


The Land of Maramureş Romaniá

Get Off the Beaten Path





photo: Gabriel Motica



"The soundtrack for this bucolic landscape is one of tumbling water and distant bells, of the rumble of cartwheels over a wooden bridge, of dogs barking and geese complaining, of keening birds of prey and the liquid whistle of a shepherd trying to keep his ewes from straying"

(Lonely Planet Traveller)



photo: Ionel Onofraş

The Land of Maramureş (*Țara Maramureşului*) is one of Europe's most important eco-destinations, a well kept secret known only to the initiated. Over time, the place has been visited by photographers such as Henri Cartier-Bresson, Martine Franck and Miya Kosei, by the writer William Blacker (who wrote *Along the enchanted way: A Romanian Story*), and also by celebrities such as Bill Gates, Prince Charles and many more.

If beautiful landscapes can also be found in other parts of the continent (this is true, though not so alive and wild), not the same can be said about the people of the area, whose rural civilisation is unique.

Here, in Northern Transylvania, is the last bastion of those upholding the ancient European traditions and the last place with authentic native organic farming. Here we have a focal point of a genuine peasant culture under pressure from the internet, globalisation and EU rules, showing us how Europe was 50 years ago, before the industrialization of agriculture.

In Maramureş, those searching for the essence of "slow living" and "back to nature" can find a way of life in which many inhabitants still practise self-sufficient farming. Large areas of the Land of Maramureş have never seen pesticides or pest treatments because modern farming has simply not reached these high altitudes. The vegetables, fruits, meat and milk produced here have a taste from your childhood, while the air and water are as pure as champagne.



ruralMaramures



A sea of green

The Land of Maramureş, surrounded on three sides by the Carpathian Mountains and with Ukraine at its northern border, is located in the extreme north of Romania, occupying half of the county of the same name (*Maramureş*). Today's borders were drawn during the communist period, when this small region, full of tourist attractions, was united with three other neighbouring "lands": the Lands of Lăpuş, Chioar and Codru, together with the city of Baia Mare (situated across the mountains).

The Land of Maramureş becomes, between the months of April and September, a sea of green, depending on the texture of the land (meadows, orchards, grasslands or forests). The green is so intense, so consistent, that it resembles the Amazonian jungles. As the year progresses, you can witness a rainbow of crimson colours, a precursor to the white of the winter.



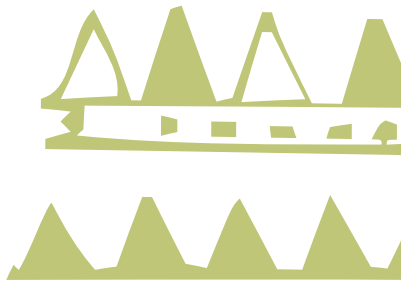


photo: Péter Lengyel

The landscape is spread across a network of river valleys, separated by hills and lined with villages, many of them leading into each other, below the wonderful rising mountain crests. On the nearby hills you can see mosaic agro-terraces, built during the Middle Ages, most being used today as meadows or arable lands, of which the best can be seen in the area of Breb – Budești and Bogdan Vodă – Bocicoiel. All over, on higher ground, can be seen hazel tree bushes, followed by forests of beech, oak, fir trees and spruce. In these areas, you will also find edible mushrooms, cranberries, raspberries, blackberries and wild strawberries, which can be picked and eaten without concern while in season. Above the forests, there are alpine grasslands, often covered with snow for seven months of the year.

The network of valleys is bordered by hills and mountain chains. Towards the west and south are volcanic mountains (dormant for nine million years). Here, there are crystal cascades, forested gorges, superb lava plateaus covered with glades and peat swamps hosting rare species (such as insectivore plants), but also relics of volcanic activity, the most beautiful being *Creasta Cocoșului* (The Rooster's Crest). In the Budești and Botiza mountains, there are mineral deposits (gold, silver, copper, lead or zinc) which have been extracted until recently, through mines dug from the far side of the mountains.

To the south are the crests of the Rodna Mountains (reaching heights of 2303 metres), a National Park crowned by the Pietrosul Mare peak (a UNESCO – MAB biosphere reserve).

Beneath the tall peaks, which were once glaciated, are the crystal mirrors of small glacial lakes. In all of these mountains are impressive hidden caves, limestone cliffs and the great Horses' Waterfall (*Cascada Cailor*), the highest in the Romanian Carpathians.

The eastern half of the region is occupied by the Maramureș Mountains Natural Park. Massive and relatively low, up to an altitude of 1957 m, these mountains are covered by large forests and extensive grasslands, peppered with small alpine lakes, cliffs and caves. Here is situated one of the most beautiful wonders of nature, the Vaser Valley (where runs the so-called *Mocănița*, a narrow gauge steam railway), densely forested with beech and spruce.



activeMaramureș

photo: Kalmár Zoltán





photo: Vali Tămaș

Besides these two parks, Maramureș also comprises many small nature reserves and several Natura 2000 sites.

Volcanic mountains stretch to the west, the Lăpuș and Țibles Mountains preserving (at Băiuț and Groșii Țibleșului) centuries-old beech and fir forests, which have recently been included in the UNESCO heritage.

The Land of Maramureș sustains one of the richest biodiversities in Europe, with 11.000 of plant and animal species, a heaven for wild flowers (orchids, edelweiss, rhododendron etc.), butterflies and birds, with virgin forests hosting large carnivores (bear, wolf, lynx) and many endemic species (15 new species of invertebrates discovered since 1995). In this region, there are also hundreds of mineral springs (most of which are not used) and also salt lakes, like the ones at Ocna Șugatag, a small spa town.

Those interested in “weird” phenomena are attracted on the way from Cavnic to Budești, to experience a perfect optical illusion, combined with a slight anomaly of gravitation, to the place where cars appear to “climb” a slope with the engine stopped!

Buildings of hay

The hay fields covering important areas in the Land of Maramureş represent a connection between man and nature, create a special atmosphere and illustrate the agricultural abilities of the locals, acquired through centuries of experience.

Within and around the villages, the landscape is dotted with thousands of haystacks. Occasionally, between haystacks and often near stables, you see hay barracks (*şopruri*), cube-like ventilated structures, with a pyramidal roof, that can be raised or lowered vertically on the four corner posts, depending on the amount of dried grass that they store.

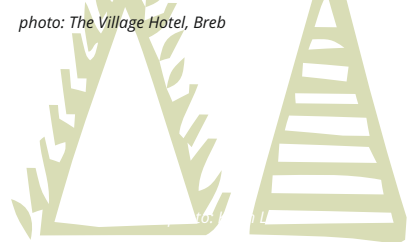
Hay, the main fodder used by the inhabitants of Maramureş, to feed their cattle, requires work all the year round. Men are the ones who carry it home in carts (and in wintertime, sledges) pulled by horses or tractors. They are the ones who fertilize the land by hand-spreading manure at the start of winter and clean it in the spring (helped also by the women), by torching the vegetable waste. Mowing takes place once, twice or three times a year, mostly during June-September, using motorised mowers or even manual scythes.

The hay drying, by repeated turning with forks and wooden rakes, is performed by women, men and also children, everybody offering help with the building of the haystacks.

Hundreds of species of melliferous flowers (the honey here is exceptional!) and herbs among the organic fields of Maramureş create a wonderful paradise of biodiversity, and the milk produced by the cattle has an unforgettable taste.



photo: The Village Hotel, Breb



Small houses



This landscape, with its unmistakable man-made features, seen from above resembles the fairy lands of the brothers Grimm, dominated by houses one after the other lining the villages of the valleys. Away from the main roads, houses become a rarer sight and on hills and low mountains, only small groups of isolated households can be found.



woodMaramureș

Until 30-40 years ago, when new building materials appeared, almost all of the houses in the region were made of wood, like most of the tools and objects in daily use, which led to Maramureş being known as "The Land of Wood".

Notwithstanding modernisation, a lack of enforced regulations and demolitions, there are still thousands of wooden houses, built from horizontal beams of oak or fir wood, of small dimensions, with high pitched roofs, some keeping a specific porch with sculpted columns, and a roof covered by fir wood shingles (more and more rare and expensive and requiring replacement every 15-20 years).

You can also photograph hundreds of wooden gates, carved with ornaments inspired by magic (the twisted rope, the tree of life, the hand, the snake or human silhouettes), by totems (horns or wolf fangs), or by cosmic, pre-Christian influences (the sun and the moon).

photo: Karin Lachner



In the yards of these micro-farms (almost all of the households are actually just that), one can see stables and pens for cattle, hay barns, agricultural tools and sometimes “pot trees” on which are hung colourful pots and pans, a custom with three explanations: a girl living here is available for marriage, a sign of wealth, or just a way to store and keep the dishes dry!

The best preserved villages of the Land of Maramureş are to be found on the Iza River Valley (such as Botiza or Săcel), on the Mara River Valley (Desesti or Sat Şugatag) and especially on the Cosău River Valley (all of the villages, including Breb – considered by many as the most beautiful village in Maramureş).

Even if many buildings have been restored and enlarged using new materials, their utility remains mainly the same, as proof of the extraordinary traditionalism and conservatism of the locals. The most valuable old houses have been moved to open air museums from Sighetu-Marmaţiei, Baia Mare, Cluj-Napoca, Sibiu and Bucureşti.



photo: Gabriel Motica



photo: Gabriel Matica

... and tall churches

Also constructed from wood is an impressively built heritage of 35 old churches, five of which are protected by UNESCO: Desești, Budești-Josani, Bârsana-Jbâr, Poienile Izei and Ieud-Deal (plus three more UNESCO churches in the south of the county: Șurdești, Plopiș and Rogoz). These are built in the amazing “Maramureș Gothic” style and contain furniture and old icons made from wood or glass, covered in naive frescoes (“Biblia pauperum”, addressed to the illiterate). In some narthexes, one can see frightening scenes from The Last Judgement, describing the punishments for sinners, scenes whose efficiency was proven time and again. Thus, thanks to the images of torture for those guilty of adultery and drunkenness, divorce was unknown in some villages until only thirty or forty years ago!

Most existing churches were built in the 17th and 18th centuries. In the last 30 years, many new wooden religious constructions have been erected, both churches and monasteries (the most famous being the Bârsana Monastery). The region holds seven of the top 10 tallest wooden churches in the world, the first four being, in order: Săpânța-Peri (75 m tall), Ieud-Crucișoare (60 m), Rozavlea-Șesu Mânăstirii (58 m) and Bârsana Monastery (57 m).

Medieval crafts

Without exaggeration, the Land of Maramureș can be considered a capital of traditional crafts, with thousands of artisans using wood and textiles.

Here one can see in working condition the largest European grouping of water-powered peasant installations, made from wood, still functioning and in daily use (without any museum or tourist purpose), almost unknown, unprotected and still in active use by their owners. They are called: whirlpools (*vâltori*) (used to wash textiles by the centrifugal action of water), flour mills (grinding corn for polenta—*mămăligă*—or animal fodder), fulling mills used to make a thicken woollen fabric (*pănura*), carding mills (where the sheep wool is prepared for hand spinning) and even a thresher and a saw mill (which are still preserved, but haven't been active in the last few years).



photo: Costas Dumitrescu



The most numerous installations of this type, reconstructed many times over the years on the same foundations, can be seen on the banks of the Cosău River, in the village of Sârbi and in Săcel, in Iza Valley.

The wool of sheep, trimmed in spring with primitive scissors, is processed by hundreds of women from all over the villages. There are still many traditional looms which, especially in the cold season, are pressed into use for the weaving of linen, rugs, thick woollen quilts decorated with stripes or floral motifs and carpets which are either offered as part of the symbolic dowry to brides-to-be, or sold to tourists. In this field, the most appreciated are the woven rugs from Botiza, coloured with vegetal dyes, decorated with tens of ancient motives and having both sides absolutely identical (an art recently included in the UNESCO heritage) and the striped blankets from Săpânța.

Maramureș is the place where you may find traditional costumes for all ages (including toddlers), to be worn especially during religious feast days and still produced today (in villages such as Breb, Sârbi, Călinești, Bârsana, Oncești etc), although expensive and requiring a lot of detail. It is also worth seeing how *opinci* (the traditional footwear threatened with disappearance, made from two pieces of leather or rubber, sewed like a clog and fixed on the foot with laces) are produced at Sârbi, Bârsana, Călinești or Bocicoiel or waistcoats with floral motives from Sat Șugatag, Breb, Oncesti, Vișeu de Jos or Borșa. You should also visit the hat makers from Sârbi and Budești, producing small straw hats called *clopuri* (long ago they were bigger and flatter) which perhaps do not protect so well against the rain or sun, but which highlight the pride that local inhabitants claim in being

ex-noblemen, at least according to some! In the past, the Land of Maramureș had the largest population of nobility in the Kingdom of Hungary and the Austrian and Austro-Hungarian Empires (to which it belonged until 1918).

In almost every village, there are wood craftsmen, carvers or carpenters who build houses, gates or churches (as at Ieud, Desești, Bârsana, Breb, Săcel or Valea Stejarului). Then there are still some still active blacksmiths, a few coopers making barrels and other wooden pots (like the one from Poienile de Sub Munte), basket weavers (from hazel tree fibres at Breb, from willow in the villages on the Tisa Valley), ceramics and demon-like masks for Christmas (both found in Săcel), or glass icons (at Săpânța, Bârsana monastery or in Sighetu- Marmației) etc.

This is a land where you can see carts pulled by horses (and extremely rarely by water buffaloes or oxen), a true joy to the eye, especially at the most impressive farmers markets taking place weekly or monthly in Bogdan Vodă, Dragomirești, Sighetu-Marmației and in other places.



photo: CJMM

Food like grandma used to cook



photo: Gabriel Motica

Fruits grow in the orchards and yards of the locals, as are vegetables and other ancient edible species of plants (potatoes, corn, onion, garlic, cabbage, pumpkins, carrots, etc) used for daily consumption or preserved for the long months of winter (like *zacusca*, a mix of tomatoes, peppers, onion, mushrooms, eggplants). The traditional dishes are *mămăliga* (polenta, or corn porridge) with sheep's cheese, sour cream or with stew. Then there are dairy products, various types of soup (green salad, beans with smoked pork, fresh or dried beans, chicken or potatoes), *sarmale* (pickled cabbage leaves stuffed with rice and pork meat, or with mushrooms and corn for the fasting periods), pies and *cozonaci* (a type of sweet pastry filled with walnuts, apples, poppy seed), homemade bread and so on.

A pig is sacrificed in the yard following a precise and ancestral ritual before Christmas, then turned into various sausage types (*cârnați*, *caltaboși*, *tobă*, *pateu*), ham and bacon, smoked or preserved in salted water taken from mineral springs.

Small family restaurants have appeared in several villages (Breb, Budești), offering typical local dishes, and there are, as well, a few trout farms (in Mara or Săpânța), where you can eat tasty mountain fish. The most famous restaurants are to be found in Sighetu Marmăției and Vișeu de Sus, but also over the mountains, in Baia Mare.



photo: CJMM



The institution of “pălincă”

The best known and most important local beverage is *pălinca* (or *horinca*), a true brand. It refers to a double-distilled spirit, made from plums, apples, pears or cherries, with a strength of over 50 degrees proof.

The authentic beverage is produced by small artisan distillers, living in all the Maramureș villages, using copper stills crafted by Roma coppersmiths. These alcohol distilleries are usually found on the banks of streams, where the water is used in the cooling part of the distilling process.

The procedure starts in June when the cherries appear. Afterwards the plums, pears and apples are harvested, ground and fermented in large receptacles. At just the right time, the mixture is processed, a procedure taking hours or even days, depending on the amount of fruit and number of chambers in the still. The climax of the season is reached in September-November with most of the distilleries located in the Cosău and Iza Valleys.

photo: CJMM



If you see bottles tied upside down in a tree, you might want to know that this is the method through which pears grow inside bottles, thereby greatly outgrowing the size of the bottles' neck. The bottles are taken down in autumn, filled with *pălinca* and sold, to the amazement of those unaware of the technique. *Pălinca* improves with age and doesn't expire, making it wise to build a stock. Other drinks obtained from alcohol, sweeter and a bit less strong, are: *afinata* (based on wild blueberries), *vișinata* (from sour cherries) and *cireșata* (from wild or cultivated cherries).

Until recent decades, the *pălinca* also contained some strands of the rare plant called *pedicuță* (*Lycopodium clavatum*), because "this was the custom". Actually, today it is known that this plant is an effective detoxification agent and is used to treat alcoholism!

Why is *pălinca* an "institution"? Because it is respected, it can bring some income, it is consumed at all significant ceremonies in life, perceived as a treatment and a powerful disinfectant, it's used for unlocking doors and mouths otherwise sealed and it's even a currency! Whether it be at the spout of the still itself, or with a glass in company, there's a long discussion to be had on this matter...

One of the many expressions related to the legendary drink would be: *pălinca* is of two kinds: very good and very little!



photo: Gabriel Motica

Extraordinary customs



photo: Gheroghe Petriță

The people of Maramureș are welcoming, hardworking, ironic and cheerful although they also spent 45 years under a communist dictatorship who sent them, their parents or grandparents to jail and stole their land, mills, cattle and forests. Don't be amazed if, when passing by somebody's home, you are invited inside for a glass of pălincă, as this is a normal gesture and practised frequently in the region!

In Maramureș, Romanians represent the main ethnicity, co-habiting with Ukrainians, Hungarians, and small German, Roma and Jewish communities (who have in Sighetu Marmatiei 2 Synagogues, a huge cemetery and the Elie Wiesel museum). The religion with the most followers is Orthodoxy, followed by Catholicism and Protestantism.

The year is marked by religious events, the most attractive ones for tourists being Easter and Christmas. At Easter (there are two: Catholic and Orthodox) everybody brings to the church

baskets with food and wine to be blessed by the priest (a custom practised both during the night and on the morning of The Resurrection), forming impressively long lines in front of the churches. On this occasion, specific dishes are prepared: boiled eggs painted red, specially decorated sweet bread called pască (made with eggs, sour cream, fresh cheese, raisins and sugar), smoked ham and stuffed lamb. At Christmas, specific foods are prepared from the recently sacrificed pig. On Christmas Eve, the children visit the neighbours and relatives and sing Christmas carols, receiving treats of sweets and money.



photo: Mihai Ian Nedelcu

A special moment is also the pre-Christian ritual of All Saints' Day / the Day of the Dead, celebrated by families with food and beverages, around the 1st of November.

A series of specific customs take place around any of the big events in life. Weddings, with horseback riders, their horses dressed for celebration, with musicians and hundreds of participants, lasting up to an entire day and night, represent the climax of joy. Funerals, with pre-Christian rites (such as the Charon's obol, meaning the coin placed in the dead person's hand) ends with a festive meal in memory of the deceased, a moment where respectful outsiders would be welcome to join.



folkloreMaramureș

The ancestral sheepfold

It all begins with a communal farming ritual, taking place in May, called “the Measuring of the milk/sheep” (*Mulsul măsurii*). Usually, most sheep (and goat) owners keep just a few head of sheep, kept at home during the cold season and fed with hay. At the beginning of May, once the grass starts growing, farmers gather on mountain hills for sheep fairs. Each village has a special place (sometimes more than one) where this ritual occurs, at variable dates depending on the weather. This is the occasion when shepherds are hired to take care of each person's sheep until autumn, when they are returned to their owners. They will take responsibility for looking after and guarding the sheep all through the summer, with the help of fierce dogs trained for fighting the wolves and bears which occasionally attack the herds at night, in the mountains.

photo: Ștefan Béla





photo: Gabriel Motica

In the presence of the owners, the sheep are milked and the amount is measured. This is used to estimate the amount of milk and cheese that the animals will produce over the summer. Then the priest blesses the sheep, the dogs and the shepherds, and the event is followed by a great meal together.

The sheep are gathered in sheepfolds (200-500 head of sheep) to graze together. Then, the herd either remains near the village (where there might be meadows available) or they are taken together on a long climb to the mountain accompanied by the sounds of *trâmbița*, a type of long trumpet similar to a metal alpine horn, crafted by artisans). Traditionally, the sheep stay at night in mobile enclosures, guarded all around by dogs, and during the day graze on meadows, being milked twice a day by the shepherds. The shepherds usually stay in primitive huts, without electricity or running water.



One of the shepherds, the *baciul* (the leader of the sheepfold), prepares two types of organic unfermented cheese (*caș* - a hard cheese – and *urdă* – a sweet cheese like feta). The sheep owners come regularly to the sheepfold to take the cheese (the surplus will be sold in the markets), on which occasion they provide the shepherds with the agreed payment, according to a preliminary deal.

A visit to a sheepfold, especially one situated in a place far from civilisation, represents an unforgettable experience.

Maramureș for everyone

Maramureș, this area where nature, rural charm, organic farming, people, crafts and unique customs combine, is closer to the heart of Europe than it seems.

The main international airport (Cluj-Napoca), as well as the entrance to the network of European highways (in Hungary) are at about 180 km away from the Land of Maramureș hub, Sighetu-Marmației. Other airports are at Baia Mare (80 km away) or Satu Mare (120 km away from Sighetu Marmatiei). The town (where there is also a road border crossing to Ukraine) is connected also to the railway network: a train leaves Bucharest's Gara de Nord each evening, arriving in Sighetu-Marmatiei the following morning, with first and second class sleeping carriages, and returning daily each evening to Bucharest. On both the inward and outward journeys, the traveller enjoys spectacular views of Maramures as it travels slowly the whole length of the county, exiting this enchanted land through the second longest railway tunnel in Romania at Dealul Ștefăniței.



In the region, there are hundreds of accommodation places, starting from hostels, camping grounds up to four-star hotels, but the most authentic experience is at the rural bed-and-breakfasts (some of which are restored old traditional houses). Within the county, distances can be covered by car, bus, caravan, motorbike or bicycle. In the most visited areas (Cosău-Mara-Iza valleys), the villages practically lead into each other, thus walking is an option for short or longer distances.

If you plan to visit the Land of Maramureș, prepare for a diverse offering. From the mountains to the everglades of the rivers, through alpine grasslands and glacial lakes, caves and virgin forests, you can walk, hike, do photo safari, ski or extreme sports. Visiting the towns and especially the villages with their myriad of micro-farms, traditional craftsmen, wooden buildings and interesting museums, requires time. Don't forget that in the region there are also attractions like the Mocănița small gauge steam railway on the Vaser Valley from Vișeu de Sus, the Memorial to the Victims of the Resistance to Communism in Sighetu-Marmației, the Merry Cemetery in Săpânța, the Bârsana Monastery etc.



photo: Gabriel Motica

The recommended visit length should be from 3 to 5 days and the best time to go is April-October or around Winter holidays.

Maramureş is a destination for families or solo travellers, for old style farm nostalgics or eco enthusiasts, for photographers or adventurers, for students or backpackers. It's also a romantic place for lovers, as well as for those who want to travel in time back to their childhood memories.

To each and everyone, the magic Land of Maramureş, this fabulous corner of Northern Transylvania from Romania, has something to offer!

photo: Gabriel Motica



Edited by



turism@cjmaramures.ro

www.visitmaramures.ro



Romanian text: Teofil Ivanciuc

Front cover photo: Gabriel Motica

Back cover photo: Ioana Socaciu



photo: Ștefan Béla



