

Mountain Roads in Romania / 8 days

Of the ups, downs and all over agains out there.



Bucur's Bleating Say:

Winding! Uphill! Downhill! Deep woods! Rugged cliffs! Remoteness! Only here can a mere 8 days reveal civilization in all its history and glory along perfect arcs from bucolic churches to picture book villages to a pungent brewery. This recurring highland pass crossing is no mere fad and is still a way of life in these "in extremis" lands. By all means "Da"!

A local saying has it that "woods are Romanian's brother", conveying the fact that there is a strong, historic kinship between local people and the woods or the highlands that were never too far away from their communities or on which such communities relied to make a living. A third of Romania is taken by the Carpathian Mountains and a historical border separating Transylvania and Moldavia, respectively Wallachia ran right along their ridge. Therefore, trade, invasions, as well as the once intense transhumance process have all created, maintained and developed the network of roads and trails crossing the high passes or following the deep valleys cutting through from one side to the other. More recently, daring projects such as the Transfăgărășan opened in 1974 or the newer - and higher - Transalpina opened in 2010 provide a great way of exploring the diverse Carpathians from a car or motorcycle seat. Let us take slightly over a week and proceed up and down these fascinating roads across dramatic terrain or extensive woods, while crisscrossing the country! Back to the local saying above, as Calistrat Hogaș, a highly descriptive writer that traveled extensively up and down the mountains joined by his horse, once wrote:

"How many times, amidst the silent and unmoving trees, have we felt as if we were in the company of good, old, talkative friends! How many times have we confided in them while sharing our sorrows with them, and how many times, above all, have they soothed our sorrows!"

Calistrat Hogaș - "On Mountain Roads"

Note: this tour is usually possible with this itinerary between early July and end October (variations might occur according to the snow situation up the mountains); even in summer, in case of extreme weather conditions especially the Transfăgărășan and the Transalpina might close for a while. In this case, alternative routes will be used and the Capra Lodge accommodation might be replaced.



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DAY 1

Bucharest - Sinaia - Transbucegi Road - Piatra Arsă - Peștera / Padina

Starting in Bucharest with its maximum elevation of less than 90 m.a.s.l., we shall proceed straight Northwards up Prahova Valley running between the dramatic Eastern slopes of the Bucegi and the smooth, pasture-covered Baiului mountains. After optionally seeing the royal Peleş Castle in Sinaia, we shall head up the mountains to Dichiu Pass at 1596 m.a.s.l. and then farther to the juniper-dotted plateau slightly below where Piatra Arsă Hut is located at 1950 m.a.s.l. After a walk around, we shall return to the Dichiu crossroads and carry on down on the other side of the mountains, towards the Ialomița Basin, complete with the wide Bolboci Reservoir and scenic Padina - Peștera area. A drive past the treeline and a walk around will reveal a superb mountain scenery!

- Pick-up in Bucharest or at Bucharest Airport.
- Optional visit to Peleş Castle (closed on Mondays and Tuesdays, allow about 1 hour 30 minutes for the visit).
- Drive up the Transbucegi to off Piatra Arsă Hut.
- Drive down to the Padina area and then farther to the lower cable car terminal at Peștera.
- Walk around, then return by car or walking to the Padina area.
- Accommodation in a 3* mountain lodge in the Padina area.

DAY 2

Peștera / Padina - Fieni - Râul Alb - Câmpulung - Curtea de Argeș - Transfăgărășan Road - Capra

This morning we shall take a dirt road downstream to Moroieni and then, after hopping over two scenic hills, respectively going through a couple of villages, we shall go down across fine countryside to Dâmbovița Valley which we shall follow upstream. After crossing the first capital of Wallachia, we shall hop over two other hills before reaching Curtea de Argeș, hosting the second capital of Wallachia and an impressive monastery with a captivating legend. Leaving Curtea de Argeș, we shall proceed along the Transfăgărășan Road, the first of the paved high mountain roads in the country built between 1970 and 1974 and initially meant as a military road as the then Communist regime feared a Soviet invasion following Romania's refusal to join Eastern Bloc armies that swept across Prague so as to end the anti-Communist protests in 1968. Today, after passing under the cliff where Poienari Fortress stands, going up the 166 m. tall Vidraru Dam and contouring part of the homonymous reservoir, we shall call it a day at the scenically located Capra Lodge.

- Breakfast.
- Drive down the Ialomița, then across Câmpulung to Curtea de Argeș.
- Optional visit to the Negru Vodă Monastery in Câmpulung.
- Optional visit to the Curtea de Argeș Monastery or the older Princely Church.
- Drive up the Transfăgărășan with views of Poienari Fortress, Vidraru dam and reservoir.
- Accommodation in Capra Lodge 3* up the Transfăgărășan.

DAY 3

Capra - Transfăgărășan Road - Cârtișoara - Cârța - Sibiu

Carrying on up the Transfăgărășan with its tight hairpin curves and going through the tunnel running under the Capra - Paltinu Ridge, we shall reach the 2042 m.a.s.l. Bâlea Lake and the adjacent huts. If the way up here was quite long and, save for the final part, rather smooth, the way down on the other side is considerably steeper, with many switchbacks and dramatic views all around. Once down in Transylvania, we shall head to Sibiu, one of the Saxon towns in the Siebenbürgen and former Cultural



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Capital of Europe in 2007; the three squares in the old town, as well as the finely restored monuments there, will definitely enchant us while enjoying a walk around.

- Breakfast.
- Drive up to Bâlea Lake.
- Optional walk to Capra Pass (30 minutes up, 15 minutes down).
- Optional detour to see the ruins of the 13th century Cistercian Abbey in Cârța.
- Walking tour in old Sibiu taking in the three main squares there.
- Accommodation in an old house-hosted 3* guesthouse in Sibiu.

DAY 4

Sibiu - Cisnădie - Orlat - Poiana Sibiului - Obârșia Lotrului - Transalpina Road - Novaci - Târgu Jiu - Petroșani - Parâng Resort

A drive by the fortified churches in Cisnădie and Cisnădioara, then across quiet countryside and bucolic hilly terrain will lead us to a very scenic road running Southwards, contouring Oașa Reservoir and then going down to the Obârșia Lotrului crossroads. There then commences the highest paved mountain road in the country. Completed in 1939, but unpaved at that point, the Transalpina was paved in 2010. It reaches the highest point (2150 m.a.s.l.) in Urdele Pass up the Parâng Mountains and then goes down across the extensive Rânca Resort. Once down, we shall veer Westwards to Târgu Jiu, a city that hosts Constantin Brâncuși's great sculptural ensemble comprising the Gate of the Kiss, the Table of Silence and the Column of Infinity. We shall then follow the impressive Jiu Gorges and head up the Parâng Mountains to a slope where a few clusters of huts and guesthouses are set along a chairlift between 1200 and 1600 m.a.s.l. A great place to spend the night!

- Breakfast.
- Optional visit to the Cisnădie fortified church.
- Drive along the Transalpina.
- Walk to see Constantin Brâncuși's works in Târgu Jiu.
- Drive up the Jiu Gorges.
- Optional visit to Lainici Monastery completed in 1818.
- Accommodation in the Podul lui Rus - Parâng Resort area, 3* hotel or guesthouse.

DAY 5

Petroșani - Hațeg - Hunedoara - Deva - Abrud - Transapuseana Road - Rîmetea

In the morning we can carry on all the way up to the end of the road and enjoy a 30 minute walk to a 1800 m.a.s.l. point affording great views towards Cârja Peak, or we can even go all the way to the Parângul Mic at 2074 m.a.s.l. (easy to follow trail, but a good physical condition is required, as one needs to cover a nearly 600 m. elevation gain). Then, back down to Petroșani, we shall continue Northwards with an optional detour to see the iconic Hunyadi Castle completed in 1447 and the mid-13th century hilltop fortress in Deva. Deep in Apuseni Mountains, we shall proceed along a newly (2024) paved mountain road that will definitely enchant us with its wonderful views of round crests, extensive woods and charming hamlets or scattered traditional houses lacking the dramatism of the Transfăgărășan or the Transalpina and inviting for many picture breaks: the Transapuseana. Once at its other end, we shall soon reach the picturesque village of Rîmetea with its impeccably white, old houses plying the main street. A walk to the ruins of the 1296 Torockó Fortress can provide a great view of the village and the impressive Székelykő Cliffs, unless one hikes all the way up to the latter (good physical condition needed), a highly rewarding activity; otherwise, the local ethnographic museum hosted in one of the old houses can be quite eye-opening on local traditions and culture!



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- Breakfast.
- Optional walk / hike up to a viewpoint or all the way to Parângul Mic Peak.
- Optional detour to see the Hunyadi Castle in Hunedoara.
- Optional visit to Deva Fortress (or view from down the hill).
- Drive along the Transapuseana Road.
- Optional walk to the Torockó Fortress or hike up the Székelykő Cliffs.
- Accommodation in Colțești, 3* mansion-like guesthouse.

DAY 6

Rîmetea - Turda - Bistrița - Vatra Dornei - Pojorâta - Transrău Road - Alpin Lodge

A short drive will take us this morning to Turda, where we may opt to visit the imposing halls of the local salt mine, complete with the art and entertainment endowments down there. It will then be across upper Transylvania to Bistrița, where we may have a break and see the local “șugălete” or old merchant houses. And then, a very scenic road will take us across Tihuța Pass between Bârgău and Călimani mountains, down in Bukovina, a region of very well preserved traditions and of the medieval painted monasteries. After passing through Vatra Dornei, a pleasant and relaxing spa town, we shall carry on up the Transrău Road (with an optional break at a great viewpoint) all the way to its upper end, in the parking lot of the Alpin Lodge where we shall spend the night. Before the night falls however we shall have the time to do a 15 minute walk to the treeline affording great views of the impressive, nearly vertical Lady's Cliffs; for the energetic, an hour's hike around them is recommended (good physical condition and sturdy footwear needed, as the terrain, while not demanding, is rocky).

- Breakfast.
- Optional visit to the Turda Salt Mine.
- Optional break in Vatra Dornei.
- Drive up the Transrău from Pojorâta.
- Optional break at a point affording good views of Giumalău Mountains.
- Optional walk to the treeline for a view of the Lady's Cliffs.
- Optional hike farther around the foot of the Lady's Cliffs.
- Accommodation in the Alpin Lodge 3*.

DAY 7

Alpin Lodge - Vama - Voroneț - Izvorul Muntelui Lake - Bicz Gorges - Gheorgheni - Izvoare - Mădăraș Road - Mădăraș Hut

In the morning we shall head down the mountain to Câmpulung and then carry on Eastwards with two optional, but highly recommended, breaks talking of the Bukovina traditions. First, the egg museum in Vama comprising an extensive collection of eggs (turned into art by various means) from around the world, including the traditional, local, painted Easter eggs. Then, built in only three months and three weeks in 1488, Voroneț Monastery is a real gem, with the outstanding frescoes adorning its exterior and interior walls depicting various scenes in the Bible so that its teachings could reach a population that was for the most part illiterate. After contouring the great Izvorul Muntelui Reservoir, we shall cross the mountains again, this time via the dramatic Bicz Gorges and the natural dam Red Lake. Once on the other side of the mountains, again in Transylvania, we shall cross one more mountain pass and some fine countryside before going back up to 1700 m.a.s.l. in Harghita Mountains, where we shall spend the night after an optional 30 minute walk to the Mădăraș, the highest point in these mountains at 1800 m.a.s.l.

- Breakfast.



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- Optional visit to the Egg Museum in Vama.
- Optional visit to Voroneț Monastery.
- Drive through Bicaș Gorges.
- Drive up to Mădăraș Hut.
- Optional walk to Mădăraș Peak for views.
- Accommodation off Mădăraș Hut, in a 3* lodge.

DAY 8

Mădăraș Hut - Odorheiu Secuiesc - Brașov / St. Ann Lake - Cheia - Bucharest

This morning we shall leave Harghita Mountains, with two options. First, we may continue straight to Brașov for a walking tour in this Saxon town at the foot of Tâmpa Hill; the pedestrian Republicii, the Council Square and the imposing Black Church will definitely make this highly enjoyable. Second, we may head Eastwards instead and, after a visit to the local Csíki Sör Brewery with its several varieties of ale and stout, we may continue up Mount Ciomatu Mare with the scenic volcano crater-hosted lake at its top. Either way, we shall then carry on Southwards along a last mountain road running between Grohotiș and Ciucaș mountains, reaching Bucharest in the late afternoon or early evening. A great drive taking in some of the finest mountain roads in the country and nonetheless complete with glimpses of the rich local heritage there is to explore!

- Breakfast.
- Drive down Harghita Mountains.
- Option #1: drive to Sânsimion and visit to the Csíki Sör Brewery, then on to the St. Ann Lake hosted in a volcano crater (from the parking lot to the lake shore one needs walk for 10 minutes).
- Option #2: drive to Brașov and walking tour of the city taking in the Republicii, the Council Square, the Black Church (exterior views).
- Drive over the Bratocea Pass and on to Bucharest.
- Drop off in Bucharest or at Bucharest Airport.
- End of services.



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