



The King's Road

Romania's highest pass combines perfect hairpins and pristine tarmac with jaw-dropping views and curiously few cyclists. Welcome to the Transalpina Highway

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elieve me, if the Transalpina was a climb in France you'd have heard of it. Pro riders would fight to be first over its summit, each of its numerous switchbacks would be named after a former winner, and every year thousands of amateur riders would flock to test themselves on its slopes.

As it is, the Transalpina is a mountain pass in Romania, and is therefore little known to the armies of col baggers and KOM braggers. While Strava can boast 79,000 attempts on the ascent of Mont Ventoux from Bedoin,

it has recorded just 500 attempts on the north side of this secluded gem.

Running between the towns of Sebeş in the north and Novaci in the south, the Transalpina Highway links the regions of Transylvania and Oltenia with a picturesque 135km road that winds through valleys, plateaus and forests to a height of 2,145m in the heart of the Parâng Mountains. The pass was built in the 1930s by King Carol II, earning it the name of *Drumul Regelui* – The King's Road. Its lofty altitude is also responsible for another nickname: *Drumul Dintre Nori* – The Road Between Clouds. Which is odd, for on the day I intend to become the 501st rider on Strava to reach its summit, there isn't a single cloud to be seen.

Paved with gold

The principal challenge for the day is the Pasul Urdele, the high point of the Transalpina Highway. From our start

Below: Gliding down through the red-roofed chalets of Râncea on the first leg of the route

Right: With six chairlifts but only 3.4km of blue and red runs, the ski resort at Râncea won't be hosting a World Cup skiing event any time soon

Previous pages, right: The eight switchbacks leading to the summit of the Pasul Urdele – at 2,145m, the highest pass in Romania

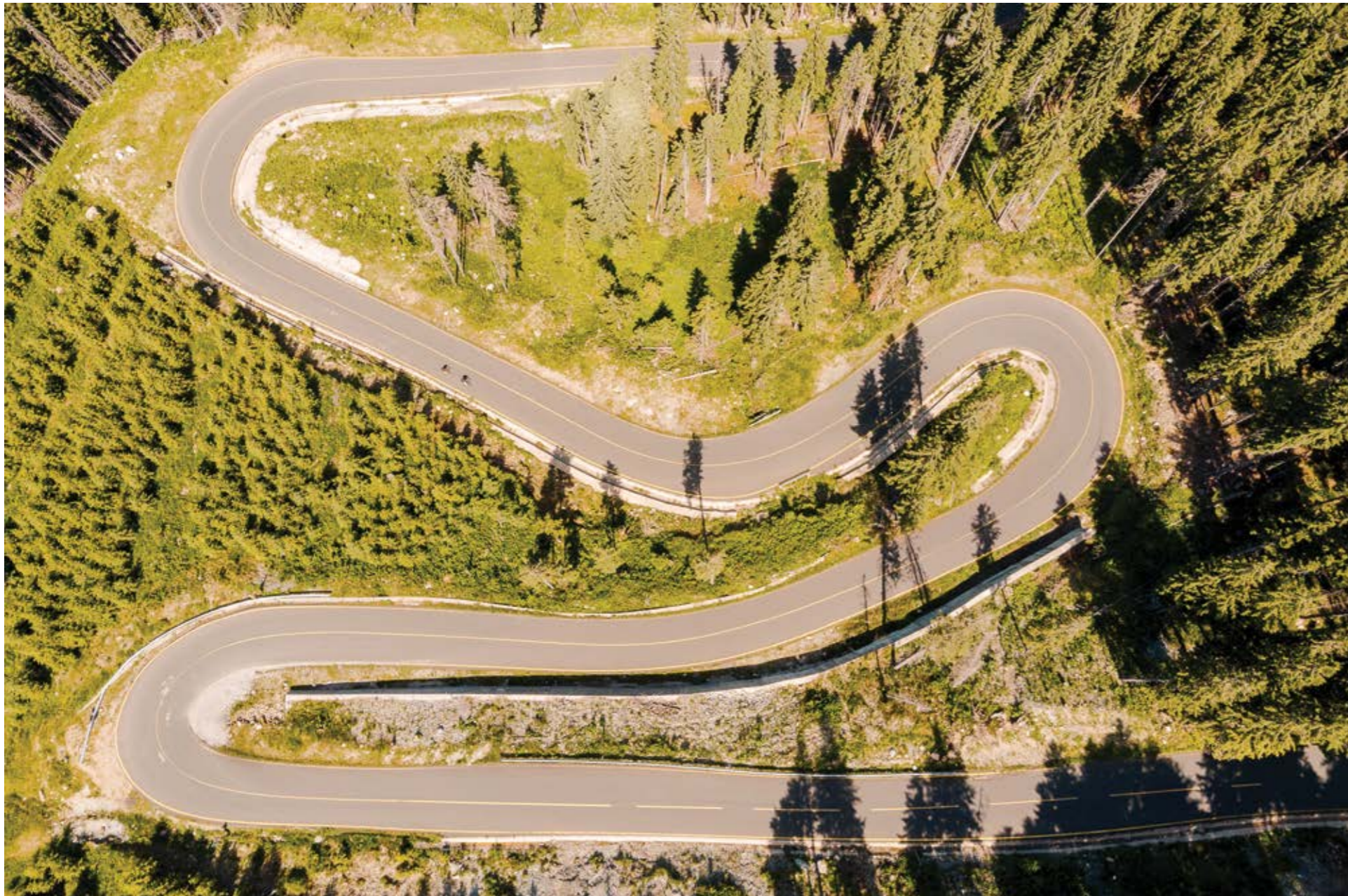


in the village of Obârșia Lotrului, this means a 20km climb straight out of the traps with an elevation gain of around 950m. Its slightly misleading average gradient of 4% is skewed by an exhilarating drop before the final rise to the roof of Romania.

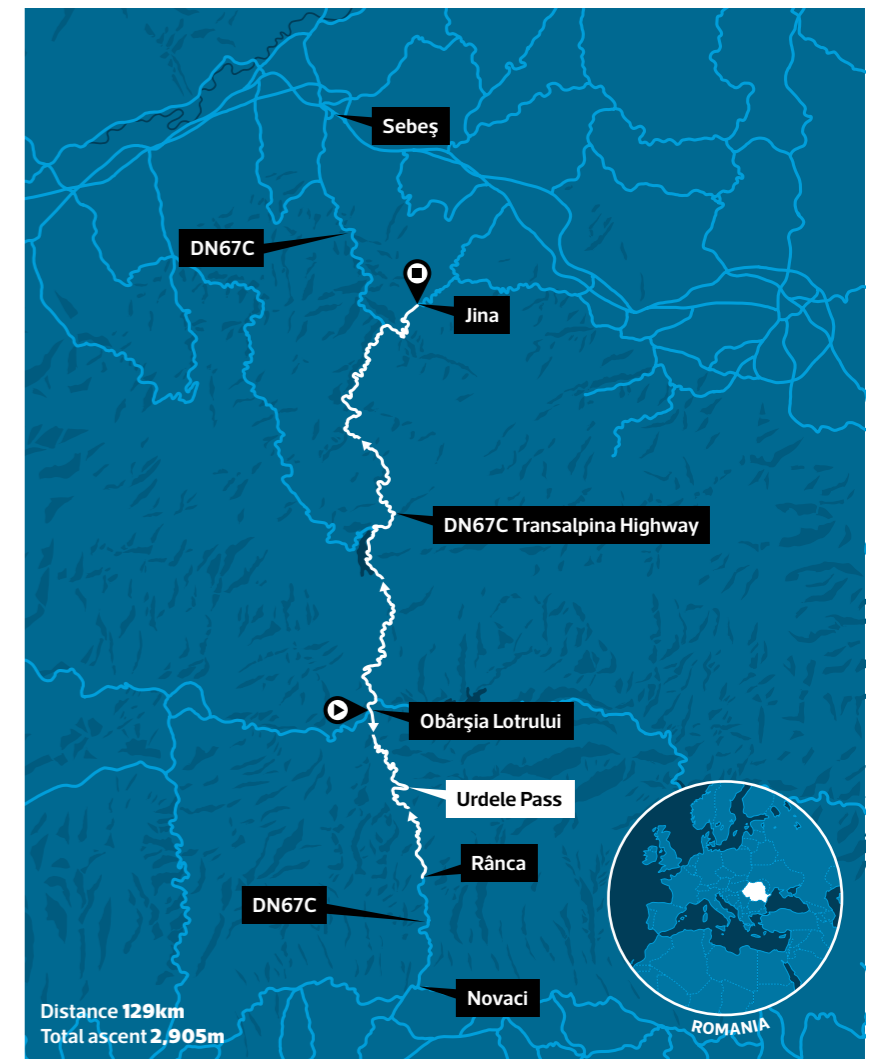
It's a glorious Monday morning in early July. We've been riding barely a few minutes from Obârșia Lotrului before we hit the first crowded section of road – local farmers are driving their livestock to summer grazing pastures on the mountains and we are forced to weave between the cows. The road hugs the sonorous trickle of River Lotru, where fishermen set up shop and three nuns do their weekly washing in the shade of a silver fir. We cross the river on a bridge with orange railings and the climb begins in earnest. From here it's 10km of steady ascent until the first, false summit.

My human GPS for the day is Silviu, a local guide and cycling tour operator who knows the roads of the Carpathians like the back of his mahogany-tanned hand. This, he tells me as we ride through a towering forest of pine, is his favourite climb in the country.

The road was only opened in 2012, which explains the pristine surface and the lack of Strava heat, but its



Left: Pine trees cast their mid-morning shadows across the first set of hairpins on the northern side of the Urdele Pass, which dates back to the 2nd century AD when the Romans dubbed it the Gold Road



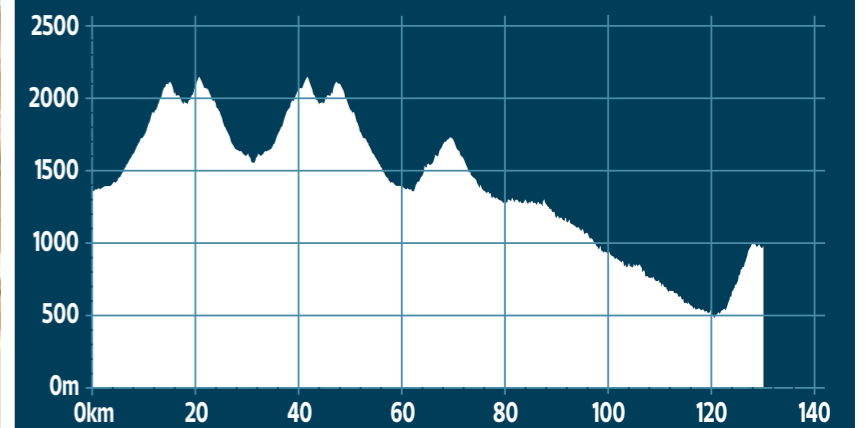
Romania's high point

Follow *Cyclist's* route across the Transalpinia

To download this route, go to cyclist.co.uk/103romania. For the full Transalpinia challenge, you could aim to ride the entirety of the DN67C between Sebeş in the north and Novaci in the south, a distance of 135km. From Sebeş the climb is actually gentle but long, with a total ascent of just over 3,000m. If you choose to go north from Novaci, the route begins with a more challenging 28km climb to the Urdele Pass

and the full ride to Sebeş will accumulate around 2,850m of ascent.

We didn't do either of those things. To get all the best bits we started at Obârşia Lotrului and rode south over the Urdele Pass to the ski resort of Rânca for lunch. We then retraced our steps back over the pass and continued along the DN67C towards Sebeş, but rather than go all the way we stopped with a final climb to the small town of Jina.



While you're here

Don't forget your crucifix

VAMPIRE WEEKEND

Poenari Castle is the former residence of 15th century ruler Vlad the Impaler, the inspiration for Bram Stoker's *Count Dracula*. The castle's remains sit on a cliff above the Transfăgărăşan Pass, about 75km to the east of the Transalpinia, which is another must (see issue 92).

CASTLES GALORE

Bran Castle in Transylvania is commonly known as Dracula's Castle. It certainly looks the part, with its turrets and position high on a hill, but it actually has no connections to the book. It's still worth a visit, and the region boasts a fabulous array of fortified churches spread around six Saxon Villages of UNESCO World Heritage Site status.

IN THE CITY

Renowned for its gastronomy and architecture, the colourful city of Sibui is about a 45-minute drive from Sebeş and was named European Capital of Culture in 2007. It has an Italian vibe, combining grand squares and mighty fortifications with narrow, winding streets.





history goes right back the 2nd century AD. That's when invading Roman legions used the route to transport Romanian gold back to Rome, giving the Transalpina yet another moniker – The Gold Road. It was rebuilt during World War II by German troops, but the pass remained inaccessible for most vehicles (including road bikes) until it was fully paved this century and given the rather more prosaic name of DN67C.

Of course, the sinuous strip of tarmac has proved to be a magnet for adventurous motorists, and it's while we're puffing up a series of zigzags in the early forested part of the climb that we hear the first rumbling of approaching vehicles. A short while later a motley crew of clapped-out bangers chugs past in a series of convoys, amiably tooting their horns.

Silviu explains that these cars are competing in something called the Gumbalkan (a nod to the *Gumball Rally* movie about a race across America), which is a six-day jolly through Romania via 20 checkpoints for cars that cost less than €1,000 – cheaper than the Cannondale I'm currently nursing up the hill. Many of the cars have mascots on their roof racks such as buffalo antlers, a Soviet-style shopping bike and, most memorably of all, a toilet bowl.

The Gumbalkan rally is not responsible for all the traffic on this otherwise peaceful morning. Over the course of our climb we are passed by scores of motorcycles – primarily tourists from Germany and

It feels like we're on the top of the world as we approach a cluster of huts on what looks like the summit



Top right: Capping the day with an unexpectedly punchy climb to our end-point at Jina

Above: Cyclist enjoys a quick refreshment stop amid the tourist shacks on the false summit of the Urdele Pass



Poland – and although they disturb the peace of the surroundings, they prove to be much more courteous to cyclists than the motorists you encounter on that other King's Road in London.

In truth, save for the periodic flurry of motor-tourists we see very little traffic at all. As we break through the treeline and reach some rolling pastures, we're confronted by considerably more animals next to the road than we are vehicles on it.

It reminds me of some of the more rural cols of the Pyrenees: cows graze and echelons of sheep traverse grassy ridges, kept in check by faithful dogs and a shepherd support crew largely comprising of donkeys. The accompanying tinkle of bells, bleating and the occasional moo makes for an immersive experience, interrupted only by the next string of motorbikes or decrepit cars passing in stilted staccatos.

The hills are alive

Edelweiss apparently grows in these lush fields. The vista definitely has something of *The Sound of Music* about it. I almost expect Silviu to break into song and channel his inner Captain von Trapp as we tap out a rhythm up to two small glacial lakes and the remnants of some winter snow. It feels like we're on the top of the world as we approach a cluster of huts on what looks like the summit, but which I know to be the false summit before the real one.

Some motorcyclists interrupt their Instagramming to applaud our arrival, while a tethered donkey seeks the shade of a van. Silviu tells me that the people manning the stalls selling snacks and tourist tat are not locals but itinerant Hungarian-speaking Szeklers who come here seasonally. They're clearly more accustomed to bikers in leather than riders in Lycra, and I get a few odd looks as I buy some *kürtóskalács* – cake cooked in strips wrapped around a cone-shaped spit. They taste a bit like donuts



The rider's ride

Cannondale SuperSix Evo 105 2019, from £1,440, cannondale.com

Remember the days when bikes had skinny, rounded tubes and horizontal top tubes? The traditional frame shape of this 2019 SuperSix Evo already looks outdated in these days of razor-sharp aero bikes, yet the bike's performance remains thoroughly up-to-the-minute.

It's light enough to be an efficient climber, solid enough to be a nimble and predictable descender, and just compliant enough to dampen the vibrations from some of Romania's clunkier surfaces. In this no-frills package, the Shimano 105 groupset is as robust and reliable as an Aga cooker, and while the wheels are pretty workmanlike I can't really complain when the whole package comes in at less than the paintjob on some top-end frames. I really couldn't have asked for a more supportive companion on my ride over the Transalpina.

Since last year, Cannondale has shunned the classic silhouette of its signature race bike in favour of the more aggressive, aerodynamic look that has become the norm, but this slightly older version is a reminder of just what an elegant bike the SuperSix Evo once was.



Above: Romania is thought to have more than 6,000 brown bears across a third of the country, and especially in the Carpathian mountains

Right: Locals in the Saxon village of Jina aren't used to seeing Lycra-clad cyclists

Feeling peckish?

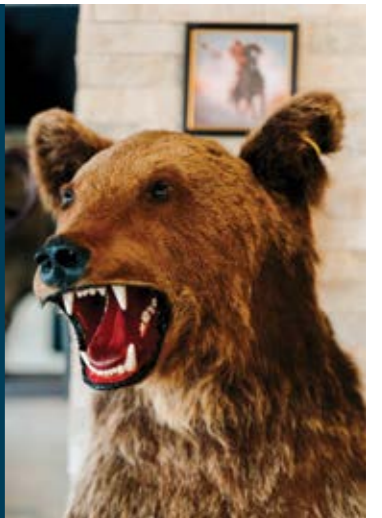
It all counts as fuel for the ride

WHAT'S ON THE MENU?

For snacks along the Transalpina route, you could follow *Cyclist's* lead and try out the *mici* (grilled meatballs) and *kürtöskalács* (donut-like cakes). For a proper lunch, stop at any of the sheepfolds on the Transalpina to try *bulz*, a traditional Romanian dish made from cooked polenta and filled with a cheesy, creamy stuffing – rocket fuel for the last push to the summit. For a fuller meal, one perhaps best enjoyed on the way down, *tocan de oaie* is a hearty slow-cooked lamb stew, which has apparently been produced by shepherds in this area for two millennia.

ORDER THE LOCAL TIPPLE

Romanian wines are gathering momentum among oenophiles of a hipster persuasion. The Opreșor Winery in Oltenia produces an award-winning intense, almost black, red wine called *Smerenie* (or 'Humbleness'). Made with a blend of Shiraz, Pinot Noir and Dornfelder grapes, it's a silky, well-rounded wine with notes of ripe cherries and pine needles. If you're feeling brave, down a glass of *țuică*, a strong local plum brandy that warms the cockles.



The road leads into a lush basin, from which the only escape is via a flamboyant flourish of switchbacks that guard the final ascent

By the numbers

Romanian numerals...

129

Kilometres ridden

139

Length in kilometres of the Transalpina Highway

2,145

Height in metres of the Urdele Pass

2,905

Total metres climbed

37

Max temperature in °C

17

Steepest gradient climbed in %

1

Bears spotted (stuffed)

3

Nuns spotted (doing their washing)



and are the perfect hit of stodge to get us through the next section to the real summit at Pasul Urdele.

Never mind the non-existent clouds, this Road Between Summits momentarily becomes my favourite place on Earth. It starts with a zippy, straight downhill segment, punctuated by a single, thrilling chicane. This leads into a lush basin, from which the only escape is via a flamboyant flourish of switchbacks that guard the final ascent to the Pasul Urdele.

Just as we edge near to the top there's a roar from behind us and then a blur of colour as we are overtaken by a Ferrari, a Lamborghini and finally a Porsche. They disappear up the hill in a cloud of noise and by the time we arrive at the summit there's no sign of the supercars.

Come to think of it, there's no real sign of the summit at all except for a small, well... sign, practically enveloped in stickers, indicating this stretch of false flat as the summit of the Urdele Pass and the crest of the highest road in Romania. Had Silviu not warned me, I'd have ridden straight past it.

Listening to our stomachs, it's now a brisk freewheel down to the red roofs of Rânca in the distance. With its one rickety chairlift and disparate chalets, Rânca is just how you'd imagine a small ski resort in Romania would look. It definitely has an off-season vibe to it: the sound of chainsaws and trimmers spliced with the thwack of a hammer and the bark of a dog. We pass through to the far end of town and stop for lunch on a terrace overlooking pastures, pines and peaks. I opt for soup and the local

delicacy of *mici* – ground meat rolled up and grilled. When I ask the waiter what kind of meat it is, he makes a point of not understanding my question.

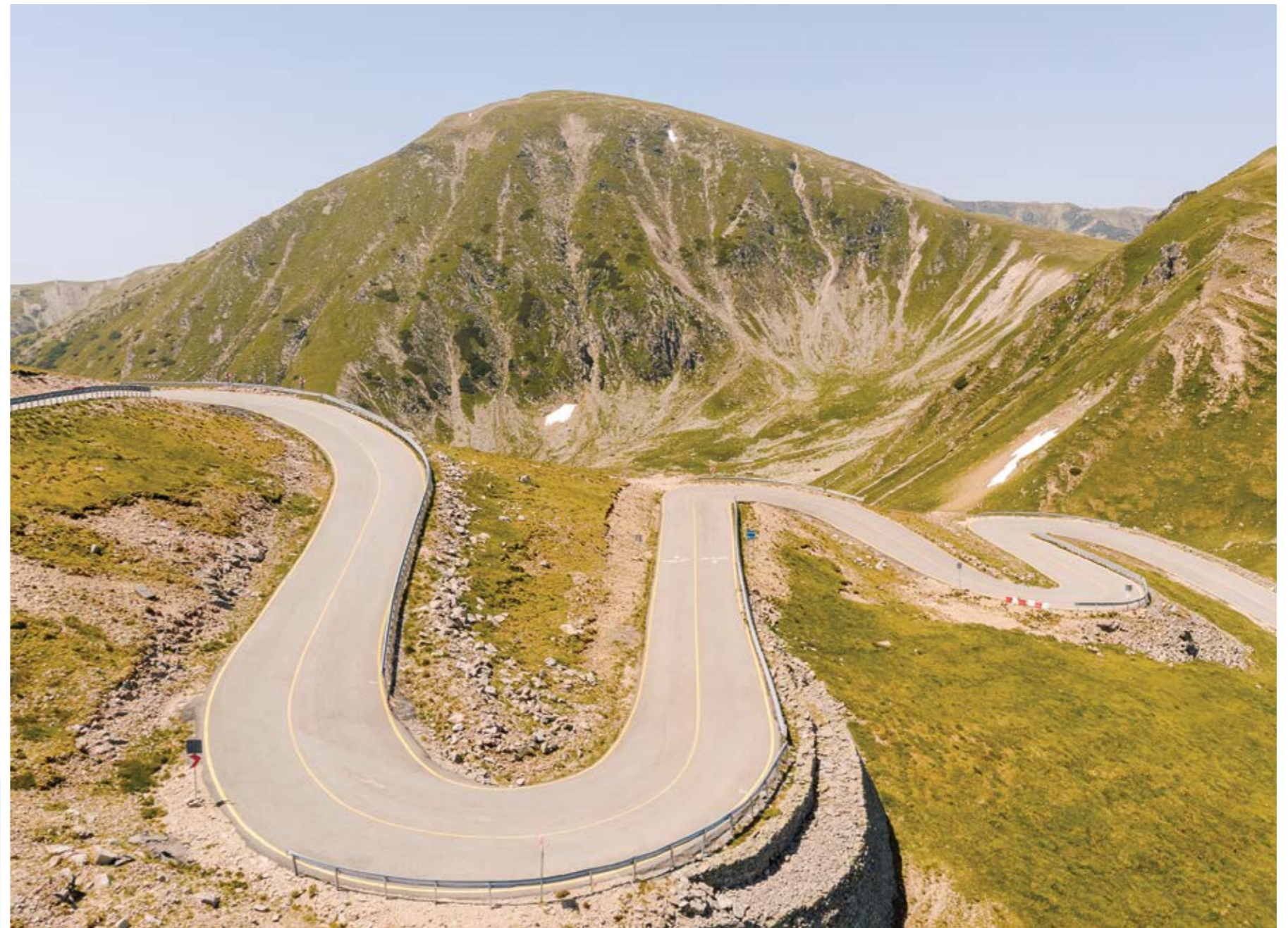
Back and beyond

Replenished by coffee as dark as Dracula's quiff, I commit the rookie mistake of setting an unsustainably high tempo as we ride back through Rânca. Instead of continuing the 20km down to Novaci and the official start of the Transalpina we're retracing our steps, and the hairpins next to the chairlift prove to be much harder going up in 37°C heat than they were when we whizzed down dulled by hunger. Painted on every corner is the word TRACTARI with a phone number: enterprising locals advertising a towing service for vehicles caught out before the winter road closure. Looking at the state of some of the Gumbalkan cars passing in dribs and drabs, they may even get some business today.

The stretch along the ridge to the summit is far longer than I recall. The basin between summits is still a treat, but it's a real brute to clamber out of on the other side. Once past the *kürtőskalács* vans, however, the rest of the descent is a boundless joy. Only a slight headwind and the occasional cow keep our speed in check.

We push on past our start point at Obârșia Lotrului, and once we crawl over an energy-sapping lump through a patch of forest, it's pretty much 80km downhill to Sebeș with a drop of 1,400m. Sebeș is where the Transalpina officially ends (or starts) but we're not going all the way

Never mind the non-existent clouds, this Road Between Summits momentarily becomes my favourite place on Earth



Above: The picturesque DN67C was only completed in 2012, which explains the pristine surface that's perfect for cyclists and petrolheads alike

Right: A helping hand on the final climb comes in the form of a fresh water spring adorned with a mural of Jesus Christ lifting a bucket from a well





Below right: After a long day in the saddle, Cyclist arrives in the small town of Jina and takes a well-earned rest outside the ornate 18th century Orthodox church

there. After a stunning sequence of lakes, reservoirs, dams and an eerie gorge, we hook a right and enter a sleepy village of B&Bs and houses with manicured lawns.

'Now for the final sting in the tail,' Silviu says as we flout a sign informing us of a temporary road closure up ahead. The reason becomes quickly apparent: recent flooding has caused a small landslide, spilling rocks and dirt across the road, plus the contents of a wall of sandbags to stem the flow. Dodging these obstacles is a mental workout distracting me from the truth: jersey unzipped, bidons empty, back wheel skidding, I'm shattered, dehydrated and struggling with the double-digit bends as we weave through a very different woodland of oak, beech, willow, poplar and hornbeam.

'Jesus Christ,' I say, but it's not a curse. We've been saved by the Son of God – in the form of a water spring



Jersey unzipped, bidons empty, I'm shattered, dehydrated and struggling with the double-digit bends

encased within a gaudy mural of the bearded Jesus lifting water from a well. We stop and give thanks while refilling our bottles, and once rehydrated we complete the 5km climb before freewheeling past meadows of wildflowers, haystacks piled the ancient way, and vines. Sleepy Jina is one of numerous Saxon villages set up in the 12th century by immigrant Germans who fortified their Lutheran churches against the Mongols. It's the kind of place that could be a set for the Romanian *Midsomer Murders*.

With bikes casting long shadows in the late afternoon sun, the analogy continues as we pass a man with a Hitler moustache and a cowboy hat carrying a grim reaper's scythe over his shoulder; another portly chap with crutches sits outside his house, shouting something in our wake. They don't see many cyclists in these parts.

We call it a day beside a brightly coloured 18th century Orthodox church, clicking out of our pedals just as a rogue car from the Gumbalkan rally grumbles past. They have a long drive up Romania's highest pass on the horizon, but the sunset views from either summit will be worth it. ● *Felix Lowe is a writer and blogger for Eurosport, who when in Romania does as the Romanians do*



How we did it

TRAVEL

Pre-lockdown, Cyclist flew WizzAir from Luton to Bucharest Otopeni for £165 return (although our luggage went on a separate jolly to Skopje and Hannover – thanks, WizzAir). From there it's about a 3.5-hour drive to Novaci or 4.5 hours to Sebeş, the towns at either end of the Transalpin Highway. Cheaper but less regular flights go to the pretty medieval walled city of Sibiu (one-way from £40), a 45-minute drive from Sebeş.

ACCOMMODATION

We stayed in the four-star Zan Hotel (zanhotel.ro) on the banks of the river Lotru in Voineasa, a 50-minute drive from the start of our ride at Obârşia Lotrului. Double rooms cost around £50 per night and the hotel was welcoming and had a gym and

spa, although I'd have traded them for a bit more food at the breakfast buffet.

THANKS

It was a pleasure to run riot in the Carpathians with congenial local guide Silviu Martin, who aims to open up this neck of the Romanian woods to cyclists through his company Martin Cycling Adventures. He hosts boutique cycling tours and guiding all over the Balkans (most notably Romania, Slovenia and Macedonia) and does so with unflagging patience and an infectious smile. See martin-adventures.com for more details.