

# MOUNTAIN BIKE

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LIKE IKE

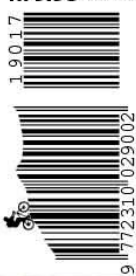
CHICKS RULE!  
Candice, Katja,  
Miroda & teen Thana

# GET OFF THE GRID!

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THE CARPATHIAN MTB EPIC PROMISES TO RESHAPE YOUR MOUNTAIN BIKING FOUNDATIONS AS YOU TRAVERSE THE LAST GENUINELY WILD REGIONS IN EUROPE. MIRODA OTTO COULDN'T RESIST TAKING ON THE MYSTERIOUS CARPATHIAN MOUNTAINS OF DRACULA...

# RUGGED ROMANIA

After the intense Transpyr race last year in Spain (800km over six days, averaging eight to 10 hours a day in the saddle) I was taking it much easier on the cycling. While on a fun, six-day customised leisure bike tour in Canada, with only a few hours of riding a day, my Transpyr partner and friend, Annie, sent me a message asking if I'd be interested in doing the Carpathian MTB Epic, a solo UCI race in Romania. It was less than a month before the race and I needed to be in Europe two weeks after the race, so I figured why not, and off I went!

Held high up in the mountains at the beautiful Cheile Gradistei – Fundata Resort, the second edition of the Carpathian MTB Epic offered two racing options (four days or one day). We opted for the four days which started with an 11km Prologue XC stage then three XCM stages, each around 60km. The total elevation gain was an astronomical 8 500m. I hadn't had much time for training so I was basically relying on the fitness I had left in my legs from the Transpyr, hoping it would still be enough to get me up the huge 2 500 to 3 300m vertical ascent days I would have to ride.

The fact that the race started and finished at the same place and was a full-service event – “eat, ride, sleep” – played a big part in my decision to do it. I regard myself as “conveniently tough”, and camping is normally avoided unless there are no alternative options. It is just so much nicer to sleep in a comfortable bed with white sheets and a fluffy pillow after a hard day of racing.

The race organisers were amazing and had everything covered, from arranging your transport to and from the airport, to themed dinners every night. It was great to arrive at the airport in Bucharest and



## PROLOGUE PANIC

The next day was pretty relaxing and I went for a short afternoon ride to have a look around and make sure everything was ready for the next day. At breakfast on the day of the Prologue, my friends Cory Wallace and Frederic Gombert asked if I wanted to join them for a pre-ride of the difficult sections of the Prologue and a short spin around the area. It sounded like a great idea; I agreed to ride with them until I'd had enough and then come back. It turned out to be so beautiful that I stayed on, and when they eventually decided to turn back we had to choose between returning on the same road or taking a much shorter hiking trail over a steep hill. We decided to be adventurous – it didn't look too far and we thought it would just be a quick climb to the top. It turned out to be more like the start of a huge mountain, and the hiking trail was definitely not meant for cycling. At first we were pushing our bikes up and when that became too steep we ended up carrying them on our shoulders. Every time we turned a corner and thought the worst was over, there was more climbing. We probably hiked our bikes for at least an hour before reaching the top. The views across the valley were incredible and we were joking that we could be glad we wouldn't be riding anything as steep or technical in the race. We managed to find a rideable road that took us back to the

have someone waiting for me – I knew from then on I could relax and all would be taken care of. I'm not a light traveller; besides my bicycle I can't go anywhere without rusks, an Aero press, my Riedel wine glass, my MacBook and my drone. Arriving two days before the race started gave me some time to settle in. The Race Village, set near Fundata village in an Olympic-level resort, is located in the mountains about 200km from the airport. We were transported in a private bus. The drive was pretty slow and it took us more than four hours to get there but the scenery was lovely and we were having a great time chatting. We even bought delicious berries from a guy at one of the traffic lights along the way.

PHOTOGRAPHS TRAIAN OLINCINI, MARIUS FURCEANU, BRINDUSA MUTOIU, TIBI HILA, JANOS CHERESTES.

## REVIEW CARPATHIANS

Race Village, past lots of little farms where families were working in their fields. Our little Prologue pre-ride ended up taking much longer than we anticipated; two and a half hours to be exact. I felt rather tired when we got back. We had just enough time for a shower and lunch before we had to line up again for the start of the Prologue. I definitely learnt my lesson: never go for a pre-ride with professional cyclists.

Before registration I had been contemplating changing my racing category from elite to amateur, because the field was small and consisted almost completely of the world's top women cyclists. I knew I was not anywhere close to their level of riding with my "ride when I can" training program. You get placed from slowest to fastest and it didn't take long for me to be overtaken by all these super-fast women, making me feel like a real beginner. I'd entered the elite category because I prefer a women's only batch start in UCI races. A lot of men think we want our own starting batch because we want equal rights in races and so on, but it has nothing to do with that. It has more to do with the fact that we know we cannot compete with men and would prefer to make it easier for both parties. We know we will never be as strong or as fast, and we feel intimidated when we have to compete in front on the starting line. Men ride far more aggressively and they often become really impatient when they get stuck behind us on single track where we are also racing for a place and can't afford to stop to let them pass.

My Prologue didn't go as well as I had

hoped; it felt more like a scene from a horror movie. Although it was the shortest Prologue I'd ever ridden, it was definitely not the easiest. There were endless steep climbs and one extremely steep downhill section that we were warned about during race briefing. I tried to be cautious, but my back wheel had no grip at all and it kept sliding sideways. I couldn't have sat further back behind my saddle if I'd tried. My luck eventually ran out, and between all the slip-sliding, I hit a rock with my front wheel causing a spectacular tumble. I was lucky not to be hurt too badly and saw it as a blessing in disguise – people at the finish line would assume I finished so far behind the other elites because of my crash (and not because I was so slow!). The rest of the stage offered more climbing and it felt like the most embarrassing day of my cycling life. I had no energy left in my legs and I probably pushed my bike up more than half the climbs while at the same time trying to get out of the way for all the male elites racing past. Those 11km felt never-ending and left me really worried. How was I going to survive the next three 60km stages, with all that elevation gain?!

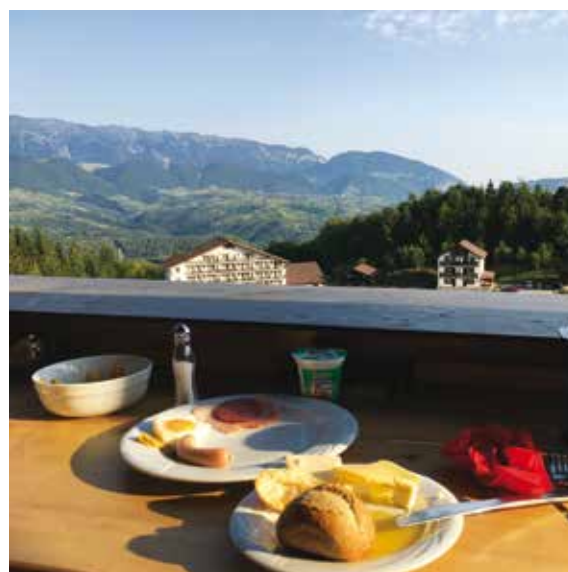
### INTO THE WILD

The first stage was a rude awakening to all of us, starting with a huge climb and more hike-a-bike. At least this time I felt better about pushing my bike because I was surrounded by other people doing the same. We raced through beautiful forests with lovely streams at the bottom followed by breath taking panoramic views once we got to the top. We were fully

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Bottom, from left: Miroda testing out the trails before the official race; a hearty breakfast at the luxurious Race Village; Ariane Luthi on her way to victory; Miroda proudly shows off her finishers medal.



aware of the fact that we were ascending like mad up the mountain, but it was only once we stood looking down into the valley, taking it all in, that we realised just how much climbing we'd done in such a short distance.

Every stage was hard and it felt more like I'd ridden 100km instead of 60km. It was not just my legs that were tired but my whole body from all the bike-pushing and carrying. The route was rugged and wild, exactly how the organisers described it. We rode mainly on jeep track and gravel roads and sometimes "no track" with little flags pointing out the way. There were also some very fast, single track downhills that had me smiling. I stopped once or twice on the way down to let my brakes, that I

could smell, cool down, and to rest my hands. The one downhill lasted for about six kilometres and was so much fun that by the time I reached the bottom, I'd forgiven the route designer (also the local MTB multi-champion), for all the suffering he'd put me through to get to the top in the first place.

The weather up in the mountains was so unpredictable. Every day there was a 20-minute thunderstorm. It almost felt like the rain Gods were watching me and sent the rain, thunder and even hail each time I was on the hardest part of the biggest climb of the day. The first time it happened, with the muddy water running over my feet and my bike on my shoulders, I asked myself: "Why am I doing

## REVIEW CARPATHIANS



this again?" I'd feel sorry for myself for a few minutes and then realise there was nothing I could do about it, and so carried on. Then the rain stopped, the sun came out and we'd hit the downhills and be smiling again. On the second day, the little rain shower turned out to be a massive thunderstorm and two of us arrived on the top of the mountain where a race official asked us to wait for the lightning to pass before we carried on. This was the only day I actually remembered to look at the weather forecast before the start,

and there had been no rain predicted, so I decided to leave my rain jacket behind. A mistake I will never make again when riding in a mountainous area. The weather at the top was completely different to what it was like in the valley. I ended up freezing cold and wet, stuck up on the mountain for about 40 minutes waiting for them to say we could carry on. Every time we thought it was safe to go, another round of lightning struck. Eventually, the race organisers asked us to turn back and we were slipping and sliding down the

mountain in less than 30 minutes after taking two hours to get up. About 10km from the Race Village we had to cross a river that had come down in full force with all the rain – there was no other alternative but to walk through it. We waded through, carrying our bikes in the air, trying not to get our legs washed out from underneath us. It was pretty exciting and felt more like we were on a survivor challenge.

The Carpathian MTB Epic proved to be a challenging, tough race! The organisers' goal was to attract the most daring professional mountain bikers to face the Carpathian's rugged peaks. At the start line were some of the toughest international cyclists, among them European and World Champions. It was not an easy race and I would not recommend it to a weekend warrior; you have to be super fit and love riding up big mountains to enjoy it. If you've ever thought of pulling out your ebike for a race, this would be the perfect one for it, because of the short distances and big ascents. The organisers did a great job with showing off some of the most pristine scenery Romania has to offer and the hospitality was next level. I will never forget the views from those beautiful mountains and all the friendly people I met every day (not to mention the local, traditional cheese, cold cut specialities and wine tasting). If you are looking at doing a multi-stage professional event in Eastern Europe, this is definitely one to look at. I now know what a real mountain bike adventure feels like and I'm very proud for taking this chance and living it! ⚙️

<https://carpathianmtb.ro/>



**From left: Young riders getting inspired; crossing the rushing river proved to be a challenging feat after the heavy thunderstorm; cruising through pristine Romania.**

