Count János Bethlen's Manor House dates from the 1650s

It Takes a Village
A mother and son's restoration project in the quiet hills of Transylvania promises to carry tradition into the future

The kitchen in the Caretaker's House

Picnicking in a nearby meadow in Criş

Cut off from the rest of Romania by the arc of the Carpathian Mountains, Transylvania still embodies a certain rural self-sufficiency. There are few better examples than the picturesque village of Criş, from which Count Miklós Bethlen fled in 1948 during the rise of the Soviet Union. But even after settling in Austria, he never abandoned the place his ancestors founded some 800 years prior: "When he returned in 1967, he found his ancestral home in ruins and the community all but forgotten," says his son Nikolaus Bethlen. "From then on it became his life's ambition to raise funds to restore the family's castle and support the local people."

Since the count's death in 2001, Nikolaus and his mother, Gladys, have continued this work, slowly acquiring village buildings and renovating them into appealing vacation houses under the banner of Bethlen Estates. The first, Caretaker's House, was completed in 2019; this year, two more—Saxon-style cottage Depner House and the four-bedroom Corner Barn—will join it.

Bethlen is an enterprise deeply rooted not only in place but also in people and traditions. As part of the restorations, Gladys travels the countryside researching historic construction techniques and looking for period fixtures and materials. "Whenever they knock down a house, I'm there collecting old hinges and beams," she says. A team of local carpenters and blacksmiths integrates the pieces into the structures, along with locks, hand-forged nails, roof tiles, and old shutters.

As the scale of the project has grown, so has the family's impact on the area. Since 2002, Gladys and Nikolaus have awarded five scholarships annually to local children to attend a boarding school in nearby Sighişoara, and they hire from the surrounding area whenever possible. That includes the chef, Robert Birtalan, who in turn sources from producers within a 10-mile radius of the property.

The pair now own 10 buildings around Criş, including a former school and a granary, all of which will become part of Bethlen Estates over the coming years, bringing further investment and job opportunities to the village. "Originally the Caretaker's House was for our family to get back to our roots," says Nikolaus. "But the project has evolved to preserve this part of Transylvania for generations more to come." FIONA KERR

Doubles from $300 per night; bethlenestates.com