

Transylvania

The Land Beyond the Forest

Text and photos by Hendrik de Backer



Transylvania, a region in rural Romania in Central Europe, is for many people linked to and associated with the fictional Dracula figure out of the 19th century book by Bram Stoker. However, the meaning of the name, derived from the Latin "ultra silvam" or "exceedingly forested," is much more representative for the true content and richness of this wonderful piece of land in the heart of Europe.

Having known quite vivid history, and being at times part of the Roman Empire, the Hun Empire, Hungary and Romania, or even being an independent region, it offers a rich variety of nature and culture. For Jeepers, this means endless drives on unpaved roads through hills and valleys, and great visits to medieval villages.

With this in mind, my family and I set out for the Euro Camp Jeep site near Berlin with our Rubicon Unlimited to Romania, crossing Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary with the aim of spending a two week holiday of off-highway driving in the Apuseni Mountains.



Pestera Ghetarul Scarisoara; 7km off-highway

In all, we probably drove about 800km – 320 miles - off-highway, visiting amongst others medieval villages on the top of a mountain, secluded and almost abandoned monasteries, deserted winter skiing slopes, etc etc ...

The real wonders of the Apuseni are not above but underground. Hidden in deep valleys are extensive limestone formations that give rise to some spectacularly eroded scenery. It turns out the whole region is like a big, white chunk of Swiss cheese, thoroughly carved by underground rivers for millions of years.

A great attraction is the Scarisoara cave, site of a large underground glacier that is preserved during the summer and winter months. An off-highway trek of about 7km takes you up the mountain, after which you descend into the funnel leading to the glacier. The off-highway drive up the mountain with the Rubicon was big fun. Unlike home and elsewhere in Europe, there are no restrictions or negative looks from hikers when you are crawling up the mountain in a 4x4 ... Fantastic.

Farther away in the northern range of the Apuseni lies the most beautiful of all Romanian caves. It is called Pestera Ursilor - The Bears' Cave - and was discovered less than 20 years ago. It owes its name to the remains of an ancient species of bear that were discovered here.

In terms of cities and culture, the region offers quite a lot if you are prepared to spend some time driving. The main cities of the area are Turda and well-known Cluj-Napoca. Turda is an old mining town, offering a visit to an underground salt mine which was originally set-up for mining by the Romans, and which is now known to be a spa for people with respiratory problems. Cluj-Napoca is an exciting and vivid university town, offering all comfort and services one can image in contrast to the rural villages.

All good stories must have some suspense, so we had ours in the form of a ripped off track bar bracket on the rear axle. We presume that the very bad shape of the unpaved (and paved roads), and a fully loaded and packed Jeep, caused too much stress on the Rubicon. By the last days of our holiday, we started to hear a weird kloink-kloink sound from the back of the Jeep when we were climbing up to the Bihor Nagy mountain pass. It turned out that the rear track bar bracket welds had been ripped off, clearly too week construction of Jeep here!

We had to stop because the body of the Jeep started to rub against our tires. We made it off-road (luckily) and were towed after seven hours of waiting. In terms of service and helpfulness of the assistance team and Jeep dealer in Cluj-Napoca, there was nothing but praise. The bracket was welded back on in less than a day, and we got home safely.



Track bar bracket failure

In all, this trip from Camp Jeep through Poland and Hungary, and our longer holiday in Romania, clocked off 6450km – 2,580 miles - on the counter. Despite warnings from friends and wild stories about the dangers of Romania, we had a great and very pleasant holiday with great people and great experiences. I highly recommend this trip for all!



Guide in the Scarisoara Ice cave



An average, normal road in Romania

Entrance to the Scarisoara Ice cave



Chapel in the Turda Salt mine

For more information about the places Hendrik and his family experienced during their trek, please visit:

Turda Salt mine

http://www.ki.ro/romania/en/turism/c_salinaTurda.html

Cluj-Napoca

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cluj-Napoca>

Green Mountain Holidays

<http://www.greenmountainholidays.ro/>

The Bear cave

http://www.welcometoromania.ro/Apuseni/Apuseni_Pestera_Scarisoara_Cave

Scarisoara Cave

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sc%C4%83ri%C5%9Foara_Cave





The Apuseni Mountains are not high. The highest peak is only approximately 5,500 feet and human settlement can be found even on the highest peaks. The landscape offers a variety of steep climbing roads ending on a plateau with a small village, mixed with great views and sights on the valleys. The area is also special in the sense that it is disputed between the Romanians and the Hungarians. One village is Hungarian while the next one is Romanian. In any case, the whole area is very rural with small villages and no cities, lots of unpaved roads, and cattle and horse-drawn carts on the roads.

Our Rubicon with 2.8 CRD diesel, Skyjacker 2.5 inch, BFG MT 285/75/16



View on the village of Valea Ierii



The end of a day traveling off-highway



En route to visit a gorge



A road into the mountains



A shepherd's hut in the Bihor Mountains



Picnic lunch in the rain



Breathtaking scenery near Garda de Sus



View on the mountains from our holiday house

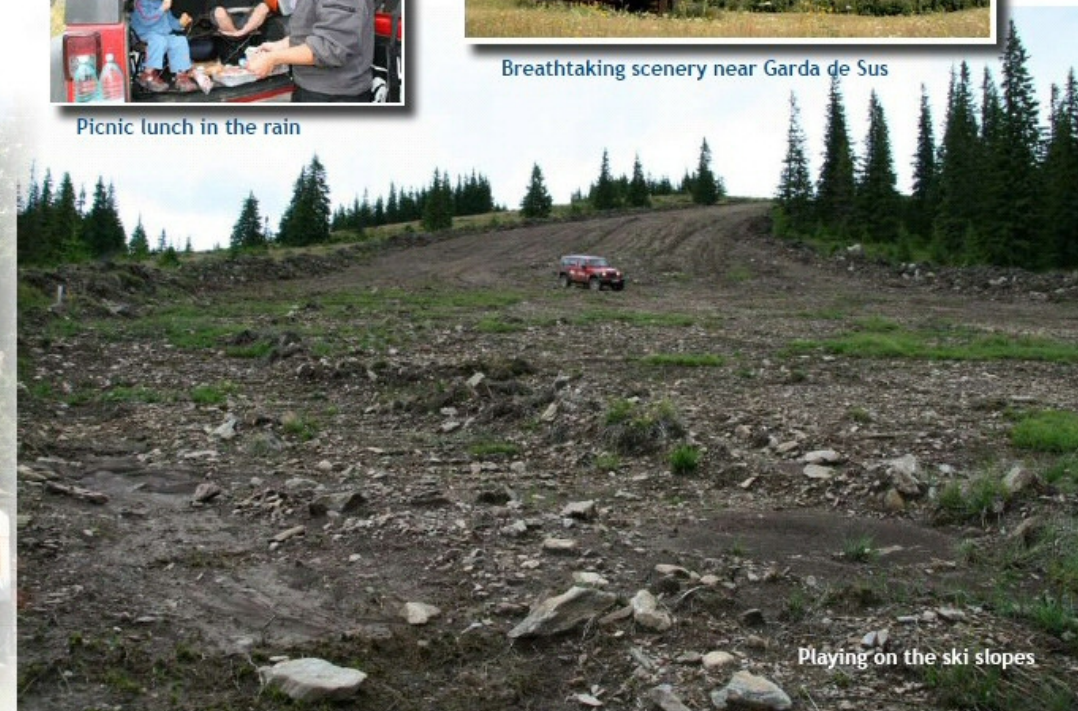
We decided to rent a holiday house and work with an organization called Green Mountain Holidays, operated by a Belgian ex-patriot and offering active and natural holidays. This turned out to be a big hit! Johan provided us with a binder full of detailed maps, containing off-highway tracks and routes for days and days of driving. This was great! We were now free to plan loop-based trips from our cottage, and get up there in the mountains every day, packing a picnic and our maps.



The scenery stopped us in our path ...



The village of Rimetea



Playing on the ski slopes

