

RIDING HIGH

LISA YOUNG REVELS IN THE PLEASURES OF DISCOVERING TRANSYLVANIA'S MOUNTAINS AND FORESTS ON HORSEBACK, INCLUDING ENCOUNTERS WITH THE LOCAL WILDLIFE

Stop, bear! Our first day of horse riding through Transylvania's beautiful Carpathian Mountains comes to a sudden halt. A few metres ahead on the trail, a brown bear plays with her three cubs. Startled by our presence, she stops and stares as eight equally surprised riders look on. The bear quickly gathers her cubs and disappears into the protection of the forest. We are unable to suppress our excitement, but our well-trained horses take the encounter in their stride. The experience is a particular highlight of the trip.

I am on a six-day, lodge-based, guided riding holiday, booked through In the Saddle. This particular holiday is operated by the equestrian centre Equus Sylvania, whose experienced German owners, Christoph and Barbara Promberger, have lived in Romania for many years. The riding centre is based in the tiny village of Sinca Noua in the Transylvanian district of Brasov, in the centre of Romania; it's a three-hour drive north of Bucharest. The week includes three-day rides and a two-day camping trip through the south-central Carpathian Mountains.

The Transylvanian landscape, which has changed little over the past 100 years, offers perfect riding country, with wide, open spaces

where you can ride for over 100 miles without crossing a fence. There is every chance that, in addition to red deer, wild boar, eagles and the elusive lynx, you'll spot brown bears and wolves. 'Romania is the only place in Europe where you can do this,' Christoph tells us.

Our varied horses - Hungarian Sport, Arab, Shagya-Arabian, Gidran and part-Lipizzaner - are fit and offer different riding experiences, and they are kept strong by the challenging Transylvanian terrain. Our rides, geared towards experienced riders, last around six hours, covering approximately 12 to 18 miles a day. If the land becomes too steep, we lead our horses on foot; otherwise, we walk, trot and canter through a picturesque landscape that time seems to have forgotten. We climb through high forests, traverse swaying lowland hay fields and wade through slow-flowing streams, stopping to take the picnic lunches from our saddlebags to eat in pretty, flower-strewn meadows; wild strawberries ripen in the sun and the scent of wild mint hangs heavy in the air. At the end of each long day in the saddle, we return to base for dinner - meals are composed of largely home-grown, local produce - and well-earned rest in comfortable, spacious en suite bedrooms.

Midweek, the adventure changes tack and we head off on a two-day camping ride, starting at

Riders spend a night camping on a hill in the remote village of Holbav, where they can enjoy uninterrupted views of the surrounding farmland



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE Horses cantering on the trail. A brown bear with her cub. A traditional blue-painted house in the village of Viscri. Horses and carts are the only mode of transport in Holbav

an altitude of 580 metres and covering a total distance of about 30 miles, much of it through ancient Transylvanian forests of beech and fir. At the end of day one, we arrive hot and tired in the

remote farming village of Holbav, where there is no running water or electricity and only horses and carts for transport. While our horses are let loose in a makeshift paddock, we set up camp on a hilltop with 360-degree views of stunning scenery. At 1,400 metres, this is the highest elevation of our ride and has been chosen by Christoph for its rural beauty. 'We are still in the European Union,' he says, 'but we are in a different time zone here. You need to put your watches back 500 years.' Dinner, of barbecued meat and freshly picked corn around a roaring fire, is

heartily and convivial beneath a twilight sky unfettered by man-made light. Day two leads us back to base, revealing more scenic pleasures along the way, our horses never failing us in their long tramp home to a day of rest. Swapping four feet for four wheels, we visit the countryside immediately surrounding Sinca Noua. Medieval towns, citadels and sleepy hamlets create a scene of Transylvanian Saxon antiquity; none more so than the village of Viscri, with its restored guest house owned by HRH Prince Charles who, together with locally revered Count Kalkony has famously established a foundation to protect Romania's rural heritage. We drive on, heading further south to Transylvania's most celebrated landmark, the picturesque Bran Castle, which is tenuously linked to Bram Stoker's story of



Dracula, even though the writer never visited Romania. If anything, the history and the setting are much more exciting than the fiction.

Our last day sees us back in the saddle - in the rain. The weather may be bad but spirits are high and the landscape, as ever, rewards us. As we turn a bend, a small bear bounds down a slope and, unperturbed, crosses the trail in front of my horse. It seems like the perfect end to a spectacular adventure in a corner of Europe where, for now at least, time stands still □



ways and means

Lisa Young travelled as a guest of In the Saddle (01299-272997; inthesaddle.com). A seven-night trip with five days riding and one optional night camping (available from May to October) costs from £643, full board, based on two sharing. This includes guided riding, sightseeing trips and transfers, but excludes international flights.

LISA YOUNG: ISTOCKPHOTO