

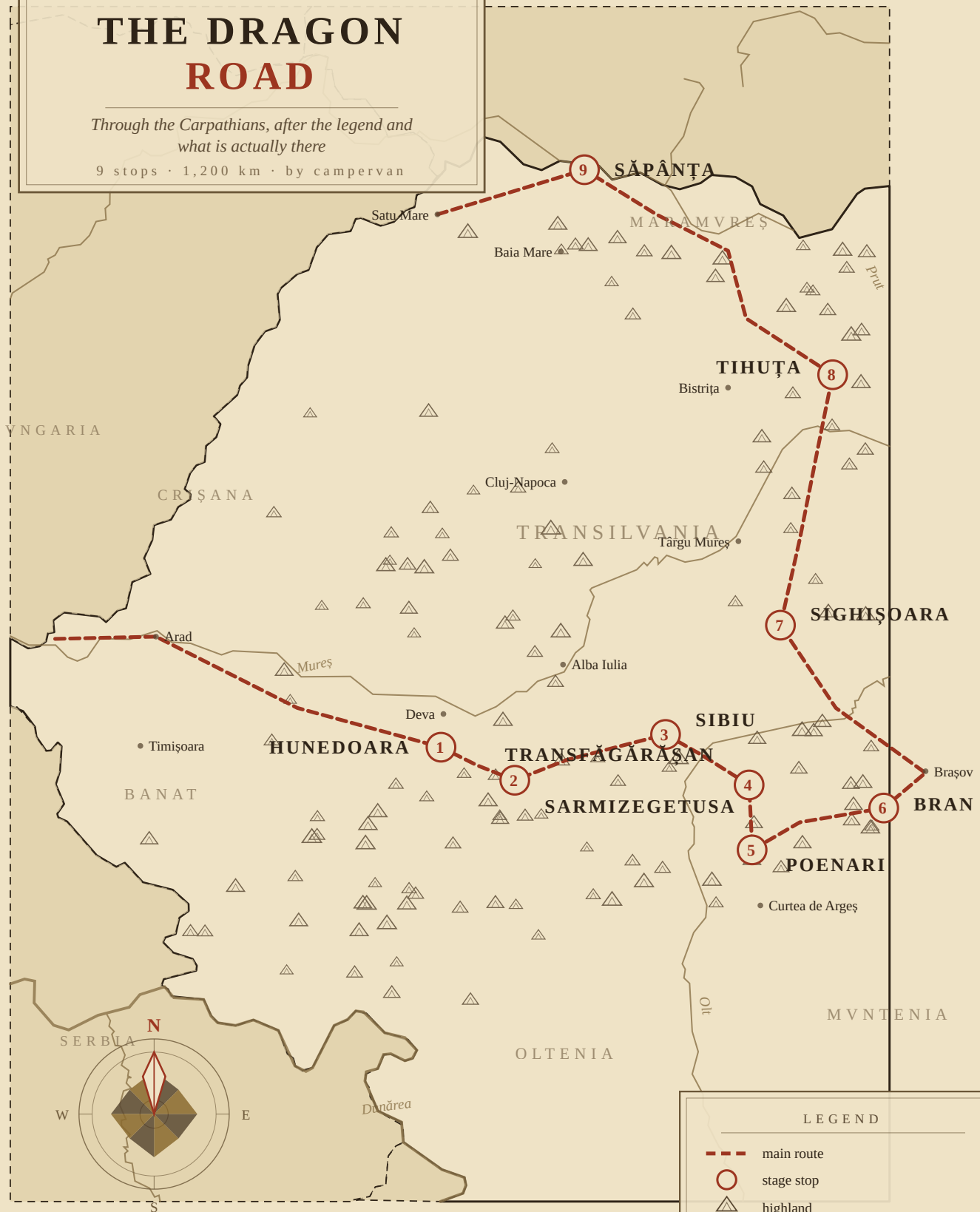
MADE TO EXPLORE

THE DRAGON ROAD

Through the Carpathians, after the legend and what is actually there

9 stops · 1,200 km · by campervan

UKRAINA



LEGEND

- main route
- stage stop
- △ highland

SCALE — KILOMETRES

0 50 100 150

1

HUNEDOARA

Hunedoara — the castle that really is gothic

THE LEGEND

Corvin Castle, raised by John Hunyadi in the fifteenth century: towers, a wooden bridge over the drop, a knights' hall. Guides will tell you Vlad the Impaler was held here for seven years. There is no evidence for it. What is certain is that you are looking at the largest gothic castle in Romania, and that it has nothing to do with vampires.

THE CAMPER

Right beside the castle is Tehnica Fierului — Parcare Castelului, set up for campers, with water and the usual services. It is one of very few of its kind on the whole route, so use it as your starting point: leave with full tanks before two days in the mountains.

FREE

From the road dropping towards the castle the whole silhouette stands clear, towers and bridge, with no ticket. That view is the photograph everyone knows. Also free: the riverside promenade in the centre of Hunedoara, long and pleasant, and Lake Cinciș, a very beautiful reservoir.

✓ ON THE GROUND

Checked on the ground by Calin Muntean · 7 October 2026

Hunedoara → Costești → Sarmizegetusa Regia, about 60 km · ~1½ h by camper. The last twenty are mountain road, narrow and slow.

2

SARMIZEGETUSA REGIA

Orăștie Mountains — the capital before the legend

THE LEGEND

Decebalus's capital, fallen in 106 after Trajan's second campaign. The circular sanctuary of wood and andesite gets sold as the Dacian Stonehenge, which is a lazy comparison: these were not raised stones, this was a city with terraces, an aqueduct and iron workshops.

THE CAMPER

The forest road up from Costești is narrow and rutted. From the car park there is still a walk uphill through the trees. A long camper has no business up there — better left down in the valley.

FREE

The other fortresses in the same forest — Costești, Blidaru, Piatra Roșie — are largely unstaffed. Less spectacular, far emptier.

WHERE TO SLEEP

Campsite · Camping Sargetia, Costești (DJ705A) · GPS 45.67435, 23.16711

Sarmizegetusa → Sebeș → Sibiu, about 120 km · ~2 h by camper. Here the route leaves the Dacians and enters the Saxons.

3

SIBIU

Sibiu and the Mărginimea — the town that looks back at you

THE LEGEND

Hermannstadt, capital of the Transylvanian Saxons, European Capital of Culture in 2007. The houses have small oval windows set into the roofs that from below look like eyes. For a German reader this town is his own history, moved a thousand kilometres east.

THE CAMPER

There are campsites around the town and in the Mărginimea Sibiului. The old centre is pedestrian and narrow — the camper stays outside in any case.

FREE

The whole centre: the Large Square, the Small Square, the Liars' Bridge. And half an hour out in every direction stand the fortified Saxon churches, many of which open with a key fetched from a neighbour.

WHERE TO SLEEP

Campsite · Sibiu City Camping, Strada Aviației · GPS 45.78907, 24.10807

Sibiu → Cârtișoara → Bâlea, about 80 km · ~2 h by camper. The climb starts here.

4

TRANSFĂGĂRĂȘAN

DN7C — the road built out of fear

THE LEGEND Ceaușescu had it built between 1970 and 1974, after the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia: he wanted a military route across the Făgăraș in case an army had to be moved. It cost a great deal of dynamite and a number of lives. Three decades later a British car programme called it the finest road in the world, and Romania found out what it had.

THE CAMPER Open roughly from 1 July to 31 October, depending on snow — check it, do not assume it. The tunnel at Bâlea, at 2,042 m, is unlit and narrow. The hairpins on the northern side are tight; with a long camper, avoid weekend peak hours.

FREE The road itself. Lake Bâlea, the waterfall, the Vidraru dam on the way down — all of it visible without paying anything beyond parking.

Down past Vidraru to the south, about 40 km to the foot of the fortress · ~1 h by camper.

5

POENARI

Poenari Citadel — Vlad's actual castle

THE LEGEND This one is his. Vlad rebuilt it in 1457 using the boyars of Târgoviște, marched up here in their Easter clothes as a punishment. You climb 1,480 steps on a steel stair bolted to the hillside. At the top there is no castle, there are broken walls on a ridge — and that is exactly what makes it true.

THE CAMPER Parking is on the DN7C at the foot of the steps and it is limited. In high season a large camper will struggle — and check first that the citadel is open, it has been closed in the past for bears and for works.

FREE The climb has a ticket, but a small one. The view over the Argeș valley from halfway up has none, and it is half the reason you came.

WHERE TO SLEEP Campsite · Camping Dracula, Arefu (Transfăgărașan) · GPS 45.34999, 24.63308

Poenari → Curtea de Argeș → Câmpulung → Bran, about 150 km along the foot of the range · ~4 h by camper.

6

BRAN

Bran — the castle that is not Dracula's

THE LEGEND It is sold as Dracula's castle. Vlad never lived there; at most he passed nearby. Bram Stoker never set foot in Romania and wrote the novel out of a library in England. The castle is handsome and has a real history, as Queen Marie's residence — that is simply not what is being sold at the gate.

THE CAMPER The car parks are paid and in July and August they fill early. The clean answer is to sleep at Moieciu or Fundata and come down in the morning. The closest to the castle is Vampire Camping, in Bran itself.

FREE Râșnov fortress, fifteen kilometres away, is bigger, older and far emptier. And the road to Fundata under the Piatra Craiului beats any castle hall.

WHERE TO SLEEP Campsite · Vampire Camping, Strada Cavalier Ioan de Pușcariu, Bran · GPS 45.52919, 25.37038

Bran → Brașov → Sighișoara, about 150 km · ~3 h by camper.

7

SIGHIȘOARA

Sighișoara — where he was actually born

THE LEGEND Vlad was born here in 1431, in the house beside the clock tower. It is the one point on the whole route where the connection to him is documented and undisputed. The citadel is the last medieval citadel in Europe that has been lived in without interruption — people inhabit it, they do not visit it.

THE CAMPER The citadel sits on a hill and is pedestrian. Campsites are around the town; you go up on foot, by the Covered Stair.

FREE The whole citadel, the covered stair with its 175 steps, the church on the hill and the Saxon cemetery behind it. The cemetery is free and it is the quietest place in town.

WHERE TO SLEEP Campsite · Camping Aquaris, Strada Nicolae Titulescu, Sighișoara · GPS 46.22352, 24.79709

Sighișoara → Târgu Mureș → Bistrița → the Tihuța Pass, about 200 km · ~5 h by camper.

8

TIHUȚA

The Tihuța Pass — the road an Irishman invented

THE LEGEND

Stoker called it the Borgo Pass and sent an English solicitor up it, towards a castle he had made up. In the 1980s the Romanian state built a hotel in the pass designed to resemble the castle from the book. So: a real communist hotel, built after a fake castle, from a novel written by someone who was never here.

THE CAMPER

The pass is at 1,201 m and open all year, being a national road. You park in the area around the hotel.

FREE

The pass itself and the view towards the Călimani and the Bârgău. And if you want, the hotel courtyard is visible from the road without going in.

Tihuța → Năsăud → the Prislop Pass → Borșa, about 180 km · ~5 h by camper. Prislop, at 1,416 m, is the highest road pass in the Eastern Carpathians.

9

SĂPÂNȚA

Săpânța — where death is painted blue

THE LEGEND

The Merry Cemetery: wooden crosses painted blue, each with a picture and a poem about the person underneath, many of them sharp. Stan Ioan Pătraș began it in 1935 and it has been continued ever since. It is not a tourist joke, it is a funeral tradition that is still running.

THE CAMPER

Small village, parking beside the cemetery. The last fifty kilometres to the border are an easy morning the next day.

FREE

The village itself, with its carved wooden gates. And around it stand the wooden churches of Maramureș — Bârsana, Ieud, Poienile Izei — which are, quietly, the best thing on the entire route.

End of the route. The way out towards Hungary is Petea, about 120 km and two hours on valley roads.

THE ROUTE IN BRIEF

Distance	~1,200 km
Driving time	~29 h in all, without stops
Recommended time	14–18 days
Stage stops	9
Countries	RO
Highest point	Bâlea, 2,042 m
Direction	west → north
Best months	Sep

GOOD TO KNOW BEFORE YOU LEAVE

The Transfăgărășan is open roughly from 1 July to 31 October, depending on snow; if it is closed, the route loses its central stage. Check beforehand, don't assume.

Leave with full tanks before the two mountain days, and don't climb the Transfăgărășan on a quarter tank.

The rovinietă (road vignette) is compulsory on national roads; you buy it online, by registration number.

WHEN TO GO

Ideal: September. The Transfăgărășan is still open, the crowds have thinned, and Maramureș is turning colour.

Workable: July and August, but then Bran is impossible by mid-morning and the Transfăgărășan becomes a queue.

Avoid: any departure before 1 July. The Transfăgărășan is shut and the route loses its central stage.

Winter: the route does not exist in this form. Hunedoara, Sibiu, Sighișoara and Bran still work; the mountains do not.

DRIVING IN ROMANIA

Kilometres lie. On a national road running through villages the real average is 45–55 km/h, not 80. Count the distances in hours, not kilometres.

The rovinietă road tax is compulsory on national roads and is bought online in two minutes against the number plate.

There is no continuous motorway. The route runs almost entirely on national roads, with lorries and with overtaking that asks for patience.

The Transfăgărășan and the Transalpina are seasonal roads, shut from roughly November to June. The exact dates are announced each year.

Since January 2025 Romania has been in Schengen, so nobody stops you at the Hungarian border. Halmeu, though closer to Săpânța, is a crossing into Ukraine — an external border, with full checks.

WHERE YOU SLEEP

Romania has few aires in the German sense of the word, but they do exist — the Parcareă Castelului at Hunedoara is one. Where they appear, it is worth planning around them.

Guesthouses will often take a camper in the yard for a small sum, with water and power. It is the most practical answer on this route and it is arranged on the spot.

Free overnighting is not clearly regulated. In practice it is tolerated outside settlements and protected areas, but do not count on it in high season next to the sights.

In the national parks — Retezat, Piatra Craiului, Rodnei — the rules are stricter and they are enforced.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Shepherd dogs Not a picturesque detail. They work as a pack, they guard the flock, and they will come at you if you approach it. The rule is not to run, not to raise a stick, and to withdraw slowly the way you came. On foot, give the sheepfold a wide berth.

Bears They are real and on a few roads, the Transfăgărășan above all, they are used to people. Do not feed them, do not stop for photographs, do not leave food outside the camper overnight. A bear that has once eaten from a car comes back.

Fuel Filling stations are frequent on the national roads and rare in the mountains. Do not start up the Transfăgărășan on a quarter tank. LPG exists but not everywhere.

Cash and signal Cards work almost everywhere, but carry small notes for tickets, parking and village guesthouses. Signal is generally good and disappears in the deep valleys.

When is the Transfăgărășan open?

Usually from 1 July to 31 October, depending on snow. The exact dates are announced each year, and the route cannot be driven as written outside that window.

Can you sleep in a camper at Corvin Castle in Hunedoara?

Yes. The castle car park has full camper services, water included.

How do you get the Romanian road vignette for a camper under 3.5 t?

You buy it online by registration number: for a vehicle under 3.5 t it is a few tens of lei for ten days and a few hundred for a year — but since 1

July 2026 the tariff is set in lei and also depends on the vehicle's Euro emission class, so take the exact figure from the CNAIR site. Which class you fall into depends on how the camper is registered in its papers. The rovinietă is compulsory on national roads and is bought online against the number plate; the bridges at Giurgiu and Fetești are tolled separately.

Which is the best month for the route?

September. The Transfăgărășan is still open, the summer crowds have gone and the light is better.

THE RULE OF THE ROAD

*“On this road the legend sells a ticket; the truth you climb to on foot.
The castle they sell was never Vlad's.
His is at the top of 1,480 steps, and there is no queue.”*

Documentary check: September 2026. Places, hours and conditions change — check them before you leave.