

WINTER 2021

# DEPARTURES

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# Rural Reinvention

The tip-to-toe restoration of a family estate in the wilds of Transylvania has become a true labour of love. *by Ann Abel*

The 300-year-old Caretaker's House forms the heart of Bethlen Estates' countrified grounds

TRAVEL



DEPARTURES

**“THIS WHOLE COUNTRY** has a special feeling,” says Gladys Bethlen, the proprietor of the extraordinary new Bethlen Estates in Romania. “That’s what people feel when they come here from all over the world.”

And it’s true that Transylvania is like no place else on earth, all beautifully bucolic countryside, virgin pine forests and diverse

wildlife. It’s a place where people live in harmony with nature, and where the wild woods and flowering meadows are dotted with medieval citadels and fairy-tale castles, reminders of a history that runs much deeper than the past few generations.

Bethlen, who is Austrian by birth and Romanian by marriage, might have been forgiven for having mixed

feelings about Romania. Bethlen Estates is on the land that was the ancestral home of the family of her late husband, Count Miklós Bethlen. Some 800 years ago, his progenitors founded the village of Criş and built its medieval castle. After World War II, Romania’s Communist dictatorship was an especially brutal one, and the regime took a particular



Left: an elegant staircase within the Caretaker's House; below: the house features a traditional tiled stove in the dining room

pleasure in destroying noble estates as they nationalised them. As Gladys Bethlen tells it, they used her family's castle as a stable for animals, burned hundreds and hundreds of antique books in the library, and ripped the nails from the walls.

"We didn't just start from scratch," she says. "We started from minus 20."

And yet she – along with her son and business partner, Nikolaus – persevered. They bought it all back, tumbledown building by

tumbledown building (without any sort of restitution or EU assistance, she points out) and set about not just restoring it to its rightful state but also transforming it into something that celebrates the past while also looking towards the future.

After the first phase of a meticulous, years-long restoration project, Bethlen Estates is again operational, a legacy project rooted in social purpose and the preservation of cultural heritage. Their aim was to transform the ruins

into modern marvels of architecture and hospitality while supporting the surrounding community through employment, education and practical help to those who need it.

The first restored building is the Caretaker's House, a gorgeous and gracious four-bedroom home that offers a sophisticated take on rural living. Part of the project was to restore the exteriors of all the houses, barns, granaries, schoolhouses and other buildings to their original glory, but inside, the Caretaker's House became something more contemporary.

Interior designers Stefanie de Castelbajac and Melanie Etten-Rüppell worked with local artisans to create a light-filled, soothing space, with antique kilim rugs, original wooden beams and warming tiled stoves – but they've also integrated Tom Dixon lighting and contemporary sculptural staircases and architecturally impressive cabinetry in the robin's-egg-blue kitchen. Waking up there, it's difficult not to reach for that travel cliché: you feel at home.

More intimate is the two-bedroom Depner House, a traditional Saxon heritage cottage that dates from the 18th century. It retains much of its original charm, with exposed beams, traditional ironwork and a central cast-iron staircase. It's cosy and coddling, and it also has the benefit of being near the Kitchen Barn, which is one of the centrepieces of Bethlen Estates.

While all meals can be taken in the privacy of the houses, the central Kitchen Barn is appealing for its terrace, and also for the chance to chat with Tatiana, the in-house chef, as she prepares a nourishing breakfast – Romanian-style, with eggs, toast and jam, cucumber and tomatoes, and specialty meats like *pariser* (similar to mortadella) and *salam de Sibiu* (pork salami from the nearby city of Sibiu) – or traditional evening meal.





Left: wine tasting in the ancient cellars of Count János Bethlen's Manor House in Criș; below: the spacious kitchen in the Caretaker's House



*Ingredients are locally sourced, including fruit and vegetables from the family's orchards*

Every ingredient is locally sourced, including organic fruit and vegetables from the Bethlen family's orchards, farmland and forests, while meat comes from nearby farmers, and fresh trout is plucked from the Mureș River. Romanian food is heavy, to be sure, with an emphasis on meat in dishes like goulash (beef stew with paprika sauce) or traditional pork *flecken* (pork fried in lard). But the good cooks in the region are learning to cater to an increasingly international clientele, and now there are alternatives like the typical *sarmale* (cabbage rolls), stuffed only with sauerkraut, rice, and vegetables instead of the usual

beef and pork, or fresh wild-foraged mushrooms served over the soft polenta that is a staple of the region.

Transylvanian wines aren't the world's best, and many people prefer to pair their meals with *pálinka*, the local brandy made from plums, apples or other fruits that many families still produce themselves. But Bethlen Estates is trying to spotlight the region's best wines, both during meals in the Kitchen Barn and at atmospheric, torch-lit tastings in the historic wine cellars at Count János Bethlen's Manor House, one of Gladys Bethlen's newest restoration projects.

Showing me around the cellar, she shakes her head a bit at the scale of her ambition. The place is huge, and the restoration work was complex. But she's relished the process of choosing the decorations and putting them into place. And she is rightly proud of the work that she's done – even more so because she saw the odds against her.

"I'm Austrian, a woman, a widow, a mother and not from here," she points out, adding that Nikolaus lives in Germany and she did parts of it on her own. "It was all against me. But I've had many people helping me."

And Gladys and Nikolaus are just getting started. The latest accommodation to be added to the estate is the Corner Barn, whose four bedrooms can be booked individually, bringing the capacity of the property to 20 guests and offering an option for couples or solo travellers. There's another handful of houses waiting for their turn to be transformed. It's slow, delicate work, this labour of heritage and love, but they expect the next generations to carry it on – and, one day, to return the castle itself to its rightful state. [betblenestates.com](http://betblenestates.com)

### Lie of the Land

While Romania is safe, it's undeniably foreign to almost all travellers – which makes the services of a plugged-in travel designer useful. Founded several years ago by two young Romanian women with extensive international experience, **Beyond Dracula** not only takes care of all the logistics but introduces visitors to the most wonderful corners of Romania, all while ensuring maximum comfort. [beyonddracula.com](http://beyonddracula.com)