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Haystacks, wildflowers, and fields greet arrivals to the village of Breb, which rises above the trees in the background.

## Maramures Backroads: Romania's Region of Wooden Churches

Story and Photography by Lisa K. Harris

Walking a cobbled lane, we hunt for the letter C as we explore Breb, a village in Romania's Maramures region. Our farm-stay host, Ione, suggested the route. So far, blue Cs have been scarce. On our right, a woven fence—think linear basket—encloses a farmhouse yard. We hear gruff barks, and through fence slats spot a humongous, chained, muddy dog.

"There's one." Teenage Ava points to a blue C with an arrow pointing right, painted onto a tree trunk at a crossroads. Stringing together blue Cs is akin to following a treasure map where gold nuggets are uncovered at each turn.

The basket fence ends in a massive carved gate. The doors hang open. Inside, chickens and ducks peck in a mucky courtyard, a cow sticks its head out a stable's window, enamel pots hang from nails tacked around the home's entry, and wooden sleigh runners perch on the barn's exterior. A woman with her hair tied in a floral scarf pins wet clothing to a line strung under the eaves.

Visiting Maramures is taking a step back in time. Men harvest hay with scythes, swinging the long-handled blade with the cadence of a metro-

nome; flocks of sheep speckle hills lush with wildflowers; women spin hemp into thread.

"Watch out," I shout.

A horse and cart barrel down upon us. The buckboard's bed is piled with hay, and the red tassels on the draft horse's halter flutter. We jump sideways and I land on something squishy.

After the cart rattles by, I examine what's on the bottom of my sandal: a flattened plum. The road is neatly lined with plum trees, and there's so much fruit it rots on the ground.

Ava spots another C with an arrow directing us to a well-worn path between stone walls barely arms-distance apart. We head downhill toward a spire and are spit out of the "chute" near an ancient wooden church. Wooden Celtic grave markers topped with metal arches, and apple trees brimming with fruit, jam-pack the hillside. With a low-hanging shingled roof capping axe-hewn logs and white chinking, the church looks like a toadstool bursting from an unkempt orchard.

The tall shingled spire, the oldest in a region known for its old churches, dates to 1531. The church was built in 1621, replacing an earlier building. Most of the 100 or so wooden churches in Maramures are Orthodox, and eight are listed as UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

Next morning, after an early breakfast of homemade yogurt, apricot jam,

The spire of this wooden church is the oldest in the Maramures region. It dates to 1531.



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Sleigh runners hang on the wall of a barn (right) in Breb. Note the blue "C" and arrow on the electrical pole where the road curves to the right. The arrow points in the direction of the path.

and still-warm-from-the-oven bread, we drive to the adjacent valley to ride the CFF Viseu de-Sus, which uses a 760 mm gauge track (approximately 2 1/2 feet, the standard gauge of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire) and is the last remaining forestry railway in Europe. We snag seats in the rear car and settle in. The only language heard is Romanian, and when we speak English, people stare.

Bump-ba-dum-ba-dum-bump. The open-air car was designed to haul loggers, and the wooden seat boards were meant to be utilitarian not comfortable. At 10 kilometers per hour (about 6 miles per hour), the train chugs past barns, hedgerows, homes. People wave. Some raise glasses to our adventure. Steam billows from the engine as we bump-ba-dum-ba-dum-bump alongside

the Vaser River, uphill into the forests of the Carpathian Mountains.

We pass cleared swatches of forest where horses pull logs to makeshift mills. In a narrow ravine we slow. People snap photos of a cave where WWII soldiers hid from the German army.

Two and a half hours into the ride, our backsides sore from bumping, we stop at a cluster of buildings and picnic tables. Everyone climbs off. Some jostle for selfies with the billowing engine, others head to a tiny museum on the train's history. Many smoke. We queue up for a meal of sausage, coleslaw, rice, and hot chocolate, and sit next to the water and eat. Dancers in traditional embroidered skirts and vests perform. After the music stops, and after cleaning our plates, we bump-da-dum-bump

*continued on next page*

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A steam engine of the CFF Viseu de Sus, the last remaining forestry railway in Europe, chugs along the banks of the Vaser River in the Carpathian Mountains.

back to Viseu de Sus.

Driving to Sighetu Marmatei, near the Ukrainian border, we pass Romany selling mushrooms from spread-out blankets. Women in long red skirts and braided hair hover over their forest-gathered goods: dinner-plate-size white caps and orange chanterelles.

In Sighetu, we navigate confusing roundabouts, wishing the route were marked with Cs, until finally finding Elie Wiesel's house. Inside, there is scant furniture. Walls display photos of Wiesel's life: accepting the Nobel Peace Prize for speaking against violence and oppression; *Night*, his book detailing his family's Holocaust experience, a book Ava read in school; his family and neighbors rounded up and sent to Auschwitz.

"I expected more stuff," Ava says.

"The house is empty."

"That's the point," I reply. "The town's entire Jewish population was nearly exterminated, their stuff destroyed."

Back in Breb, Ione ushers us to a ramada, seconds before a rainstorm bursts. We tuck into divine stuffed cabbage rolls, minced eggplant and tomatoes, and brandied pears, grateful for being dry, discovering letter Cs, and for Wiesel's surviving to tell his story.

Ione pours a purple liquid into a glass and shows me his iPhone. Its screen displays "Plum cordial."

I sip. Taste sunshine, wildflowers, rain. Maramures.

**DL**

*Lisa K. Harris is a local freelance writer. Comments for publication should be addressed to letters@desertleaf.com.*



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