

TRANSYLVANIA

August 2014

Everything on the horizon was just a hazy silhouette as I rode away from the chilly north coast of France heading east into the sun that was rising through the early morning mist. I skirted north of Paris on provincial roads before arriving in Champagne. Too early to sample this year's vintage.

Not for the first time I was engaged by a French Gendarme. It seems that I never actually halted at a STOP sign and put my foot down. What I actually did was to approach a road junction with a very clear view, looking everywhere whilst still rolling. I was told to be more careful. Tonight's meal would not have got a mention if it were not for a sign on the wall which read "Eat here.....Diet home'.

I met up with the other three the following morning, one of whom soon earned the nickname of "Never Ready". We crossed France, Germany and Hungary over the next three days before entering Romania on Wednesday afternoon and arriving in Sighisoara late evening. Dracula was born in this Transylvanian medieval citadel town with its many towers and hilly cobbled streets, lined by multi-coloured houses, most over 500 years old. Vlad the Impaler had lived here too.

We ventured out on foot that morning, guide book in hand, on a self guided tour of the citadel whilst the hotel odd job man washed our bikes. We're staying in Sighisoara for three nights and I had every intention of riding the Transfagarasan Pass the next day.

The cobbles were dry as we headed out of the citadel under clear blue skies. I'd ridden out to Romania four years ago, intent on riding the Transfagarasan Pass but heavy rain and deep snow on the summit foiled my attempt. This time things looked all together more promising.

The morning's ride went south, on minor roads through traditional Romanian peasant villages with tall spired Orthodox Churches; past horse drawn carts and cone shaped dumpy haystacks. The women wore colourful flowing skirts and headscarves as everyday wear and many of the men sported a dark trilby hat, shielding their prominent nose from the sun. The villagers had turned out to witness the rare occurrence of a road being freshly tarmacked, whilst a man drew water from the village well.

It wasn't long before we gained our first glimpse of the Fagarasan Mountains towering above the landscape below. The approach road was straight and fast before it started to climb and curve through the trees. As the incline steepened the bends tightened, until we were well and truly riding a mountain road, hairpin after hairpin. Once above the tree line the road just went on and up, switch back after switch back. Was it really three hours ago that we'd left our hotel?



Transfagarasan Pass

Read more overleaf...

TRANSYLVANIA (cont.)

I didn't stop at the top amongst the roadside stalls selling tacky keepsakes, cheese and tripe, instead I pressed on down the other side enjoying the open vistas and sweeping bends. Many a time I had to lift my foot to avoid scrapping a boot on the road. At the bottom we turned around and did it all again in reverse but somehow it all looked different in another direction.

The brass band played as we entered the square and parked up in our hotel that evening, was it especially for us? I'd like to think so.

I left the hotel too early for breakfast in the morning, riding in the golden glow of the rising sun. I'd said goodbye and was on my own again. The improved road surface and the new Romanian motorway meant that I was over the border and powering across the Hungarian Plain sooner than expected. Another early start beckoned and two border crossings in and out of Croatia to tonight's destination in northern Slovenia. I'd arranged to meet up with an old pal that night as I was staying at the same hotel as him in Kranjska Gora.

I'd been monitoring the weather forecast, so the overnight storm on Sunday and Monday's rain didn't come as much of a surprise, although it was still unwelcome. My ride soon left Slovenia behind and flirted with Italy before getting to grips with a miserable wet journey across the Austrian Tyrol. I missed out a couple of high passes but I was still in the mountains, amongst the clouds, in temperatures of 5°C above freezing.

I find Austrian mountain hotels particularly agreeable and the warm hospitality of tonight's, complete with underground car park to unpack in, was most welcome. It wasn't long before I was ensconced in the sauna and in deep conversation with a woman. For those of you unfamiliar with Germanic saunas, it's frowned upon to wear any item of clothing. Just a smile is all you need. I didn't recognise the woman from the sauna when I met her in the bar; she was fully clothed.

Heading west in the morning things got surprisingly warm. The temperature reached 28°C but I was in the middle of a 14 kilometre long tunnel. Normality returned once I was out in the open again.

The large floating object in the sky was a clear indication that I was reaching my destination on the shore of Lake Constance. I'm staying in the old hotel, once a monastery and the birth place of Count Ferdinand von Zeppelin. Graf Zeppelins are still made here to this day and regularly fly over the lake. The view from my window, in the afternoon sun, looked out across the lake and a wide vista of spouting fountains, yacht moorings, tree covered islands and the inevitable tourist vessel. It was all rather pleasant.

My last night's stop was in an idyllic Auberge, built from red brick, with dark wooden features, all draped in ivy. The village occupied a river gorge on the banks of La Semois, overlooked by a Medieval Fortress. That morning I'd ridden through the Black Forest before crossing the Rhine into France and on to the Belgian Ardenne. Autumn was in the air that morning and there were warm croissants for breakfast. Au Revoir.



Contact Gordon

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