



CLASSIC
EDELWEISS TOURS

EASTERN EUROPEAN DELIGHTS

Tracking down Dracula: Vienna to Romania by motorcycle!



RIDING DAY 1 : WIEN (VIENNA) - KROMĚŘÍŽ

Standard Route (214 km / 133 miles)

Austria's far north-eastern corner is called Weinviertel, which means "Wine Quarter". Think rolling hills, vineyards, lots of sunshine, and small secondary roads that don't see much traffic. Past Wolkersdorf we head north to Mistelbach, made famous by an Austrian pop band that used the name as a synonym for "really far off".

A bit further up the road, we cross into the Czech Republic almost unseen, there are no more checkpoints. The border between east and west that was once impenetrable has disappeared almost without a trace. Of course, we still stop for a quick picture. Lednice features a beautifully restored old town and an impressive castle, even a World Heritage site.

Further north, right outside of Brno, the wide-open countryside once witnessed one of Europe's most important events. At the Battle of Austerlitz, French Emperor Napoleon defeated a much larger Austrian and Russian army, a victory that eventually led to the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire and to a period of French supremacy in Europe. Not for very long, though, as during those days the next war was never far off. Today a monument stands on Pratzen Heights, where most of the fighting took place.

From here we head to Kroměříž, just an hour away.

Highlights:

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#1: Lednice Castle



The Chateau Lednice and its large English-style park is one of the most beautiful complexes in the Czech Republic. The Liechtenstein family acquired the whole estate in 1249 and they have owned it for nearly 700 years. The chateau was originally built as the fortress and it was rebuilt in Renaissance style in the 16th century. Already at that time, the large chateau's garden was created around the chateau. The chateau went through an important adjustment in the late 17th century when it was adapted to the Baroque style according to the plans by the Italian architect Domenico Martinelli and John Bernhard Fischer von Erlach. The chateau gained its present appearance, which is based on the neo-Gothic style, during the extensive reconstruction in the mid of the 19th century. (www.hotellednice.cz)

#2: Kroměříž



Kroměříž is without a doubt one of the most beautiful cities in the Czech Republic. The picturesque historical city with town houses and arcades, the monumental archbishop's chateau, the wonderful gardens spreading out around this and the archbishop's cellars with their unique wine. This is the Athens of Haná, a city the splendour and spectacular beauty of which have secured it a place on the UNESCO world heritage list. (www.czechtourism.com)

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RIDING DAY 2 : KROMĚŘÍŽ - LIPTOVSKÝ HRÁDOK

Standard Route (314 km / 195 miles)

On this route we pass the city of Zlin, home of Tomáš Baťa who invented the shoe factory and founded what is today the world's largest shoe company here in 1894. Only minutes later we cross the border to Slovakia as well as the Valley of the Váh River and head up into a low mountain range named Strážovské vrchy. This may be difficult to pronounce but the roads are gorgeous, the riding is fun.

Čičmany, a small village famous its folk architecture, makes for a really nice picture stop before we find today's main highlight in the nearby town of Bojnice. The castle there is like straight out of a fairy tale, you expect Rapunzel to appear at a window high up at any moment.

After a visit to the castle and some lunch we continue towards the Lesser Tatras. This mountain range is not as high and not as well-known as the High Tatras, but the roads are much better and less busy. The pass named Čertovica is Slovakia's highest, at 1,232 m (4,042 ft). Our destination Liptovský Hrádok is at the end of the road.

Highlights:

#1: Čičmany



The village of Čičmany is famous for a 200-year-old custom of painting its wooden cottages in patterns based on traditional embroidery motifs. They make a great photo opportunity, and in the local gift shop you can buy model cottages.

#2: Bojnický zámok (Bojnice Castle)



The fairy tale castle of Bojnice is the single most visited castle in Slovakia. It was first mentioned in written documents in 1113, remodeled many times over the centuries and then, from 1888 to 1910, it was turned into today's beautiful imitation of French castles of the Loire valley. It is worth going inside, but if the lines are too long just walk to the little pond and take a gorgeous picture.

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RIDING DAY 3 : LIPTOVSKÝ HRÁDOK - KOŠICE

Standard Route (256 km / 159 miles)

Soon after leaving Liptov the High Tatras come into view. We follow the road that leads along their southern slopes, always heading east. Tatra Lomnica is where you are closest to the high peaks; tourism is king around here, the best ski resort in Eastern Europe keeps people busy in winter, in summer it's all about hiking, climbing, bicycling – and motorcycling.

If time is on our side we can cross to Poland and ride the curvy road along Poprad River. Back in Slovakia Bardejov has a beautifully preserved old town, a treasure trove full of Gothic and Renaissance buildings huddled around the central square. Most of them date from the 14th to 17th centuries. If this isn't a great place for a coffee break than we don't know what is!

The ride from here to Košice, our destination today, takes us just over an hour. That's good because the historic center of Košice is also worth seeing. Just so much to do and to see around here...

Highlights:

#1: High Tatras



The smallest High Alpine mountain range in the world is a paradise for hikers and climbers. There are ten peaks of 8,500 ft or more, the highest one being Gerlachovsky stit at 8,711 ft. Because there are no roads in but only around the mountains the Tatras are a quiet and unspoiled refuge for people who want to enjoy pure nature.

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#2: Bardejov



Bardejov, one of the major towns of the Šariš region, received municipal privileges in 1320 and became a free royal town in 1376. Trade between Poland and Russia passed through the town and in the 15th century the Bardejov merchants grew rich, mainly through the production of cloth and fabrics.

The Thirty Years' War stopped the town's development in its tracks, but saved its fine Renaissance and Gothic center from being renovated away. This town center, a total of 84 buildings, was painstakingly restored between 1970 and 1990 at a cost of almost 9 million Dollars. The result is a contribution in Europe's architectural heritage that earned Bardejov a gold medal in 1986 and Unesco World Heritage status in 2000 (Lonely Planet)

#3: Košice



Košice originated in the 9th century and was chartered in 1241. In the late Middle Ages it was one of the 24 trading settlements of the Polish-Slovak frontier, in which immigrant German merchants were prominent. In 1660 Benedict Kischdy, the Hungarian bishop of Eger, founded a university at Košice that was later suppressed by the Austrians. There are remnants of the city's stout 17th-century fortifications, built as a defense against the Turks;

particularly well preserved are the Hangman's Bastion, now a museum, and the Mikluš Prison. The long medieval street known as Hlavná Ulica is still the centre of the city. Along it stand the great Gothic Cathedral of St. Elizabeth, St. Michael's Chapel, Levoča House (the former warehouse of the trading-settlement merchants), and several other churches and palaces. (www.britannica.com)

After WWII Košice rapidly developed into Eastern Slovakia's largest and most important urban center. Today almost 250,000 people live here and make it a very lively and enjoyable city.

RIDING DAY 4 : KOŠICE - ORADEA

Standard Route (275 km / 171 miles)

Today we have to cross two borders but Hungary is where we spend most of our day. The Great Hungarian Plain and the Northern Uplands are quite remote and not as touristically developed as, say, Budapest or the Balaton. But there is still so much to see that we can really only scratch the surface.

After crossing the border to Hungary first thing in the morning we take a little detour and check out the castle of Füzér, sitting high up on a rocky outcrop. If these walls could talk we would probably be sitting here for days, listening, but they can't and so we continue, down to the lowlands.

Tokaj is a famous wine region and the town of the same name is its center. Tokaj wine is sweet and heavy and very, very good. Throughout the town, you can sample it, or let's say you could if you didn't have to ride your bike. But why not buy a bottle, take it along and have it tonight as an aperitif or – even better – for dessert?

After Tokaj the roads we travel on are straight, and the land is flat. Many towns around here have a name that starts with 'Nyir', Hungarian for 'birch', a hint at what the landscape here used to look like. Today you see endless fields and few trees, but at least we are surrounded by greenery. Another popular prefix for town names is Hajdú, referring to the Hajduks, outlaws of south-eastern Europe from the 15th to the 18th centuries. Many of them were cattle people, working here, in the wide-open Puszta.

We work our way around the city of Debrecen and towards the Romanian border. It will take us a little while to cross it and on top of that we lose an hour due to the change of time zones, but Oradea, our destination for today, is just beyond the border.

Highlights:

#1: Füzér



Until recently the Castle of Füzér was a dilapidated ruin romantically hovering over a steep rock in north-eastern Hungary on the Slovakian border. Now (2012 – 2016) it has been completely rebuilt.

The Füzér castle was first mentioned in 1264, when it belonged to a local clan leader, Andronicus the Blind. It had been built before the Mongol invasion on a steep hill reaching more than 550 metres high. After the end of the war, the castle was soon taken over by King Béla IV who used it as one of his more important eastern strongholds. Thus, in 1529, the royal insignia were kept there and not at the usual castle, Visegrád. Around the same time, the castle was heavily fortified and fitted with a tower at the entrance gate, inspired by Italian architecture. In the end of the 17th century it was burned down in order to prevent the castle to be used by rebels and bands of robbers, who had harassed locals in the vicinity. After its destruction, the walls crumbled and the site was pillaged for its building material. (www.medievalhistories.com)

#2: Tokaj



It all began back in 1703 when Duke Ferenc Rakóczi II sent a present to King Luis XIV of France (the Sun King): wine from his vineyard in Tokaj. The Sun King loved the wine and famously said: “Vinum Regnum, Rex Vinorum”, which means “Wine of the Kings, King of Wines”. Tokaj wine went on to conquer Europe and became the favorite drink of contemporaries like Peter the Great, Catherine the Great,

Voltaire, Goethe and Schubert.

Later Tokaj wine was all but forgotten and behind the Iron Curtain it was nothing but cheap booze. But after the wall had fallen things turned around for Tokaj and its sweet, heavy wine that is made from a special variety of grapes and the fungus that lives on them. Azús, or Eruption, is the best, the most famous and the most expensive. You should definitely take a bottle home!

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#3: Oradea



Oradea has been identified as one of Romania's greenest, safest and smartest cities. With picturesque streets full of architectural stunners and centuries of history, Oradea's architectural heritage is impressive and it earned the city the inclusion in European Art Nouveau Network, alongside cities such as Budapest, Barcelona or Vienna. Many of the buildings have been refurbished recently, and travelers have plenty to add to their to-do list. Oradea counts close to 200,000 inhabitants, its historic center is mostly pedestrianised.

RIDING DAY 5 : ORADEA - SIGHIȘOARA

Standard Route (390 km / 242 miles)

Transylvania actually means “behind the forests” and describes a high plateau surrounded by a U-shaped mountain range. The region also has a German name, Siebenbürgen, because on several occasions since the 10th century German settlers were invited to come and settle here, usually in order to replenish the population that had been decimated by the Turks, the Tartars, the plague or other disasters. As a result, most towns and cities here have German names along with their Romanian ones and on top of that many also have Hungarian names because Transylvania was under Hungarian rule for a while. Like for a couple of hundred years. Sibiu for instance also goes by the names of Hermannstadt or Nagyszeben.

We enter the U from the north-west by crossing the Apuseni Mountains on small side roads, narrow, twisty, and bumpy. No tour buses around here! Past Alba Iulia we reach the central Transylvanian plains which are not completely plain but still hilly, so the roads stay interesting. Sighișoara, our destination, beckons with a picture-perfect historic center, supposedly the most beautiful one in all of Romania. Don't get there too late!

Highlights:

#1: Apuseni Mountains



The Apuseni Mountains are the north-westernmost branch of the Carpathian Mountains in Transylvania. They are fast becoming an agrotourism and ecotourism hotspot, as they offer wonderful scenery, secluded areas, great Romanian social and rural experiences, as well as a spirit and mood that is unbeatable. Despite still being fairly hard to access, especially by public transport, the Apuseni Mountains make

for a great off-the-beaten track destination. (www.wikivoyage.com).

Motorcyclists are also in for a treat in these mountains as the scenery is lovely and the roads are twisty and don't see much traffic. They can be quite bumpy, though.

#2: Transylvanian fortified churches



Transylvania's fortified churches are some of the most authentic and inspiring travel attractions in Romania. There are more than 200 Saxon fortified churches built from the 13th – 16th century. Seven of these churches were even registered as UNESCO world heritage in 1993.

The history behind the Fortified Saxon churches is the immigration of a large contingent of Saxons in the 12th and 13th centuries. Encouraged by the Hungarian kings they settled on the plateau surrounded by the Carpathian Mountains, where they enjoyed special privileges. During the period of Ottoman and Tartar invasions the communities fortified their churches and erected storehouses within the enclosures that they might withstand long sieges. (www.medievalhistories.com)

Dominating the landscape of their villages, these fortified churches are amazing works of arts, combining the spiritual, cultural and defensive roles to save their communities for centuries. Most of them can be found in the area south of Sighisoara and north-east of Sibiu.

#3: Sighișoara



Sighișoara is a small city in the Transylvania region of Romania, with a history dating back to the 1100s. Back then, the Hungarian king was begging Saxons to move to this part of the world in order to help defend his borders. German craftsmen and artisans took him up on it, and what resulted is today a fairy-tale-like fortified city in the heart of Romania.

It's no wonder this whole place is a UNESCO World Heritage site. With cobbled streets, colorful buildings, and a pedestrian-friendly Old Town, it's difficult not to fall in love with Sighișoara. Yes, it's a touristy place. And yes, it can feel a bit crowded in the summer. But it's still well worth a visit.

Along with being an old Saxon city, Sighișoara also has another claim to fame: being the birthplace of Vlad III (also known as Vlad Tepes, Vlad the Impaler, and Vlad Dracula). Vlad's father was ruler of nearby Wallachia, but was in exile in Transylvania when Vlad was born. Vlad's birthplace is still there, marked with a placard and now home to a very kitschy restaurant called "Casa Dracula." (www.dangerous-business.com)

RIDING DAY 6 : SIGHIȘOARA - BRAN

Standard Route (169 km / 105 miles)

Today's ride is quite short and the reason for that is a man who goes by the name of Dracula. Vlad the Impaler is the historic example for Count Dracula and the castle in Bran served as a model for Dracula's. There's no record of Vlad ever setting foot in Bran Castle but that doesn't keep visitors from around the world from flocking there in large numbers. And yes, it's worth it, the castle – in German known as Törzburg – is very interesting.

On our way to Bran we stop in Viscri, a picture-perfect Romanian village with an imposing fortified church and in Brașov, the biggest city around. Its pleasant main square is surrounded by colorful, meticulously restored baroque houses and screams out "take a break, have a coffee!" Good idea.

Highlights:

#1: Viscri



Viscrist is one of the most beautiful Saxon villages in Transylvania, designated as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO.

The construction of the fortified church in the village center began in 1100 A.D., a fact confirmed by the tombstone inscription in the cemetery that surrounds the church. In 1185, Saxons colonized the area, settling in the south-east of Transylvania. The Viscrist settlement was officially named

in 1400 – it was given the Latin title of Alba Ecclesia, or "White Church."

The church gave the village its name – as it was one of the most impressive in all Transylvania. The first towers were added around 1525. In the 18th century, a defensive wall and a covered passageway were built. An altar was added in 19th century with a painting as its centerpiece – "The Blessing of the Children," by local painter J. Paukratz.

Inside the church museum you can see woven and embroidered textiles, pottery, and handmade agricultural tools, as well as traditional clothing and furniture. From the fortification's towers you can admire the village scenery, with its hills and meadows, as well as the authentic hand-tiled roofs of the houses and barns.

Many of the traditional buildings have been salvaged and restored since 1999. The Mihai Eminescu Trust (Prince Charles is one of its patrons) has more than 300 projects in the area – including paving the roads, providing school transportation for the children, and supporting local entrepreneurial development. (www.experiencetransylvania.ro)

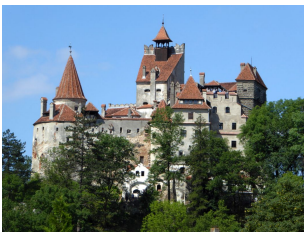
#2: Braşov



“Gothic spires, medieval gateways, Soviet blocks and a huge Hollywood-style sign: Braşov’s skyline is instantly compelling. A number of medieval watchtowers still glower over the town. Between them sparkle baroque buildings and churches, while easygoing cafes line main square Piaţa Sfatului. Visible from here is forested Mt Tâmpa, sporting ‘Braşov’ in huge white letters.” (www.lonelyplanet.com)

Braşov was founded by Teutonic Knights in the early 13th century under the name of Kronstadt, the city of the crown. Today it counts more than 250,000 inhabitants and is the largest settlement in Transylvania. The city’s most important building is the Black Church, built between 1380 and 1480 and scorched black by the great fire of 1689. The huge building is the most dominant feature of Braşov’s historic center and the focus of interest for every visitor. Walk up to the Black Tower for the best views!

#3: Bran Castle



Bram Stoker’s character, Dracula, is a Transylvanian Count with a castle located high above a valley perched on a rock. This character is often confused with Vlad Ţepeş (Vlad the Impaler), sometimes known as Vlad Dracul, who was a Wallachian Prince with a castle, now in ruins, located in the Principality of Wallachia. Because Bran Castle is the only castle in all of Transylvania that actually fits Bram Stoker’s description of Dracula’s Castle, it is known throughout the

world as Dracula’s Castle.

Bram Stoker never visited Romania. He depicted the imaginary Dracula’s castle based upon a description of Bran Castle that was available to him in turn-of-the-century Britain. Indeed, the imaginary depiction of Dracula’s Castle from the etching in the first edition of “Dracula” is strikingly similar to Bran Castle and no other in all of Romania.

Dracula – as he is perceived today – is a fictitious character whose name derives from the appellation given to Vlad Ţepeş, the ruler of Wallachia from 1456-1462 and 1476, and who, for largely political reasons, was depicted by some historians of that time as a blood-thirsty ruthless despot. (www.bran-castle.com)

“Vlad the Impaler”, as he is known today, most likely never set foot in Bran Castle, but that doesn’t diminish the experience. This castle, built around 1400, will set your imagination on fire.

RIDING DAY 7 : BRAN - SIBIU

Standard Route (262 km / 163 miles)

If Count Dracula allows us to leave his castle again (alive...) we hurry away, up into the Carpathians, This wild and remote mountain range is not only home to bears, wolves, and eagles, but also to Romania's most famous mountain road: Transfăgărășan. In endless curves, it takes us up to over 2,000 m of elevation, where the air is cool and the views are awesome. This road is very popular so don't expect to be all by yourself.

For the night we head to Sibiu, the gateway to the Carpathians and Romania's adventure capital. The historic city center was restored meticulously and features a lively pedestrian zone which, in turn, features numerous outdoor cafes, restaurants, and beer gardens. Needless to say that it pays to arrive in Sibiu a bit earlier.

Highlights:

#1: Transfăgărășan



Transfăgărășan may be difficult to pronounce but loads of fun to ride. We're talking about Romania's most famous and most spectacular road, a mountain pass across the main range of the Carpathians, connecting Transylvania to the Walachia. It was built between 1970 and 1974 mainly for strategic and military reasons, across 860 bridges and viaducts. 6,000 tons of dynamite were used and – officially

– 40 lives lost. The 151 km (94 miles) long road culminates at Bâlea-Pass, 2042 m (6,700 ft) above sea level.

The road was made famous in 2010 when TopGear took three supercars and a helicopter and produced a stunning video there. Jeremy Clarkson & Co awarded it the title "Best driving road in the World". Let's go and check if it's great for bikes, too!

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#2: Sibiu



Sibiu is awash in aristocratic elegance. Noble Saxon history emanates from every art nouveau facade and gold-embossed church. Renowned composers Strauss, Brahms and Liszt all played here during the 19th century, and Sibiu has stayed at the forefront of Romania's cultural scene through its festivals of opera, theatre and film, as well as rock, jazz and more. The country's first hospital, school,

library and pharmacy were all established here, and locals are justly proud of the spirit of enterprise that endures to this day.

Beyond its grand architecture, Sibiu has a good dose of bohemian flair. Houses with distinctive eyelid-shaped windows watch a cast of artists and buskers bustling below them. Cafes and bars inhabit brick-walled cellars and luminously decorated attics. Sibiu's soul lies somewhere in between genteel coffee culture and unbridled creativity; go find it. (www.lonelytravel.com)



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RIDING DAY 8 : SIBIU - TIMISOARA

Standard Route (382 km / 237 miles)

Today we leave Dracula's home Transylvania and head west, to the historical region of Banat. Timișoara is the center and its biggest city, a very historic place full of beautiful old buildings and with a very special atmosphere. It's our destination today.

After a couple of days on the road in Eastern or Central Europe people sometimes suffer from castle fatigue. If you are affected too you should think about this route today.

From Sibiu it will take you straight into the mountains, on the Transalpina road that is at least as beautiful as the Transfăgărășan further east, and in better condition. Countless curves, beautiful scenery, almost no traffic: riding the Carpathians can be so much fun. The road reaches an elevation of 2240 m, making it the highest in all of Romania.

But the road is beautiful all the way and it eventually takes you down to Caransebeș. For the rest of the ride we recommend the motorway. It was a long day and Timișoara features an old city center which is not completely restored yet but still very pretty and worth seeing.

Highlights:

#1: Transalpina



If adventure and Alpine scenery sound alluring, the TransAlpina road offers an ideal mix of the two. Winding its way through valleys and plateaus up to 2,145 m (7,038 ft) – a height not reached by any other mountain passage in Romania – the TransAlpina road offers breathtaking views together with lots of driving excitement.

Arguably the oldest road over the Carpathian Mountains, TransAlpina was built at the beginning of the 2nd Century AD by the Roman legions during their war campaign to conquer Sarmizegetusa – the capital of Dacia (modern-day Romania). After the conquest of Dacia, the Romans used the TransAlpina to transport to Rome the gold extracted from the central part of Romania (Transylvania). At the beginning of the second millennium, TransAlpina had become one of the main transhumance routes over the Carpathian Mountains; it still serves this purpose, even today. Paving of the road began in 1930 and eight years later King Carol II inaugurated the new TransAlpina (also named during the monarchy period "The King's Road"). (www.romaniatourism.com)

The important thing for riders like us: the road surface is in perfect condition and there is almost no traffic along the way. Apart from countless motorcycles of course...

#2: Ulpia Traiana Sarmizegetusa



Ulpia Traiana Sarmizegetusa was founded and became a capital almost 2,000 years ago, shortly after the Roman Empire conquered Dacia in 106 AD. The city was named in the memory of the victorious emperor, Traian, but also after the Dacian capital, Sarmizegetusa Regia, located only 40 km away. The city received from the start the privileged status of 'colonia' and later the 'ius italicum' that granted

communities outside Italy rights similar to those on Italian land, including a wider autonomy and several tax exemptions. The capital achieved even the status of 'metropolis' in the following century, a few decades before the Roman retreat south of the Danube. It was, in fact, the only city in the Roman province of Dacia that had this status.

The city had an approximate surface of 33 hectares (82 acres), surrounded by walls of 500 and 600 meters in length. The capital also extended outside the fences, on a surface of 60-80 hectares where many private and public houses were built. Between 20,000 and 30,000 people lived within these walls.

The capital was initially settled by veterans of the Dacian wars and it was inhabited until the 5th century, historical proof indicating that the large amphitheater was used at times as a fortress. (www.uncover-romania.com)

#3: Timisoara



First documented in 1212 as the Roman castrum (fort) Temesiensis, Timișoara in the 14th century became a fortress in the middle of marshland. The town was sacked by the Tatars in the 13th century, but its citadel was rebuilt and for a few years was the residence of Charles I of Hungary (1309–42). From 1552 the town was held by the Turks until the Austrians took it in 1716. After the Treaty of

Passarowitz in 1718, the city and the region, known as the Banat of Temesvár, were governed from Vienna and colonized with non-Magyars, mostly Swabian Germans. The city withstood a siege by Hungarian revolutionaries, lasting 107 days, in 1848. Occupied by Serbia in 1919, it was allotted by the Treaty of Trianon (1920) to Romania.

Antigovernment demonstrations that erupted in Timișoara on December 15–17, 1989, sparked the revolution that toppled the Romanian communist leader Nicolae Ceaușescu from power a few days later. It was Ceaușescu's use of deadly force to suppress the demonstrations in Timișoara that spurred the army to defect to the side of the uprising. (www.britannica.com)

Today the city counts more than 330,000 inhabitants and is the main social, economic and cultural centre in western Romania. In 2021 it will be the European Capital of Culture.

RIDING DAY 9 : TIMISOARA - PECS

Standard Route (318 km / 198 miles)

The fastest route from Timișoara to Pécs (pronounced “Petch”) describes a slight curve to the north in order to avoid going through Serbia. If you want (and if you have the right visa!) you can go through Serbia of course, but tour does not.

Instead we go straight to the Hungarian border and head to Szeged, the capital of paprika (chili peppers). Have you heard of a dish named Szegedin Goulash? It’s spiced stew with sauerkraut and according to (one) legend is was invented here.

A bit later we cross the Danube and we cross it the proper way: by ferry. Mohács, the town on the other side, is a pleasant place but more interesting is a historic site a bit further south, where an unusual monument remembers the year 1526. On August 29 of that year the Hungarian army lost the “Battle of Mohács” against the invading Turks, an event that “killed” independent Hungary and paved the way for several centuries of foreign domination. Rumor has it that some Hungarians still come to this site to cry. Only after dark of course.

Afterwards they usually go to Villány to get themselves some wine. A small mountain range protects this region from the cold northern winds, thus creating a preferable climate for vineyards. A lovely place to have a look around and stack up on some red or rosé.

Highlights:

#1: Szeged



Hungary's south-easternmost city truly deserves its nickname "Town of Sunlight", due to its 2,100 hours of sunshine per year at its location on the junction of the rivers Tisza and Maros. However, the water also left its traces. In 1879, a flood from the "Blond Tisza" nearly completely destroyed Szeged in one single night. Of the 70,000 inhabitants only 35,000 remained in the town and at

the surrounding farmsteads. International aid then helped to create a new city with magnificent Eclectic and Art Nouveau buildings. Berlin, Vienna, Paris, Brussels, London and Rome worked together so that this town, looking back on a long history, could come to life again. Until 1883, a new city was born in record time, totally marked by the Eclectic style. After that, the town counted 85,569 inhabitants in 1890. The builder of the new town was named Lajos Tisza, and he was honoured for his great feat with the title of a Count. Today the city has about 163,000 inhabitants and is famous for its food products, most of all paprika and salami („Pick“). (www.darmstadt.de)

#2: Mohács Historical Memorial Site



The 29th August 1526 was a tragic day in Hungarian history when the outnumbered Christian troops faced the invading Ottoman army in a fateful battle.

The Historical Memorial of Mohács was set up in 1976 in memory of the Battle of Mohács on the 450 anniversary of the battle. In an area of seven hectares, visitors step into a living history book written in pain and dignity, with vivid yet

modest imagination by symbols carved in wood and stone and supported by modern technology in a harmonic way. It is food for thought for the spectators, an introduction to the battle of Mohács and the fate of the Hungarian nation. (www.mohacs.hu)

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#3: Villany



Villany is both a town and region in the southernmost part of Hungary, located at the confluence of the Great Hungarian Plain, the Baranya Hills and the Villanya Mountains. Hungary's southernmost wine region is also one of Hungary's best wine regions, known primarily for its reds and rosés. Summers here are hot and dry, winters mild, and thanks to this sub-Mediterranean climate wines from Villány are full-bodied and spicy and of the highest quality.

The majority of Hungary's award-winning wines are produced in the Villány region. According to archeological finds winemaking traditions in the region can be traced back to Roman times.

The town of Villany itself is charming with its Swabian style whitewashed cellars, most of which are still in use.

#4: Pecs



Home to the world-famous Zsolnay ceramics and the largest Turkish ruins in Hungary, Pécs is a city of art and history. It is also a famous university town with many students, giving the city a youthful profile.

In the Middle Ages, Pécs was a center of education and learning. The University of Pécs, founded in 1367 is the oldest university in Hungary and one of the oldest in Europe. In 1777, Queen Maria Theresa gave Pécs the status of 'Free Royal Town' and once again the city started to flourish. Some Baroque monuments like a Franciscan church, a Franciscan monastery, and a former monastery of the Pauline order date back to this period.

In the 20th century, 'thanks' to a coalmine and a uranium mine, Pécs was partially converted into an industrial hub. Several factories were built, however after the fall of the Iron Curtain many have closed. Today, Pécs is a city of art and culture, filled with museums and galleries. It's not surprising that Pécs, named the 'Borderless City', was selected to be the European Capital of Culture in 2010, sharing the title with Essen (Germany) and Istanbul (Turkey). Several new venues were built throughout the city, including the Zsolnay Visitor Center and a Regional Library and Knowledge Center. (www.visitbudapest.travel)

Today the city of Pécs counts about 150,000 people and offers many historic sights and attractions, among them the Christian Necropolis which is part of the UNESCO's World Heritage.

EASTERN EUROPEAN DELIGHTS

RIDING DAY 10 : PECS - MARIBOR

Standard Route (257 km / 160 miles)

Today we have the chance of riding across the northern tip of Croatia. There's not much to see there but the town of Varaždin is actually very nice. Croatia has not signed the Schengen Agreement yet, so entering and leaving the country are "real" border experiences.

As soon as we reach Slovenia, the only country with 'love' in its name, the landscape becomes hilly and pretty. Past the imposing castle of Borl we reach Ptuj which, for many centuries, went by the German name of Pettau. It is the center of a lovely wine growing region and well worth a stop, even if only for coffee instead of wine. Maribor, our destination, is only half an hour away.

Highlights:

#1: Varaždin



Varaždin counts close to 50,000 inhabitants and features a beautiful old town with many restored buildings and a 14th century castle. The pedestrian zone is filled with bars, cafes and restaurants, there are shops, galleries and museums. The town has a very pleasant, laid-back atmosphere, no crowds, almost no international tourists, everybody here seems to be a local.

#2: Ptuj



Ptuj is the oldest city in Slovenia. In 103 AD Roman Emperor Traian granted city rights to the settlement that had been here since the Stone Age. Over the centuries the town became important and wealthy; in 450 AD it had about 40,000 inhabitants. For centuries it competed with Maribor, 26 km upriver, in both crafts and commerce. But in the mid-19th century the railway from Vienna to the coast was built through Maribor and Ptuj found itself on the siding.

The town's main attraction is the mighty Ptuj Castle; together the Dominican and the Minorite Monastery it shapes the Ptuj townscape. Other sights worth seeing are monuments, the City Tower and the City Hall. Around Ptuj is one of Slovenia's best-loved wine regions, producing an excellent range of white wines. Ptuj Wine Cellar is the

oldest wine cellar in the country!

#3: Maribor



Situated in the north-east corner of Slovenia, just south of the Austrian border, Maribor's southern boundary is the River Drava and its northern one a steep hill known as Piramida. In the 15th and 16th centuries the city came under attack by the Turks, and some of its old fortifications survive, including the picturesque Judgement Tower and Water Tower, with their witch's-hat red-tiled roofs.

The pride of Maribor's waterfront, however, is a plant – the oldest vine in the world (according to Guinness World Records), which has been producing grapes for 450 years. The wine is not for sale and is said to be virtually undrinkable, but it is none the less the subject of an interesting little museum and a 10-day festival each September. Most Slovenian wine is actually very good.

The city was heavily bombed during the Nazi occupation so much of the centre is modern. Luckily it escaped the worst excesses of Iron Curtain architecture and enough classical façades survive to give a sense of what life must have been like here under the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The oldest buildings are the Gothic cathedral and a section of the 15th-century castle, which now contains the Regional Museum. (www.telegraph.co.uk)

EASTERN EUROPEAN DELIGHTS

RIDING DAY 11 : MARIBOR - ADMONT

Standard Route (250 km / 155 miles)

Austria's southernmost province, Styria, is known for its mild climate, its many vineyards, its unusual traditional wooden houses – and for Arnold, the “Austrian Oak”.

Right after crossing the border we turn left and ride through the beautiful Styrian Wine Region, a very popular holiday region, especially for people on bicycles. It's illegal to even ride a bicycle while under the influence but many of them don't seem to know or care.

The provincial capital of Graz welcomes us with plenty of traffic, that's why we just bypass it instead of going in all the way. Back in 2005 Arnold Schwarzenegger had a dispute with his home town over his refusal to pardon a convict in California, where he was Governor at the time. Subsequently his name had to be removed from the local soccer stadium, Arnold is not a son of Graz anymore. At least the museum in his birth house in Thal is still there.

West of Graz you can have a look at one of the world's most unusual churches and/or at the famous stud farm, where the white Lipizzaner stallions for the Spanisch Riding School in Vienna are bred. After that some stunning roads lead us to Admont, a small town in the middle of the mountains. The magnificent basilica is worth a closer look!

Highlights:

#1: Southern Styria Wine Region



Tiny, twisty little roads through vineyards and orchard, over hills dotted with churches, wineries and the occasional castle. Beautiful houses, surrounded by flowers. Fantastic panoramic views around every corner. In short: it is a picture-perfect paradise. There are several designated tourist routes in the area, for instance the Southern Styrian Wine Road along the Slovenian border or the Saustal Wine Road a bit further north.

2,000 years ago the Romans noticed that the climate in southern Styria was very good for growing grapes. Styrian wine was even exported back to Rome! Today there are 13 different varieties cultivated here; the specialty is the co-called “Schilcher”, a light rosé.

#2: Schwarzenegger-Museum



The Arnold Schwarzenegger birthplace in Thal/Graz is not only the official, but furthermore the only museum worldwide that is bearing his name and is supported by the man himself.

The museum is located in the former forester's lodge of the Herberstein dynasty. Since 2011 you can visit the place where it all began. Here you can follow the footsteps of the

probably most famous Austrian.

Numerous exhibits show his remarkable career, including his most important stages of life like his childhood and adolescence, becoming the world's best bodybuilder, biggest movie star and the Governor of California. Go face to face with the Terminator himself – Enter the life of Arnold Schwarzenegger! (www.arnieslife.com)

#3: Admont



The name Admont derives from the Latin expression "ad montes," "at the mountains". While the history of the town dates back at least to 859 AD its most important part was founded in 1074: The Benedictine Abbey.

Admont Abbey is the oldest remaining monastery in Styria and contains the largest monastic library in the world. The abbey is known for its Baroque architecture, art, and manuscripts.

While the abbey itself was completed in 1074 the library (late Baroque) was not completed until 1776. It was commissioned by Abbot Matthäus Offner (reigned 1751-1779) and built by the Graz Master Builder Josef Hueber (1715-1787).

The library is divided into three sections and has an overall length of 70 m (230 ft), a width of 14 m (46 ft) and 11 m (36 ft) in height (12.7 m in the central cupola). Adorning the ceilings are seven frescoes by Bartolomeo Altomonte who was 80 years old at the time and completed the frescoes over the summer months of 1775 and 1776. The frescoes depict the steps in 'man's exploration of thinking and speaking from the sciences to Divine Revelation in the central cupola'. The sculptures in the library were made by master Baroque sculptor Josef Stammel. Particularly famous is The Four Last Things, a group of four oversized presentations of Death, the Last Judgement, Heaven and Hell.

Lastly, the library collection comprises some 200,000 volumes. The most valuable treasures are the more than 1,400 manuscripts (the earliest from the 8th century) and the 530 incunabula (early printed books before 1500). (<http://twistedstifter.com>)

RIDING DAY 12 : ADMONT - WIEN (VIENNA)

Standard Route (315 km / 196 miles)

Some paper maps, like the ones from Michelin for example, mark roads that especially scenic with a green line. You will be happy to hear that almost all the roads we are on today are 'green', from the "Gesäuse" to the Salza valley, from the Gscheid pass to the Klostertal valley, even the "Weinstraße" to Mödling, a suburb of Vienna, is greenlined. Great riding fun? We do think so!

But besides all the riding fun there is also something to see today. Eisenerz is home to a huge open pit iron mine which serves as a race track once per year for a hardcore off-road motorcycle event. A ride across the mine in a huge dump truck is a very unusual and interesting experience.

Past Mariazell we continue eastwards and stay in the mountains as long as possible, but eventually we have to leave them, descend towards Baden and see the Pannonian plain, stretching away into the distance. Vienna, here we come...

Highlights:

#1: Gesäuse National Park



Precipitous limestone peaks, green forests and mountain pastures, mountain huts with fabulous views and the turbulent, foaming river rapids which give this high Alpine region its name await you in the Gesäuse National Park.

For centuries the Gesäuse has been famous for its breathtakingly beautiful, inaccessible scenery. Ever since Alpine sport began, the name Gesäuse has been synonymous with unique outdoor experiences for hikers, climbers, water sports enthusiasts and ski tourers. Over millions of years the waters of the Enns have deeply eroded this mountain range. In the process it created a gorge with steep walls soaring up to 1,800 metres into the air. The Gesäuse is home to the last unregulated sections of this great Alpine river, starting at the entrance to the Gesäuse, where the gentle Enns turns into white water. It drops more than 150 meters over the 16 kilometer gorge.

In 2002 the northernmost part of the Ennstaler Alps was declared a National Park. (www.nationalpark.co.at)


#2: Erzberg mine



The Erzberg (“Ore Mountain”) is Central Europe’s largest iron ore mine. 12 million tons of material are excavated and up to 3 million tons of ore produced each year. Mining has been going on here for at least 850 years, but since ore reserves are estimated to exceed 235 million tons there is still enough of the precious stuff left for many more years. Since 1988 the open pit mine has been used for sports events. First for car races (“European Pikes Peak”), from

1995 for endure bikes. The “ErzbergRodeo” attracts 1500 riders each year, 500 make it to the finals, the “Hare Scramble”, and less than 50 usually reach the finish line. No Austrian rider has ever won it, but whoever wins is usually riding a KTM.

Today the Erzberg is one of the area’s major tourist attraction. Guided tours are on offer and some of them even include a ride in a 75 ton dump truck (“Haully Tour”).



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