



Sarah soon fell in love with her mount for the week: Vihar, a 15.1hh five-year-old Shagya Arab

Kicking on for

Cold Mountain



SARAH JENKINS soaks up the charm of Romania, where wolves still roam and mobiles don't work

If you want to let someone know you're OK, phone now, because you won't get any signal up there," says trip co-ordinator, Vasile, 30 miles from Equus Sylvania, Romania.

I was born into a text-dependant generation, so this was like telling a Rolling Stone: "Sorry, we're fresh out of narcotics," circa 1967.

Equus Sylvania is in Sinca Noua, among the Carpathian Mountains, where *Cold Mountain* was filmed. It's a beautiful country, but there's nothing Hollywood about this place, where goats and buffalo give themselves right-of-way each evening, returning from communal pastures outside the village.

Our hosts were German-born Christoph Promberger and his Austrian wife, Barbara.

Both are wildlife biologists and were responsible for the 10-year Carpathian Large Carnivore Project — the biggest research and conservation project in Central and Eastern Europe.

They are two of the most inspirational people I've ever met and made our visit go above and beyond your average riding holiday. Throughout our week of rides — where we returned to the chalet for all but one night, which was spent camping in the mountains — we were in the saddle for up to 8hr a day. Barbara and Christoph entertained us continually with their extensive knowledge of the area, its wildlife and habitat conservation — drawing on their experiences from the project.

Since establishing the riding centre in 2004, the Prombergers have had visitors from every continent. The couple had just returned from



Tying up two of the horses at one of the many rest stops scheduled during the week



Dinner time: riders are well fed, but not before the horses have been cared for



Each evening, buffalo and goats take priority on Romania's roads on the way home from grazing



Christoph and Barbara Promberger have 22 horses at the farm, which provides a base for the rides

their Transylvania Trek, a two-week ride with a group of people all on at least their second visit to Equus Sylvania.

Having been forewarned that mountain weather is like a *Forrest Gump* box of chocolates (you never know what you're going to get), we wore T-shirts and strapped jackets to our saddlebags. But, thanks to climate change, it was ludicrously warm for October. We cooled off in the wild forests after exhilarating gallops through alpine meadows. There are no

boundaries and no traffic — it's bliss.

We each rode in English tack on one of the Prombergers' 22 horses, a mix of part-Lipizzaner, Furioso-North-Star, Arab, Shagya Arab, Gidran and local breeds. The horses have fantastic temperaments and the pace is varied, but this ride is for those confident at speed. One rider, whose recent experience was limited to sitting on an ostrich that went at 40mph, turned at 90° and didn't stop till you dropped off the back, had a hard time.

Vihar (Thunderstorm), my 15.1hh five-year-old Shagya Arab, effortlessly carried me up steep inclines. She was responsive, her walk didn't give me saddle sores, she floated in trot and made light work of the terrain, popping little streams, nipping down banks and picking her way between stones. I left her to it.

On a few steep descents you must go by foot.

Wolf and bear tracks and droppings will now be my Mastermind specialist subject

I'm no Paula Radcliffe and got by, but do wear riding boots you can walk in. I was on my bottom with ludicrous predictability, mostly because I have absolutely no balance — if I had tried this in gripless shoes, there might have been carnage. Vihar had ample opportunity to squash me, but just bore a similar expression to Barbara while waiting for me to catch up.

Having never understood walking for its own sake, for me this was an epiphany. I get it, but only if the vista is as stunning as here.

We spotted both wolf and bear tracks — and distinguishing between their droppings will now be my *Mastermind* specialist subject. Luckier souls sometimes see actual carnivores. We saw the devastation left by wild boar, which harrow up whole pastures looking for food. There were many birds, >>>

Pictures by Sarah Jenkins and In The Saddle

including lesser-spotted eagle, Ural owl, bee-eaters, hoopoes, white storks, great grey shrike and red backed shrike, plus several “wolf spottings” — mostly deer and dogs. I’m convinced I saw one, but having excitedly pointed out several mongrels I was too shy to cry wolf again.

One night was spent away from the farm’s home comforts. We rode to a remote settlement in the mountains without running water, except the stream, and no electricity. It was all very Julie Andrews; the hills were alive with the sound of cowbells and absolutely nothing else.

It was the best kind of camping trip, where the tents await you and you find the fire built and the food cooked. Offers to help were refused by those who sensed I’m no domestic goddess, let alone an al fresco one.

Barbara was bemused by the idea of a tent. “I sleep by the fire,” she said.

Wonderful idea — three shots of palinka and who needs tents?

Having spent the afternoon in his distillery making the palinka, Nicolaie, the 83-year-old who let us camp here, was in high spirits. He entertained us with pipe music, while Elizabeth, a fellow guest, sang Swedish folksongs.

It’s special, lying by crackling flames gazing at the stars. Just don’t sprawl out where the smoke blows out across the mountains — you’ll wake up at 3am with your lungs full. Insufficiently conscious to let this bother me, I rolled over, wiped a hand over my head and knocked the biggest insect I’ve ever seen on to my pillow. Its proximity to my eyes might, I suppose, have affected my sense of scale, but it was huge, bright green, with several knees — Jiminy Cricket minus the waistcoat.

Never mind, I thought, feeling woozy from palinka and smoke inhalation, but every time the sleeping bag’s stray thread touched my face I had a fit. I stumbled off to find a tent.

Our group of eight always ate together, sharing travel stories from every continent — which Tessa won for her terrifying escapades with an elephant on heat in Botswana.

The food is locally produced without pesticides or artificial fertilisers. Organic milk, potatoes and meat are all bought from local farmers. As a soup lover, I was in my element. Buffalo yogurt and goose eggs were a treat, as were jams made of berries from the fields.

Sheep’s cheese is big business in Romania. Shepherds collect each village’s livestock and

herd them into the mountains to graze all summer, milking them twice a day. As Romania has joined the EU, hygiene standards will make this a thing of the past, but I’d never felt healthier nor more smug — just one morsel of chocolate all week (stowed away by another guest, Jane).

One evening, we went to a bear hide, setting off in two cars. A man with a gun stopped the car in front; the occupants thought they were being hijacked before realising he was our guide. Disappointingly, the brown bears were picnicking elsewhere, having moved down the mountain to find fruit, but all the other visitors this year saw them.

It rained one day and we finally saw carnivores, visiting the wolves Christoph and Barbara domesticated during their project. Wolves can bite through bone, but the couple were able to share their house with Crai, the male, and Poiana. But as Christoph showed us scars on his wrist and ankle, I slowly removed my hand from the friendly wolf’s head.

On the horses’ day off, we got a culture hit. Christoph is the fount of all knowledge on Romania’s history. We drove to Viscri, a little Saxon town made famous by the Prince of Wales, who bought a house there last year. The government offered to concrete the road, which

we bounced along for 30min, but the town won’t have it — the bumps keep out mass tourism.

Sara Dootz, 70, looks after Viscri’s church, which is well fortified

from the times of invading Turks.

Sara’s son-in-law, Walter Fernolend, hosted a scrumptious lunch of soup and lamb, followed by apple pastries. We drank shots of peach schnapps, which stung my lip and burnt the length of my oesophagus.

“We use it for warmth in winter and antiseptic in summer,” says Walter.

Three shots of palinka and who needs a tent?



This ride is for experienced jockeys only — the pace is varied but on some occasions, fast

COSTS AND CONTACTS

Contact: this trip was organised by In The Saddle. For details, contact Reaside, Neen Savage, Cleobury Mortimer, Shropshire DY14 8ES; (tel: 01299 272 997) or visit www.inthesaddle.com

Costs: during 2007 — from January to May and October (£575); June to September (£660). In The Saddle offers a discount of £60 per person if six or more places are booked.

What’s included: riding; full board accommodation; return transfers from Bucharest and visits to Viscri and Sighisoara. Drinks; sleeping bag hire €15; single supplement €70; donation to conservation fund €40; bear hide visit €25; tips are payable locally.

What to take: the Prombergers prefer you to wear your crash hat. Bring riding boots that are good for walking, waterproofs, layers and spare clothes for tourist days. A seat-saver is a nice luxury. Take a camera and more film than you think you’ll need.

Christoph knows a trucker who has it for breakfast: “He eats bread, so any bacteria will come out to feast, then he kills them instantly with a shot — he’s never been ill in his life.”

I’m surprised he hasn’t crashed though.

We visited the mediaeval city of Sighisoara, Dracula’s supposed birthplace, with its pretty buildings, vampire stories and jokes about wealthy dentists — rich from all that work filing down fangs. We drove back in darkness, past tiny blue flashing lights that turn out to be horses and carts.

Barbara is a remarkable horsewoman in a country where high standards of welfare are difficult, spending hours balancing available straights and supplements for each horse.

She and Christoph are now involved in a project to produce a sustainable development strategy for Sinca Noua. They aim to strengthen agriculture by certifying it organic and building a processing food industry. Their efforts reflect a Romania that is changing since EU ascension.

Go now, while you can still relish silence, unprocessed cheese and being completely unavailable. **H&H**



Equus Sylvania is based in the Carpathian Mountains, where the Hollywood hit *Cold Mountain*, featuring Jude Law and Nicole Kidman, was filmed