

Introduction

The Romanian Carpathians are split into three groups: Western, Southern and Eastern. Mountain walking is popular, however few regions and paths are busy, due to a relatively low density of population. Young people generally speak English and are very helpful, and mountain areas welcome quite a few international tourists. Generally, paths are very well waymarked, and Muntii Nostri offers some good printed and downloadable maps, with descriptions of trails at the back.

The Padis Plateau is situated in the Apuseni mountains, a karst region in the Western Carpathians with forested hills and plenty of caves and potholes (they say numbers go as high as 7000 caves). The highest peak in the Apuseni is Cucurbata Mare (1849 m), situated in the Bihor-Vladeasa massif in the North-West. The resort complex Padis is in the middle of this massif, and offers a great base for exploring, walks and entry into some of the longest and deepest caves and ice caves in Romania, along with spectacular gorge walks. The complex can be reached by car from Beius in the West, via Pietroasa.

The road from Cluj via Doda Pili is not recommended, as the last part is on difficult dirt track with worrying potholes, as some of us discovered. We stayed at Popas Turistic Padis, which offered wooden cabins for 4 people and a relatively varied half-board with good food.



Retezat MB

The Retezat mountains are in the most western massif of the Southern Carpathians. They have one of the most extensive alpine areas above the tree line in Romania, after the highest massif, the Fagaras. Characteristic features are the lichen-covered granite boulder-fields, and the multitude of glacial lakes and tarns. The highest peaks are Peleaga (2509 m), Papusa (the Doll, 2508 m) and Retezat (2482m) from which the mountain region got its name.

Retezat means “cut off”, recalling the shape of its peak. There are a few mountain huts at lower level, and we stayed at the relatively well kept Pietrele (The Rocks, 1480 m) hut, which offered basic accommodation and a not so varied food and drink menu. From here, the trips to the peaks involve 1000+ m ascents. A camping alternative is at Bucura Lake on the other side of the range, the largest glacial lake in Romania, at a higher altitude of 2030 m, which needs personal transport of all food.

The summer weather in Romania is generally hot and dry in the plains and valleys, resulting in sunny mornings and thundery afternoons in the high mountains. If sunny, it can get quite hot with high UV on the tops. However, the June-July weather in 2018 was unexpectedly bad, with daily rains. The weather started to clear when we arrived in Apuseni at the end of July, and by the time we arrived in Retezat at the beginning of August, we had a good time. Mike and Helen were less fortunate, with continuous rain when they visited at the end of July, and they had to abandon the mountain after two days of rain, with no opportunity to dry their clothes in the humid wooden cabins.

First week: Padis area in Apuseni mountains

Sunday July 29th

Helen and Michael Smith had arrived on Saturday afternoon. Richard Smith and Tim Josephy were much later, having against all advice taken the short cut through the forest. After about 10km of walking pace progress they were very relieved to hit tarmac at the top of the hamlet of Padis, windows open to dissipate the strong smell of hot clutch.

On the Sunday morning the five walked down to the charming campsite at Glavoi where coffee was taken before climbing the other side of the valley to make a tour of several cave entrances, including Ghetarul Focul Viu (Living Fire ice cave), a spectacular chamber with an ice boss said to date back to the last ice age.

After a shortish day they returned to the accommodation in Padis to await the arrival of the others.

Richard Taylor, Mick Borroff, Jason Lees and Anca Pordea left Arad and arrived at Padis via Beius, on a relatively good road. The caving trip planned for Tuesday was postponed to Wednesday August as Mike was not feeling great due to a nasty chest infection.



Monday July 30th

Helen, Mike, Richard S, Tim, Richard T, Mick, Jason, Anca

Padis – Varasoaia – Cetatile Radesei cave – Somesul Cald gorges circuit – back to Padis through cave

Everyone was keen to start some walking under the much praised dry Romanian weather, though Mike was still not feeling great.

We walked on a gentle path from Padis to Varasoia pass, where a notice warned that the Magura Vanata trail was closed due to fallen trees.

Walking further towards Cetatile Radesei, we discovered another notice warning that both the trail surrounding the caves, and the Somesul Cald trail were also closed, but decided to explore the situation anyway.

We arrived with no problems at the massive entrance of the Cetatile Radesei cave, and we scrambled through to the exit.



Approach to Radesei-Somesul Cald

JL



Cetatile Radesei

MB & TJ

It is a beautiful large cave with a stream flowing through, and the scramble out was slow due to being obstructed by fallen trees. We started the exploration of the Somesul Cald gorges by initially walking on an unmarked path alongside the stream, which turned out to be more of a slide on greasy wet rocks. Richard S, Mick, Tim and Mike made it to a water pool, and the explorers decided that any further advance would lead to immersion, so we decided to follow the marked trail at the top of the gorges. This turned out to be a tedious struggle through a mass of fallen pine trees, and spirits were dropping when we finally made it to lunch at a beautiful belvedere on a cliff at the top of the gorges.

We decided to continue, rather than turning back via the obstructed path, but the tree fall continued and we were only making about 1/2km an hour. After we crossed the stream at the end of the gorge the trail got easier, with fewer fallen trees in mainly beech and oak forest on the other side of the valley. We had had plenty of opportunity to observe the shallow root systems of pine trees; beech and oak have deep taproots and are clearly more resistant to the wind. Getting back to the cave, we met a group of Romanian walkers, who explained that the forest damage was due to the massive storm from September 2017, of which we kept seeing signs throughout our visit of Apuseni.

We returned through the cave, then through the Varasoia pass, back to Padis, to celebrate with a well-deserved beer and dinner, together with Anca's sister and her partner, who had arrived from Arad for the week.



TRC group
relaxing at Padis
Photo TJ

Tuesday July 31st

Helen, Mike, Richard S, Tim, Richard T, Mick - Lumea Pierduta (the Lost World)
Jason and Anca went for a short walk around the Padis plateau with Dana and Sorin (Anca's sister and partner). They also went to the Biserica Motului peak, just above the plateau.

The rest set off from the cabins down through a muddy track past several summer huts offering various fruit cordials and distilled liquors for sale. We descended steeply into Poiana Ponor - a large grassy depression (a polje). This was fed by a river emerging from the Ponor spring which we followed until it disappeared into a sinkhole to join the Ponorului system. Here a large party of Romanians were having single rope technique practice on the cliffs as part of a week-long caving course. We stopped for coffee at the Cabana Cetatile Ponorului, a mountain hut run by the Romanian Speleological Association.

A forest track led to the climb up to Lumea Pierduta. This is a dense area of mainly beech woods, with several impressive cave entrances hidden in the trees, but linked by a well waymarked path, eventually leading back to Padis.

During the evening, after dinner, some bemoaned the lack of a dessert course, which was not on offer. Dana and Anca spoke in glowing terms of the "pies", sweet or savoury, which could be had from the shacks on the plateau nearby. An expedition was mounted and fruit pies (actually more like waffles) were freshly cooked and consumed, along with a taste of liqueur made of pine nuts, all provided by a very friendly peasant and his wife.

Wednesday August 1st

Mike, Tim, Richard S went on a caving trip in Cetatile Ponorului

Helen, Richard T, Mick, Jason and Anca set off with a drive to the road leading to Glavoi. We left the car and started a walk leading to several cave entrances: Ghetarul de la Barsa ice cave – Taul Negru (Black Tarn) – Pestera Neagra (Black Cave) – Ghetarul Focul Viu (Live Fire ice cave) - Pietrele Galbenei – Bortig pothole – Cetatile Ponorului cave.

Cetatile Ponorului JL

*See detailed report by
Michael Smith
on page 90*

The start resembled a rain forest walk due to the humidity in the atmosphere. We were pleased to cool down with a descent into the Barsa ice cave, where we found some ice remains.



The walk continued through forested hills with a mixture of deciduous trees and spruce, and passed by several cave entrances and potholes as points of interest, including the very atmospheric Black Tarn and the Black Cave. We reached the “Live Fire ice cave” around noon time, when the sun was supposed to shine onto the ice (hence the name). The clouds made the experience less notable, though it was still impressive to see ice surviving in the middle of summer, due to the cool air of the cave. We had lunch with a view, at the top of Pietrele Galbenei, offering views over the forested Southern Apuseni range. The walk continued to Cetatile Ponorului. At the “balcony” at the top of the doline, the steep descent / scramble to the bottom of the doline looked too nasty for Helen, who decided to continue the walk to Glavoi and wait for us there. The rest of us descended to one of the cave entrances, and further into the cave until we reached the river, but did not follow it to the large portal (main cave entrance), to avoid wet boots. When outside, we walked further to the impressive main entrance, then back up to the road and Glavoi, where we met Helen, had a nice cup of tea (fruity infusion) and shared a “langos” (a kind of waffle) with cheese and cream.

Thursday August 2nd

Helen, Mike, Richard S, Tim, Richard T, Mick, Jason, Anca
Galbena gorges circuit

This was due to be the longest, and most strenuous walk of the Apuseni trip. We started early morning with a drive to Glavoi campsite, on a dirt road starting from where we parked the car on the previous day. It was a warm humid morning with the sky covered in clouds, but no sign of rain yet. We went back to the top of Ponorului doline and the “balconies”, to take in a spectacular view of the sheer drops. We continued to the Galbena gorges via a never-ending descent to the bottom of the valley – a hint to what was to be expected in terms of climbing back up at the end of the trip. The gorges were impressive, with some scrambling points aided (or not) by chains and metal wires. The Evantai (Fan) waterfall welcomed us with high waters, and we had to use the metal fixed aids to aid us in a lateral traverse on the wall, to avoid getting wet.

We had lunch after the waterfall, after which rain started with increasing strength, making the wet limestone a tricky terrain to walk on. Luckily, the tricky scrambling points were almost all behind us, with one hurdle at the end, involving walking on a loose chain, which Richard S made with an umbrella in his hand! The walk back under the rain was not to be fondly remembered, suffice to say that the climb up was never-ending too. A stop at Glavoi campsite under clearing skies to remove wet clothes and have a beer, pancake and langos reward was very welcome.



Galbena Gorge



MB & TJ

Friday August 3rd

The morning started with saying good-bye to Tim, who was heading back to Cluj, to catch his plane early Saturday morning. Richard T tried to negotiate the acquisition of a Romanian flag, but the host did not give an indication that he would gift his proudly exhibited cloth. He suggested buying one in the valley, but it turned out to be too expensive for Richard’s needs.

The rest of us went on a walk to the Boga, which started on an exiguous path through the woods, through to Padis cave, and finally out to Poiana Varasoia clearing and an easier walk on a path. Dana and Sorin joined us on this adventure. From the clearing, a walk up the hill led us to a superb view point onto the Boga amphitheatre, where we had lunch. The descent was gentle, and we learned about the Padis flora and fauna from the explanatory panels. A particular noteworthy

phenomenon is the inversion of the deciduous and coniferous forests in Padis, due to colder air in the valleys.

When back from the amphitheatre, Dana, Sorin, Anca and Jason went back to Biserica Motului peak, where they saw red squirrels, which in Romania have a very dark fur. Mick and Richard T went to visit a sheepfold, which Anca and Jason had seen earlier in the week. They were invited in by the lady of the house to sample her newly made cheese.

The Smiths also made it to the Biserica Motului peak, and on the return met with Anca's party and went on the "pie trail" on the plateau, where they had a nice taste of cheese and fruit pies from the locals.

Saturday August 4th

The Smiths moved on to visit Cluj and the surroundings, prior to their departure on Monday. Mick, Richard T, Jason and Anca descended to Deva. They had lunch in Hunedoara, where they finally got a decent internet signal and found out from an email that sadly, YRC member Cliff Large had passed away. We visited Corvin Castle where we met Esther and Lloyd, and where Richard T finally bought a long sought after Romanian flag. We had dinner in Deva with Anca's aunt and uncle, Ani and Vasile.

Second week: Retezat mountains

Sunday August 5th

After getting the last supplies from Deva, we drove to Carnic, where we left the car and hiked to the Pietrele hut for about 1.5-2 hours, reaching it in the early afternoon. Accommodation was in wooden cabins for two, and we were warned to watch out for the adders warming on the sunny stones! We got used to the 5 min trip through the nettles to the WC (Wine Cellar), and got to meet the hut warden Paul (we found out his name later in the week). For the rest of the afternoon, we gathered around a few beers. Mick had an old back injury, giving him trouble.

Monday August 6th

Richard T, Mick, Esther Chadwick, Lloyd de Beer, Jason and Anca
Pietrele hut – Lolaia ridge – Retezat peak (2482 m) – Retezat saddle - Stanisoara lake – Pietrele hut
We started on a sunny morning following the yellow stripes, on a steep climb through the spruce woods with impressive mushrooms, until we reached the tree line around 1750 m at Ciurila saddle. The steep forest climb turned out to be the theme of the Retezat trip, and was necessary every day, to get from the hut to the tree line above (around 1800 – 1900 m). We discovered a lovely alpine landscape, with juniper and dwarf mountain pine, gentians and butterflies, and had good views towards the Retezat mountain. We continued the walk over the Lolaia ridge, through granite boulder fields that required a lot of focus.

The clouds closed in, and it started to rain when we got to the Lolaia peaks, before the last push up the Retezat. The climb became more steep and difficult, and we made it to the top with the head in the clouds, just in time for lunch. The clouds started to clear when we started the descent, unveiling a majestic landscape towards the main ridge, and some of the mountain landscape behind.

We arrived at the superb Stanisoara lake, where we spotted some chamois, which we admired through Esther's binoculars.

As we found out later, their fur is black in winter (hence their name meaning black goats in Romanian), and brown in summer.

The Stanisoara valley walk on the blue triangle back to the hut was a pleasure.



Tuesday August 7th

Richard T, Mick, Esther, Lloyd, Jason and Anca

Pietrele hut – Gales lake – Varful Mare (Big Peak, 2463 m) – Gales lake – Pietrele hut

With Mick's back still giving trouble, we discussed an easier day for today. He suggested this trip, following the same trail for both ascent and descent. It was another clear morning, with a steep climb in prospect. Yet this time the walk started with an accentuated descent to Valea Rea (Bad Valley), before starting the climb to Gales lake. This was not quite to the taste of Richard T, who was feeling rather under the weather, so he returned to the hut after bravely "flogging through the woods" up to the lake. From Gales, a gentle ascent at first, followed by a steep climb led us to Vf. Mare saddle. From there it was a "knife-like" ridge walk on boulder fields up to the top, requiring some attention and a sure foot

With an unsure step at first, Lloyd made it to the top with Mick's guidance, and thoroughly enjoyed himself. We reached the top in the clouds again, and they opened up for us as we were having lunch at the top.

When back at the Vf. Mare saddle, we admired the scary ridge leading to Papusa peak. On the way back, Esther, Lloyd and Mick saw two marmots playing, just above Gales lake.

We met the shepherd from the Gales lake sheepfold, but he was too shy to enter a discussion. He had a herd of beautiful rams, which we admired for a while before descending to the hut. On the way, we took the alternative route by the atmospheric Taul dintre Brazi (The Tarn amongst the Fir Trees).

Wednesday August 8th

Richard T, Mick, Esther, Lloyd, Jason and Anca

Pietrele hut – Gentiana hut – Bucura saddle – Peleaga peak (2509 m) – Peleaga saddle – Valea Rea (Bad Valley) – Pietrele hut

With Richard still not feeling great, we decided to attempt the Peleaga peak today. After the usual forest climb, the walk up Pietrele valley was very pleasant. At Pietrele lake, we met a very friendly shepherd who was taking care of a cow herd. He had a shelter full of pots and pans under a large rock, and a tent for bad weather.

A steep climb from the lake led us to Bucura saddle, from which we had a great view over the largest glacial lake in Romania.



Peleaga from Bucura MB

We also had a surreal moment there when we met a lady with a siamese cat, something you don't see very often in the mountains. A Dobermann appeared from the direction of Pelagea, running ahead of its owner, excited at the prospect of prey and the cat owner was forced to scoop up the cat and defend it from certain extinction.



Peleaga JL

After a brief chocolate rest, we started climbing Custura Bucurei peak, before a descent to Custura Bucurei saddle and a relatively gentle ascent to Peleaga, the highest peak in the Retezat.

Here we got the usual cloudy top and lunch, and Richard was happy to hear that the ascent was over for the day. We descended to Pietrele hut through the Valea Rea.

Thursday August 9th

Richard T, Mick, Esther, Lloyd, Jason and Anca

Pietrele hut – Stanisoara lake – Saua Retezat – Bucura I peak (2433 m) – Bucura II peak – Bucura saddle – Pietrele lake – Pietrele hut

We returned to Stanisoara valley, this time for an ascent to Retezat saddle and a ridge walk to the two Bucura peaks I and II. Although still resentful of “flogging through the woods” at 9 am, Richard was feeling better on this day. After the saddle, on our right, we admired the Gemenele scientific reserve, and the Judele (The Judge) peak, during a glorious sunny day.

From the top of Bucura I, we got superb views of the Retezat mountain, with its “cut off” shape, and of the ridge up to Peleaga.

We then continued to Bucura II, which was an easy walk on an unmarked boulder field. Anca’s sister had warned of

From there, it was an easy descent to Bucura saddle, where we could see storm clouds starting to form in the valley. The descent was marked by a thunderstorm, and we were rather uneasy to hear the thunder on the tops, but happy to be in the valley. We sheltered, together with other tourists, under the shepherd’s rock at Pietrele lake, but he wasn’t there. We met him further along, after the storm, at Gentiana hut, having a beer with other tourists. He answered our curious questions, but we are still doubtful that he can drive his cow herd from Ohaba de sub Piatra to Bucura lake in 12 hours. He said he was originally from Ohaba, and he had spent 16 years being a cowherd on the mountain.

At Gentiana hut, we also found a memorial for members of the mountain club “Floarea Reginei”.

At Pietrele hut, we finally engaged in a very pleasant conversation with Paul, the warden, and we even got an exchange of jokes. Who would have thought, Helen? (Helen and Michael had totally failed to get any sign of humour from the custodians on their visit two weeks earlier.)

Friday August 10th

Richard T, Mick, Esther, Lloyd, Jason and Anca

Pietrele hut – Valea Rea lakes- Peleage saddle – Papusa peak (2508 m) – Portile Inchise ridge – Varful Mare saddle – Gales lake – Pietrele hut

Another glorious day, starting with the ascent through Valea Rea (Bad Valley), this time with Richard in top form. The name of this valley likely comes from the shepherds, who thought it was unfavourable for grazing, and this can easily be seen at the top of the valley, where lakes are scattered onto a rocky landscape.

From the Peleaga saddle, we walked to the top of Papusa (The Doll), where we could admire superb views of the Northern Retezat landscape, whilst the South was covered in clouds.

From there, we descended the ridge to the dreaded Portile Inchise, a knife-edge ridge that we had admired on the second day from the Vf Mare saddle. The trail was narrow and we had to use chains at the beginning. The clouds were menacing on the ridge behind, when we reached Portile Inchise, but the South Eastern side, on which we were walking, was nice and sunny.

After a few scrambling moments, helped by Mick's calming attitude and advice, we made it to Vf Mare saddle. As we took a well-deserved rest, Lloyd's observant eyes helped spot a majestic eagle. The descent followed the same route as day 2, and Anca got to see her first Romanian marmots, probably the same that the group saw before. From Gales lake, a steady descent brought us to meet Valea Rea, from which we ascended to Pietrele hut.

Saturday August 11th

We descended from Pietrele, visited the roman ruins at Ulpia Traiana Sarmizegetusa, then returned to Timisoara (Esther and Lloyd), Sibiu (Richard) and Deva (Mick, Jason and Anca) after a very satisfying week.

Conclusion

The concept of visiting two contrasting upland areas of Romania worked very well and allowed people to come for just one of the weeks. The leader, Anca Pordea, being a native Romanian had ensured the meet went like clockwork and all were very grateful for her detailed planning and the hospitality of her sister Dana and partner Sorin who came along on week one.

The Padis Plateau guarded most of its secrets under a cloak of trees, but the karst features we visited were world class and the Cetatile Ponorului dolines, the Cheile Galbenei gorge and the Cheile Somesului Cald with its dramatic start with a through trip of Pestera Radesei cave were exceptional and highly enjoyable. The partial descent of the Ponorolui cave was an exciting adventure with lots of fast flowing water and huge passages

The Retezat Mountains were also a great place to visit and have many similarities with more familiar parts of the Pyrenees, such as the Aigüestortes National Park and Andorra which are also glaciated granite sprinkled liberally with tarns and lakes.

Each area had enough for a full week's activity, but little more and so were a good choice for the trip. Romania is still a comparatively inexpensive place to visit, with a variety of flight options from the UK. The accommodation was modern in Padis and basic but adequate in the Retezat. We ate well - the food provided was plentiful and appetising. The fruit tea and local beers were excellent!

Participants

Week One:

Mick Borroff, Tim Josephy, Jason Lees (guest), Anca Pordea (leader), Helen Smith, Michael Smith, Richard Smith and Richard Taylor.

Week Two:

Lloyd de Beer (guest), Mick Borroff, Esther Chadwick (guest), Jason Lees (guest), Anca Pordea (leader) and Richard Taylor.



Pietrele hut JL



Retezat via Lolaia JL



On Papusa MB

Maps

Dimap: Padis Karst Area of Bihor Mountains, 1:30,000
 Muntii Nostrî: MN17 Bihorului Platoul Padis, 1:55,000 and 1:25,000
 Muntii Nostrî: MN06 Retezat, 1:50,000
 Bel-Alpine: Retezat Mountains, 1:50,000

Mapping Apps

Avenza maps: Zona Padis din Muntii Bihor (£1.99)
 Galileo Pro: Romania (£3.99)
 Muntii Nostrî: Retezat map (free)

Guidebooks

James Roberts, *The Mountains of Romania*, Cicerone, 2005. This is the only English language guidebook available and focuses exclusively on backpacking through hikes and was only of limited usefulness for planning our walks. The last decade has seen much change in Romania and the book's planning section is becoming somewhat outdated.

Pre-Meet Week in the Retezat Mountains and other minor aspects of the trip

Two Smiths visited the Retezat just before the meet started as they had to be back in Yorkshire for a family celebration clashing with the second meet week. Unfortunately, their visit coincided with wetter weather and low cloud bases. The unheated cabins of the Pietrele (1,480m) soon resulted in damp clothing and sodden shoes. Undaunted they made two ascents lacking any views from the ridges.

Vârful Peleaga (2,509m) was approached via the forest and Bulgarian cleg-like dwarf firs and tarns in Valea Rea and boulder fields up to the Saua Pelegii pass with a descent over Saua Zănoegelor and down the long Valea Gales passing shepherds leading their flock to high grazing before heavy rain set in for the last few kilometres. The traverse of Vârful Retezat (2,482m) was made longer on account of the loss of the map-indicated route from La Brodulet to the col north of the summit. Instead the Valea Stânișoara was followed for a further kilometre and a steep winding route taken to the Saua Retezatului. A well-marked route over the boulder field led to the flag-marked summit before a loose gully descent leading north.

On that descent they met three young male backpackers, the last falling behind as his boot sole was flapping. Michael rooted in his sack and provided tape to effect a repair. At the last top on the broad Culmea Lolaia ridge our two encountered a family group of three generations and exchanged pleasantries.

As they departed they shouted and came down to ask if they would escort grandpa back down to the col as he had “reached the limit of his endurance”. It transpired that they had no map and little idea of the route. Given the clear colour-coded route markings and signs giving the time taken to complete routes then the lack of a map is understandable at least in good weather - they were given a spare map printout to help them orientate themselves in the mist.

During the descent with grandpa they chatted (as much as allowed by severely limited shared vocabularies in a mixture of Spanish, German and French) and discovered that he was aged 65, retired and called Michael – three things in common with Michael Smith.

As the afternoon rain set in they reached the dense forest was reached giving some protection.



Caves and Gorges

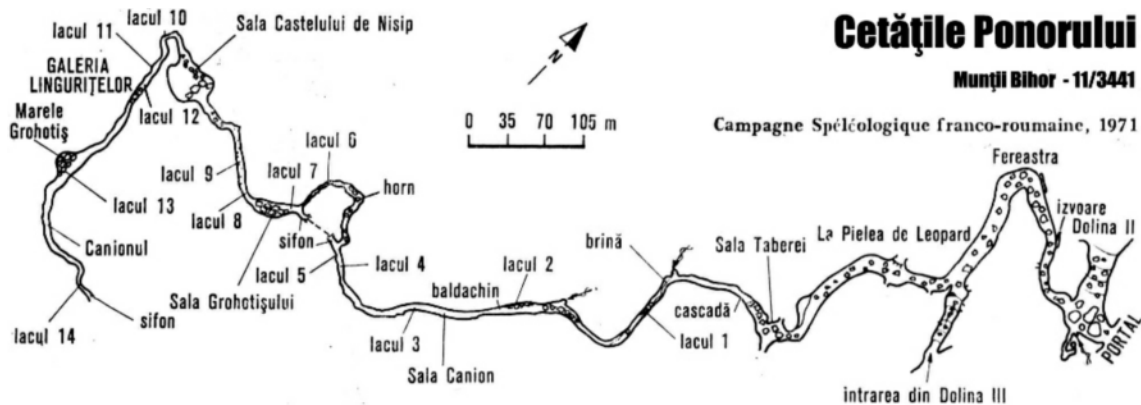
A number of small cave entrances were investigated while out walking, for example Peștera Padiș on our last day. Typically, they required initial descent of scree or clay slopes and soon reduced in height to make stooped walking impossible. Many vertical shafts were peered into such as Șaua Bortig. These were sometimes difficult to locate in the forests.

The 'Living Fire' ice cave or Ghetarul de la Focul Viu was unique in our experience in having permanent ice – indeed ice that is supposed to have remained there from the last ice age. The descent down dilapidated wooden steps to a gated viewing area was a transition into a cold sink. Behind a cone of ice with embedded tree branches a more solid ice 'stalagmite' glistened.



The absence of any draft or water flow through the cave reduced the rate of melting. Sometimes shafts of sunlight reach some of the nearby icicles giving a sparkle which led to the cave's name.

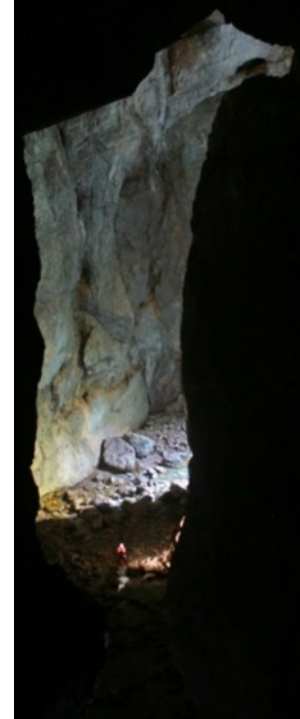
Three members signed up for a trip down the so-called Everest of Romanian Speleology, the Ponor Fortress or Cetatii Ponorului. Their guides were two members of the Spel Club Cristal of Oradea. From the Galbena valley a forest walk reached the kilometre-wide doline following the stream into the 70m tall, 30m wide entrance at the foot of a 300m wall. Soon a chamber of twice the entrance's dimensions is entered and they joined the river. A little further and a secondary entrance (and their exit route) illuminates the cave with diffused sunlight. A couple of small waterfalls were descended before an area of water chutes and jammed tree trunks requires an abseil, plunge into a narrow channel and swim to a gravel bank.





Cetatii Ponorului
photographs on
this page are by
Cristina Ianc of
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Romania.

The one at the
top of the
previous page is
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Pascariu



Continuing along the winding route wading and swimming arrived at a logjam dam across a several metre wide narrowing with a more difficult drop beyond. Given the forecasted threat of heavy afternoon rain and the tired state of the elders, a decision was made to return. Those elders struggled with one of the upstream swims, making no progress against the flow, indeed they were

being carried downstream, and called for a rope to haul them in and a hand up the water-smoothed exit from the channel. It was a pleasure to warm up again in the sunshine of the doline floor. The assistance of Robi and Bogdan was appreciated.

Driving through the eastern Muntii Vladeasa in the north of the Apuseni, the sinks of Peștera Întorsuri-Runcșor were briefly visited. A short circular walk traversed above the sink and just below a 223m long, 35m deep cave entrance home to three species of bats. Near the sink holes, the farmer was rinsing out his muslin cheesecloths as cattle crossed just upstream.

East of the Apuseni, the Turda Gorge or Cheile Turzii was a popular weekend attraction with a long zip wire and cafes near the lower entrance. The 3km long canyon was walked beneath steep walls reaching up to 300m. There are scores of small caves, a couple of arches and several rock crags this being one of the country's main climbing areas.



Tourism

There is more to a meet than the walking, scrambling and caving.

One of the fascinations of meets in new places is the opportunity to see something of the local culture. Transylvania provided plenty of cultural interest. Bran Castle had links to not only to Vlad the Impaler and so Bram Stoker's Dracula but the Queen Marie of our Victoria's Royal Family. One member was attacked by a bloodsucking creature while visiting that castle though this was in daylight hours and was by a midge. Set among the decaying remains of Romania's largest steelworks is Hunedoara's Gothic-Renaissance Corvin Castle, one of Europe's largest castles, supposedly imprisoned Vlad. Brașov was established as a city by Teutonic Knights as Kronstadt, manufactured tractors in the communist era, was the site of the militarily repressed 1987 rebellion against Nicolae Ceaușescu's draconian austerity measures, but is now a main tourist destination with a large brewery. Cluj-Napoca has Renaissance, Baroque and Gothic architecture and an active modern cultural scene with its Untold electronic music festival attracting 350,000 ticket sales while we were there. Nearby, Turda has an impressively deep abandoned salt mine which, apart from its historical interpretation and archaeological remains, now has popular underground amusements including row boats, table tennis and a Ferris wheel.

Travelling around with minimal Romanian we were warmly received and frequently offered unsolicited help. Those we spoke to at length gave us suggestions for visits and were open in discussing the dramatic changes in their society over the last generation. Having Anca and her family's support and insights added immeasurably our visit.

Michael Smith