



# Transylvania Trail



The Rustic Charm of Romania

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Arriving at Zalănpatak, where the Prince of Wales has his private retreat.



Carting hay.



Riding through Miklósvár.



In front of Kálnoky's hunting lodge.



A trek into the pages of a Tolstoy novel as Tania Huppatz from Snaffle Travel shares her riding experience through the historical landscape of Transylvania, which has remained unchanged for more than one hundred years.



A ride on a typical cart used on the land.

Set against the backdrop of the Carpathian mountain range, this unforgettable five-day escorted horse riding holiday tours Europe's last pristine landscapes and preserved medieval villages in a seemingly forgotten world of centuries-old Romanian charm.

In late May, I joined seven fellow travellers in the village of Miklósvár, formerly part of the Kálnoky estate owned by our hosts, Count Tibor Kálnoky and his wife, Anna, who are the 25th generation of the Kálnoky family, with a rich family history that dates back to medieval times. The Count and Countess are re-creating their family's lost heritage in an extraordinary part of the world, which time itself seems to have forgotten.

Despite the decades that have passed, Transylvania continues to capture the hearts of those who encounter it. HRH Prince Charles himself, so moved by the plight of Transylvanian villagers, has purchased and lovingly restored several guesthouses, which tourists now enjoy.

On our arrival to the Kálnoky estate, we were welcomed by our hosts with a traditional Transylvanian ritual — a crystal decanter of brandy and reception committee of tiny glasses. For the nights to follow, we would enjoy three-course dinners of locally sourced, in-season produce shared over candlelight. Wine and conversation flowed freely every evening in a setting reminiscent of the 19th Century, with oak beams overhead and a warming fire.

Operating from April to October annually, spring is a splendid time to visit Transylvania. The temperatures are mild and the meadows are in full bloom. We spent between 4-6 hours in the saddle daily, covering 120km of open country unspoilt and almost untouched by tourism.

Life has remained relatively unchanged for Transylvanian villagers and their horses throughout the centuries. In the Erdővidék, or 'woodlands', region where we rode, horses have retained their traditional roles, and are still widely used for ploughing fields and pulling carts.

The horses were Hussars and included the Szeklers, which are claimed to be descended from Attila and the Huns. Today, the Hussars' horses are required to be as sensible and sure-footed as their ancestors. The current breeds include the Hussar's Shagya-Arabian, the Lipizzaner, the Hungarian Cavalry's Gidran and Lipizzaner's various crosses with mountain ponies.

**We had the opportunity to ride all of the locally-bred horses, as well as the Huzul, an historic and robust breed unique to the Carpathian mountains.**

Ranging from 14.2-16.2hh, they were well-mannered and forward-moving. Such traits are distinctive of horses historically bred for battle and required to traverse challenging mountain terrain. Suitable for intermediate to experienced riders, they carried us with ease up to 40km per day along the unmarked tracks of Szekler country with no fences in sight.

A trail ride by name, but not by nature, the riding in Transylvania is sensational. Once part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, the Szekler region became Romanian during the First World War, and offers riders uninterrupted miles of pasture and woodland.

On the first day, we were driven to the Kálnoky family's once glorious stables 40 minutes away to meet our horses and main guides, Boti and Sandor. On the ride the horses were always tacked up for us and taken from us at the end of the ride. We would sometimes take the saddle off but never the bridle.

Our ride began with a slow ascension north onto high pastures where we were met by a magnificent view of the Carpathian mountain range. The countryside below was dotted with free-standing oak and beech trees. Spring had arrived and the mountains were alive with wildflowers.

Each day included a one-hour stop for a picnic lunch amongst the surrounding nature. The horses were ridden with a halter and lead rope around their neck and at lunch time we would stop and tie the horses to a tree.

The first two nights we stayed at Count Kálnoky's cottages, sensitively restored and quaintly decorated with hand-stitched cushion covers, period lamps and an old cuckoo clock. The evening air carried the sounds of cow bells and horse-drawn carts laden with hay.

The next day was spent meandering through the mountains on our way to Zalănpatak, where the Prince of Wales' private retreat resides. Unfortunately, the prince was not home, but cuckoos, deer, foxes, wolves and the occasional brown bear made for impressive sightings.

Throughout our mountain journey, we also met shepherds with their herds of cows and sheep, accompanied by their protective Romanian Carpathian shepherd dogs. All the horses we saw were mainly horses and carts carrying hay or working in the fields. The Countess does have an afterschool program for the local Roma gypsy children where they learn vaulting and there are some riding centres and competition stables in other parts of the country.

We began our descent from the mountains on the third day, riding from Zalănpatak to the Kálnoky's hunting lodge. The horses were watered at each stream we came across, their shod hooves powering through the water at crossings. While the distances placed physical demands on them, each horse was in exceptional condition and fed local grassy hay at the end of each working day.

As we left the mountains behind us, local villages amass with colourful houses and bustling life emerged before us. The locals



On the trails in the 'woodlands'.



Inside Prince Charles' cottage.



General purpose saddles were used.

provided a friendly atmosphere as we passed through, waving to us as they went about their daily activities on the fields and in their homes.

On the fourth day, we ventured 40km through the Carpathian mountains, returning to the ranges once again. It was hay season and we passed local farmers transporting grass that had been cut by hand, dried on a wooden stoop and then taken by horse and cart to store in the barns, generally in a loft above the stables, for the winter and it was all loose, not in bales. In such a harsh, mountainous environment, the Kálnoky's horses are usually stabled during the winter, but careful management ensures they receive plentiful forage to keep them physically and mentally healthy.

The next day, we returned the horses to their stables at Valea Crisului, before being transferred back to the Prince of Wales' private retreat in Zalănpatak for two days of rest and relaxation. On the final day, we took a horse and cart ride to Prince George's Meadow for a picnic lunch.

This meadow was a christening gift from the Kálnoky family to Prince George; the meadow was filled with fragrant wildflowers, including salivias, daisies and ranunculi. Before lunch, we stopped for a brandy tasting, a locally produced liquor made from caraway seeds.

On our final return to Zalănpatak, we sat together in the sun drinking Romanian beer and reflecting on the week's riding adventure. For each of us, Romania was a life-changing step back in time that we won't soon forget.



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