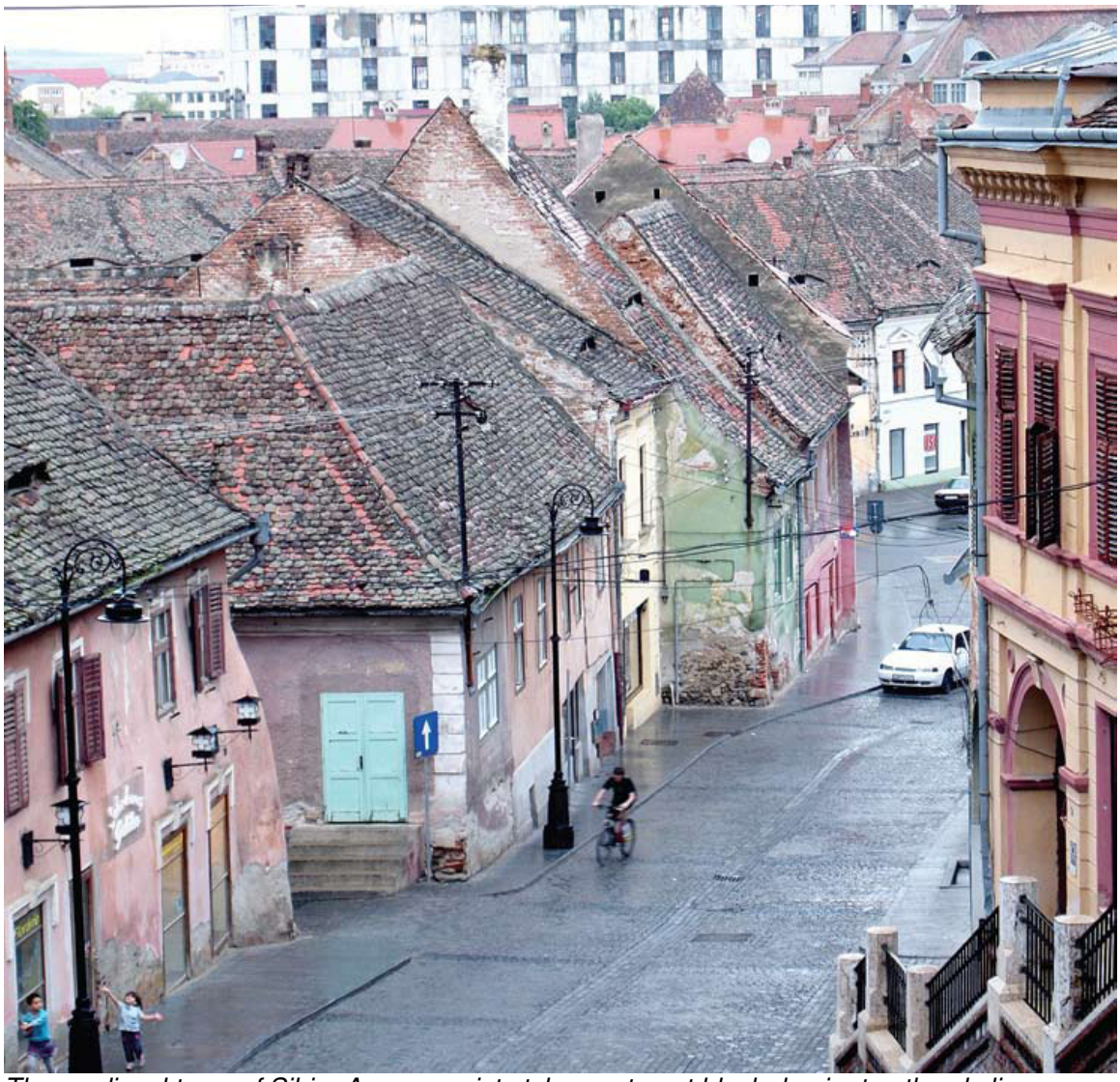
*Footnote 1: The Romanian drivers aren't as bad as the Internet bloggers said they were.*

*Footnote 2: Romanian people are very friendly.*

**Day Two**

We left our hotel at Turda, and on the outskirts of town we visited an old salt mine which has been turned into a tourist attraction, complete with a number of amazing structures which look like alien spaceships. It was here you really notice the different levels of occupational health and safety, with dodgy steps and so on through the salt mine. Once again I think this is part of the





*The medieval town of Sibiu. A communist style apartment block dominates the skyline.*

beauty of Transylvania, it is almost like one or two steps behind more developed countries and it takes you back to a time when things were simpler and people took responsibility for their own actions.

On from there we travelled towards the city of Medias via Ludus and Iernut visiting a World War II memorial. In Medias we met an 80-year-old former engineer turned artist/sculptor who showed us his works and took us to see a fortified church, where in medieval times the occupants could hole up if they were attacked. It's hard not to find the history overwhelming. Mr Emil Muresan is an amazing man and had so many ideas of future technology. He was very interested in our culture and what we thought of Romania. He is also a famous artist in Romania, and especially his own city. We got another torrential storm while in Medias and enjoyed a traditional meal in a restaurant while we waited out the storm.

From there we continued on to the Medieval city of Sibiu which has homes dating back to the 13th Century. We arrived there in the evening while still light, it doesn't get dark until 9pm or thereabouts in summer. Sibiu is known as the City of Culture and it's not hard to see why. It's hard to describe in words how beautiful Sibiu is, and being a Saturday evening it was packed with people enjoying the town square. We also visited a monument which took pride of place in the town square until 1945 when the Communists were going to destroy it. Overnight the Saxons (what Romanians call people of German extraction) removed the statue, which is about three

storeys high, through some small doorways into the square in the middle of a block of apartments. No-one really knows how it was done, and not many people even know where it is now because it sits on private property.
This is another reason why having a guide with so much knowledge is a major bonus on a trip like this.
It was hard to leave the historic Sibiu but we put on our waterproofs and headed out into the darkness towards Sibiel, about 30 minutes ride away, where we stayed at the Sibiel Hotel which was at the end of this stone road. I thought we were heading into the unknown and we came upon this fantastic hotel where we enjoyed some local beer and food -fantastic. Our rooms were like a scene out of Hansel and Gretel. Glen finally calmed down after his heart rate went through the roof on the slippery cobbled road we negotiated in the dark and rain.
*Footnote: I think Romanian drivers are a little crazy, well at least some of them are, especially on weekends.*

**Day Three**

We left Sibiel and headed back towards Sibiu where we filled up the bikes. I'll go back a step here and tell you why my wife Kerrie and I were on a BMW R 1200 GS, and not the F 650 GS machines the rest of the group were on. Back on our first night Alin held a lottery draw where you drew a number and selected whichever bike you wanted, depending on which number you picked. I got number four so that meant I had last choice. Geoff went for a yellow F 650, Alin for his personal red 650 and Glen for the 1200. Of course that meant I had the remaining 650. A few well placed words cured that though. Glen usually rides a cruiser and has no experience on the big adventure bikes, so I started talking about the tall seat being hard work in tight and dodgy conditions, especially two-up, how you have to be careful with ABS in the dirt and so on. Of course this isn't exactly true but his wife Sue let him know in no uncertain terms they would be riding the 650. So day three again saw us riding the 1200 – mission accomplished.
This was the day we experienced the Trans Fagarasului Highway, made famous in recent times by the British Top Gear program which saw the three presenters drive exotic sports cars through Transylvania and along the Trans Fagarasului. The road heads up into the mountains and was built back in the early '70s by the Romanian Army as a way of getting troops and machinery across the mountain range. It was feared Russia would invade Romania as it had done Czechoslovakia, and the then leader Nikolai Ceaucescu - incidentally shot on Christmas Day 1989 during the revolution - had the road built. Hundreds of troops were killed during construction of the road and it stands as a permanent monument to them. Because of Top Gear you will find many Romanian families and tourists trying out the highway as a Sunday drive, heading up to the highest point at the top of the snow covered mountain. The view is breathtaking, the road itself is a rider's paradise, and although the surface is a little rough in spots it is OK where it matters. On the way up I must have been shaking my head, as my wife asked me was I disappointed? It was the complete opposite. I was amazed. Once again it is hard to find the words to describe such beauty. A coffee at the top of the mountain topped off a great ride up. The girls then went in the car with Alin's lovely wife Hertha, and the boys got to play racer on the way back down.
From there we headed to the city of Brasov, again another city steeped in history. A lovely evening in the Medieval town square with local beer and food topped off this incredible day. At this stage we are all loving Romania. It was here we said goodbye to Alin and Hertha who had been our hosts so far. They both own the company and wanted us to experience other guides who work for them. It was sad to see them go, they are both extremely lovely and gracious people.
*Footnote: Felt like experiencing a little road rage with one Romanian driver in a BMW wagon. Mostly the drivers are fine, but you do get some who are very impatient.*

**Next month we get closer to Count Dracula.**




*Monument for soldiers who died building the highway. Yes, that is snow, and yes, it was cold.*

**Tour info: http://www.romania-tour.com/motorcycle.html**






**Day 4**

We said goodbye to Alin and Herta and said hello to Bogdan and Daniel. Bogdan kicked us off with a walking tour of Brasov, his home town. Bogdan is a solicitor, a history buff and motorcycle enthusiast. He also acts as a guide in a part-time gig. Maybe solicitors in Romania don't charge like the ones back home. His knowledge of Brasov was extensive and the tour was an insight into the history of the city, and indeed Romania.

From there we headed to a health and ski resort on the mountain top just outside of town. After that it was through a great winding forest road - where brown bears live incidentally - to Bran Castle. This is generally associated with The Count Dracula story but in reality has nothing to do with it. The only link with the Dracula myth is Vlad the Impaler apparently stopped two or three nights in this castle a number of centuries ago, and Bram Stoker did the rest. That doesn't stop souvenir shops selling everything to do with the fanged one. In the castle you get a full rundown of its history, including the fact it is falsely associated with dear old Vlad.

Last stop for the day was the walled citadel of Sighisoara where we stayed in this delightful hotel which is hundreds of years old itself - amazing. Sighisoara is actually the birth town of Vlad the Impaler. footnote: Love the local ale and tucker

**Day 5**

We started the day with a walk around the town, The only inhabited citadel in Romania. Included in this was a personal tour of the church which sits high up on the hill. When the church guide found out where we were from he said, "Gidday Mate!" From there we hot footed it to Bistrita for lunch, checked out the town by foot, and then travelled to a mountain resort some 50 kilometres outside the city.

Here we stayed at a hotel with a Count Dracula theme, including a basement show where we all got a fright when someone jumped out of the coffin during the show, and especially Glen who got grabbed in the dark. He squealed like a baby. It was pretty cold up in the mountains but it was a very enjoyable night, telling tales and singing songs with our guides. Young Daniel was quiet and not into '80s music but Bogdan is a head banger from way back.

One thing you find is that 100 kilometres takes much longer to travel than it does back here. It's not that the roads are bad, they aren't all good but then again many of the roads I've travelled in Australia are no better. Instead of towns being separated by open roads, you find they consist of a house either side of the road and countryside directly behind it, so one town tends to continue into the next. It's not all like this but it is hard to keep the speeds up at times.



**Day 6**

We woke to rain which was to continue for the whole day. Even though my crotch quickly got soaked despite me having good rain gear, this was one of the best days of the trip for me. We left the Vampire motel and headed to the region of Masemura. Along the way we visited an old enclosed wooden bridge in a small village, the only remaining one in Romania. While we were taking a few photos we were greeted by a local man, and the next thing you know we were invited into another lady's home, drinking Polenka – a plum brandy which tastes pretty wild – eating and having a great laugh with them even though most of our group didn't understand a thing they were saying - it was great. The old bloke even gave our two ladies a touch up on the way in for good measure.

After that we had a peasant lunch in this little cafe on top of the mountain. It wasn't actually open but the owner did so for us. Imagine having that done for you here. It was a simple meal but tasted great, even if we were cold and wet.

Just down the road we visited a well known wood carver and his parents who treated us with so much respect it was astonishing. He gave us the meanings and history behind why some of his carvings are done a certain way. Although these people live very simply and would be regarded as poor by many westerners, they are rightly very proud of their culture and position in life, and how could you argue with that. After some more Polenka we braved the weather and continued to our overnight stay.

This region is close to the Ukrainian border and is renowned for its woodcarving. Our hotel which was right next to a monastery displayed much of this, including an ornate staircase which was exquisite. The reason this was such a great day was the people we met who opened their hearts and homes to us. This was very special to me and goes to show we can all be friends no matter where we are. The local people are interested in us as much as we are them.

Bogdan complained he had no mobile phone service here in the middle of nowhere, and due to extensive flooding in the direction we were to go tomorrow we might have to ditch the bikes and take a boat. We told Bogdan to harden up.

**Footnote 1.** In the corners Glen is holding everyone up. He is so slow we christen him the 'Squeaky Wheel'.

**Footnote 2.** Bogdan thinks we are crazy and hopes all Australians aren't as mad as us. We assure him they are worse.

**Day 7.**

The last day is the longest in kilometres but we are getting used to the Romanian swing of things on the road and knock over the distances quicker than before. During a U turn I fail to give the big GS enough revs, the engine stalls the bike is quickly going over. To have this happen in the middle of a Romanian road isn't the best thing to have happen and I try my hardest to keep it upright. On top of that the horn is jammed against the tank bag and lets everyone know that I'm in a spot of bother. I'm fighting a losing battle but all of a sudden the bike gets lighter and I get it back up, helped by the fact Kerrie has fallen off and Geoff is pushing the bike back up. Glen thought this was extremely funny, and delights in reliving the moment when we stopped for a traditional lunch in Baia Mare, organised by Transylvania Live - even other locals were getting a laugh out of his antics. Maybe I shouldn't have sledged his riding so much. We check out the 'Merry Cemetery' which is very colourful and each gravestone tells the story in first person of the deceased person's life story. It is all about celebrating the person's life, but one little girl who died after being hit by a car had me in a sombre mood for a while.

It's not hard to notice the change in people's looks in this area. You see many with blond hair and blue eyes, almost Nordic in looks. This town is much like the others but Bogdan says we need to make up time so a slightly frantic ride through the heart of Sighetu Marmatiei leaves us laughing. Even Glen is coping, bipping his horn so drivers know there's a madman on the loose.

We take a detour due to the flooding, finding a bumpy but almost deserted road, and enjoy a 'spirited' strop. Bogdan tells us it's a poor area and people either stop and stare or wave to us. We finally arrive at Cluj Napoca to drop our kit off, and continue back to our starting point in Turda for a farewell dinner supplied by the local town council which is promoting tourism.

It was sad to say goodbye to the Transylvania Live crew. We were treated with great respect and they went out of their way to ensure we had a special time.

The trip was exotic, humorous, sobering, wild, breathtaking, and visually spectacular. To say this is one of the greatest things I've done on a motorcycle is a major understatement. It's hard to describe the region's beauty but there's many areas in Australia just as beautiful. I found the culture and the way of life of the Romanian people the special part of the trip. It might be a cliché but it's truly a country of contrasts. Every country in the world is to a degree but I found the differences between old and new, and the communist architecture an intoxicating mix.

Our friends Glen and Sue had a blast as well, and considered it money well spent. Each day was around 200 kilometres or so and with the walking tours, and the generally slow pace of Romanian traffic it will take you most of the day to get to your destination. The 650 Glen and Sue were on was fine two-up, Sue even fell asleep on the back a few times during the trip.

**Prices and other stuff**

Transylvania Live don't just do motorcycle tours, also on the menu are cultural tours, historic tours, vampire tours, pretty much whatever you'd like to check out in Transylvania the team at TL can organise it.

On the bike side of things the fleet is mostly BMW F650 GS single cylinder go anywhere machines, with a couple of 1200 GS adventure tourers as well. These types of bikes are perfect for negotiating the mainly poorly maintained roads, and TL is looking to continually update it's fleet. You can do the full tour like we did, or you can hire a bike off TL with a written guide and tips of where to go for the best Transylvanian experience. You can also bring your own bike if you like, so getting it shipped over to Europe by Get Routed is an option, especially if you do this as part of a longer trip. You can also opt for an enduro tour which is mostly off road. If it's by bike, by horse or even by helicopter it can be done by TL.

The guided tour we did costs around AUD $1400, pillion an extra $550, and bike hire for seven days $700. This is subject to exchange rates. You can't fly direct to Cluj Napoca. We decided to spend a night in Munich, and then the flight into Romania was a short hour and a half from there.

Check out www.romania-tour.com/motorcycle.html or Google Transylvania Live for more info and contact details. Do yourself a favour, a riding tour of Vlad's old stomping ground is something you'll thoroughly enjoy and cherish forever.

**Story and Pics by Chris Pickett | 02 Aug 10**