

Travel



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Travel Transylvania

Sean Newsom heads to Romania to visit the 'Yellowstone of Europe', which teems with wolves, lynx, wild boar – and bears



The bear arrives just as the light begins to fade. We're about to stop watching and go to bed, convinced that a sudden thunderstorm has washed away any chance of a sighting on this Carpathian mountainside. Then, softly and without drama, Christoph Promberger, our guide, announces its arrival.

"Bear," he says, quietly.

And there it is, nosing its way into the clearing beneath our hide, with that always active, ever vigilant sense of exploration that wild animals have: head up, head down, sniffing the air, snuffling over the ground, stopping to listen, moving carefully on – a dance of sensory investigation that takes every aspect of this darkening landscape into account.

Despite the plate-glass windows of our comfortable hide (complete with posh bunk beds, cooker and an invigoratingly cold shower), this particular *Ursus arctos* is oblivious to its audience. We, on the other hand, are rapt – and not just because of its sleek, dark-brown beauty.

What's just as captivating is the context. This isn't some far-flung corner of Alaska or Siberia. We're in Europe and only a four-hour drive north of Bucharest airport. The clearing is fringed by rowan trees, alders, elderflowers, silver birches and beeches – the building blocks of many British woodlands. If the slopes weren't quite so steep, there are parts of this Romanian landscape that would be the image of Epping Forest, near my home in London. And yet here in this familiar scene is an animal so rare and exotic that I'm half expecting David Attenborough to pop up and begin one of his mellifluous, fireside-style commentaries.

He may yet have good reason to visit. Because if Christoph and his team have their way, this magnificent creature will soon be a resident of one of Europe's most exciting new national parks. Set in the Fagaras Mountains in the southern Carpathians, it will most likely be called Fagaras National Park – and at up to 620,000 acres, it'll be larger than the Lake District National Park. What's more, unlike the Lakes, it will be as close to a wilderness as anyone can manage in modern Europe, and inhabited by a spectacular array of wildlife.

"The Carpathians is the only large-scale landscape in central Europe to have kept all its big mammal fauna," says Christoph, a Bavarian who started his career as a naturalist studying wolves in the Yukon. "We already have bears, wolves and lynx. We have wild boar, red deer and beavers, too. And, in October, we'll begin reintroducing the European bison."

No wonder they're calling it the Yellowstone of Europe. It won't rival its American counterpart in size (Yellowstone covers more than 2m acres), but thanks to its biodiversity and the survival of a complete, top-to-bottom food chain, it's going to have the same star quality. In a world where conservation travel is booming – the specialist Responsible Travel (responsibletravel.com) reports a

HIDE AND SEEK IN THE CARPATHIANS



35% rise in bookings of such holidays over the past year – a blossoming future awaits.

Should you wait until the park is complete before you visit? That could take a while. As well as leading my tour, Christoph is a director of the Foundation Conservation Carpathia (FCC), a privately funded organisation that is behind the national park initiative. "We're not in a rush," he says. "The timing depends on the Romanian government."

Besides, as I'm discovering on this four-night, small-group tour – aimed at those who want to see for themselves what a pioneering conservation project looks like – what they've already achieved is thoroughly compelling. At its heart lies 56,000 acres of FCC land, purchased with the help of a small group of super-rich, conservation-minded private backers. Some of it lies in the already established Piatra Craiului National Park, but most of it covers the forests and mountaintops around the adjacent Dambovitza Valley.

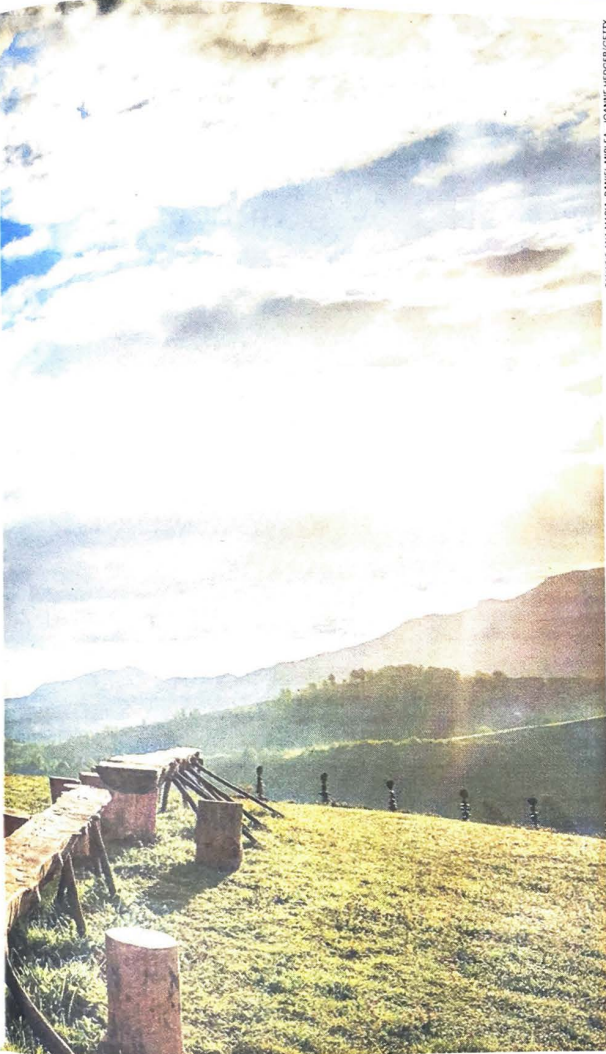
Despite the rugged terrain, exploring it is not arduous. We spend a couple of nights in the Amfiteatrul hotel, on the edge of the Piatra Craiului park, which is halfway between a hobbit house and a Hundertwasser painting. Then it's time to drive up the Dambovitza, rattling along a sinuous track until we're about 14 miles from the nearest village, Satic.

The mountains here are covered in trees – part of the nearly 15m acres of forest still standing in Romania. Much of it is single-variety spruce plantations, the legacy of a century of commercial forestry. In two small areas, we pass the detritus of logging operations still in progress. But there is hope, in the

Dambovitza Valley at least, and nowhere is more encouraging than the area around our hide. Here, one of several areas of primeval forest remains, dominated by giant 140ft beech trees. The value of such timber is huge, but FCC ownership has put them beyond the loggers' reach. If a tree falls, it's for natural reasons, and the opening it creates in the forest canopy lets the sunlight pour in, sparking a frenzy of new growth.

The ground levels out and we follow an overgrown track fringed with alders and humming with insects. Four years ago, this was a logging road. As we walk, Christoph tells me that they've already planted 2m trees, as well as covering the scars left behind by the loggers and outbidding the locals for hunting licences, so that nearly 90,000 acres of land are now policed by rangers and free of hunters (bear hunting is now banned, but some problem animals can be culled). But here, with butterflies and dragonflies dancing in the dappled





TANASIE ANA MARIA, DANIEL MIHLEA, JOANNE HEDDERLEY/GETTY



“
The bear sniffs and snuffles, performing a dance of sensory perception in the darkening landscape

WE'RE GOING ON A BEAR HUNT The Amfiteatrul hotel, in Transylvania. Above, the hide Sean stayed in

sunlight, and newts swimming in ponds at our feet, we can see for ourselves how effective rewilding can be. The FCC's protected spaces are already teeming with life. And that's before we see our bear.

It's not the only one. When we wake at 5am the next day, it's to see a second, nosing its way across the clearing. Within an hour we've seen a third. The three are all juveniles, probably no more than eight years old. Each is also a symbol of the potential of the Fagaras National Park. Clearly, there's still a long way to go. Christoph estimates that £37m has already been spent, and another £100m is needed. But they have a lot more than the bare necessities in place. Already, this feels like a kind of Eden.

Sean Newsom was a guest of the Amfiteatrul Transylvania (amfiteatrul.ro) and the European Nature Trust theeuropennaturetrust.com, which offers a four-night guided tour of the FCC project, including two nights in hides in the Dambovita Valley and two nights at the Amfiteatrul Transylvania, from £2,340pp, full-board. The price includes transfers and a donation to the project (carpathia.org). Sean was also a guest of Wizz Air, which flies direct to Bucharest from £60 return (wizzair.com)

INTO THE WILD 3 MORE CONSERVATION HOLIDAYS

NIGHTINGALE SAFARI, WEST SUSSEX

At the Knepp Wildland Project, 3,500 acres of West Sussex farmland have been let off the leash — and they're running to seed with miraculous consequences for endangered wildlife. Its guided 2019 tours are all but fully booked, but you can sign up for a 2020 visit. One-day nightingale safaris in May cost £70pp, and a half-day introduction to the project is £45pp, while glamping starts at £190 for two nights (kneppsafaris.co.uk).



SWIMMING WITH SHARKS, SOUTH BIMINI

You can snorkel with reef, bull, blacktip and hammerhead sharks, as well as Atlantic spotted dolphins, as part of a nine-day conservation holiday in the Bahamas. It's based on South Bimini and guests assist researchers as they catch and tag the creatures, and learn about the vital role these predators play in marine ecology. April 14-23, from £4,295pp, full-board, including flights (naturetrek.co.uk).

THE NATIONAL PARKS OF PATAGONIA

See the fruits of pioneering conservation work by the late Doug Tompkins on a two-week self-drive holiday in Chile and Argentina. The star attraction is Pumalin Park, where primeval temperate rainforest is preserved amid fjords, mountains and thunderous waterfalls. From £2,250pp, B&B, including local flights and car hire (responsibletravel.com).

WIN A TRIP TO MEXICO

Vote in our annual Travel Awards and you could be heading off on one of 13 incredible holidays

If you'd rather navigate your way around a cocktail list on holiday than hordes of children, this five-night, all-inclusive stay at the adults-only UNICO 20°87°, on the Mexican Riviera Maya, is just one of the prizes up for grabs in The Times and Sunday Times Travel Awards. And it could be yours simply by voting.

Situated amid vibrant landscaped gardens, this five-star hotel has a rustic yet modern feel, and supports all things local, from the decor to the food and drink to spa treatments and a selection of off-property curated adventures. Days can be spent relaxing in a cabana by one of the three pools, walking barefoot along the white sands, and dining and drinking in the five restaurants and six bars. There's also the opportunity to enjoy treatments at the luxury spa, indulge in various complimentary watersports, including sea kayaking and paddleboarding, and to take part in floating yoga and aqua spinning, and cookery and art lessons. Rooms feature four-poster beds and local art on the walls, and there's a host to assist with unpacking, reservations and requests during your stay. All rooms have outdoor hydrospace tubs or swim-up pools, with tropical, pool or ocean views.



20°N 87°W
UNICO
Riviera Maya

The prize includes two return economy flights from the UK to Cancun (unicohotelrivieramaya.com).

For your chance to win, visit thesundaytimes.co.uk/travelawards and tell us the companies you trust most, the hotels you love and the destinations you can't wait to return to. Just one vote enters you into the prize draw.

VOTE AND ENTER AT

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THE 12 OTHER PRIZES

- A five-night stay at Silversands Grenada, in the Caribbean, with Inspiring Travel Company.
- A seven-night Balinese beachside escape at The Legian Seminyak, Bali, courtesy of Best at Travel.
- A six-night health and wellbeing programme for two at The Farm at San Benito, in the Philippines, provided by Healing Holidays.
- A seven-night trip to Goa, staying in the state's first luxury resort, the Taj Fort Aguada Resort & Spa, for three nights, followed by four nights at the Taj Exotica Resort & Spa, courtesy of Audley Travel.
- Two nights at the University Arms, Cambridge, including breakfast and a three-course dinner (but not travel).
- A seven-night stay for a family of four at the child-friendly Almyra hotel, in Cyprus, through Scott Dunn.

THE TRAVEL AWARDS
2019
THE SUNDAY TIMES TRAVEL

- A six-night holiday for two in Tanzania, with three nights on safari in the Selous Game Reserve and three nights at a beach and spa retreat in Zanzibar, courtesy of Imagine Travel, Asilia Africa and British Airways.
- Four nights in a junior suite at Finca Cortesin, in Andalusia, courtesy of Abercrombie & Kent.
- Four nights for two adults at the new Malta Marriott Hotel & Spa, with flights courtesy of Air Malta.
- A seven-night stay at the Nobu Hotel Los Cabos, Mexico, with flights provided by Tui.
- A three-night stay for two adults at the five-star Fairmont Ajman, provided by Virgin Holidays.
- A four-night stay at the foodie Epicurean hotel, in Tampa Bay, Florida, courtesy of Visit Tampa Bay and British Airways.

Unless stated, prizes are for two people and include travel. For full details, visit thesundaytimes.co.uk/travelawards