

## On the Narrow-gauge: Some Railway Experiences in Romania



Fig. 1: A typical scene on a Romanian narrow-gauge line. A descending service on the Vaser Valley Railway pauses at an intermediate station, with O-8-OT built at Reșița in Romania heading the train. (Photograph: David Murray-Smith).

In September 2025, I joined an eleven-day tour organised by Ffestiniog Travel entitled “Rural Romania-Where Time Stands Still”. After our arrival at the city of Cluj-Napoca by air (from London via Munich), the group of ten plus two guides (one Romanian and one English) moved on by train further into Transylvania and the Saxon area of Romania, where we remained for several days. Our luggage was transported separately by minibus. On the fourth day, we travelled on to the Hungarian region of Romania, before proceeding to the more remote Maramureș province and areas on and close to the Ukrainian border. The final stage of the tour involved crossing the Carpathian mountains into the province of Bucovina for a short stay in Moldovita before going back by mainline train to our starting point at Cluj-Napoca. Although the minibus was available for baggage transport, as well as for some local travel and transfers, train travel was used extensively. Accommodation involved some nights in hotels, but we were staying mostly in guesthouses and family-run homestays, all of which were really excellent, offering wholesome Romanian food and drink and comfortable bedrooms. Although Ffestiniog Travel is well known for specialist tours for railway enthusiasts, this trip to Romania had a more general theme and members of the group had many different interests.

Guidebooks for Romania often state that visiting the rural areas is like stepping back fifty years. In my opinion, that is true and, in some respects, seventy or eighty years might be more appropriate. Beautiful scenery is combined with interesting towns and villages, many fortified churches in the Saxon area, highly decorated wooden churches in the Hungarian region, painted monasteries in Bucovina, and, everywhere, glimpses of a rural lifestyle that has largely disappeared elsewhere in Europe.

Travel by standard-gauge mainline trains in the parts of Romania that we were visiting is slow by UK standards, but there is much evidence of new investment in the railway system. There is also a modern tramway in Cluj-Napoca. Many rail routes are already electrified with overhead supplies at 25kV, but with many long single-track sections, delays are common. However, upgrading is underway on many routes, and it was interesting to see that major engineering work was being carried out without the use of rail-replacement buses. Even relatively small stations are manned and offer ticket sales, and train arrival and departure information is well displayed. Timings can, however, be altered at relatively short notice, and the Romanian railway website only provides timetable information one month ahead. Generally, speeds are very low and journey times are long.

Narrow-gauge railways were for long an important feature of Romania. Some provided local transport for passengers and freight, while others were used to extract timber from forested regions (Figure 1). We were fortunate to travel on four of the remaining lines, and this is the aspect of the tour that I am emphasising here. The map shown in Figure 2 indicates roughly where these four lines are located in relation to some of the main cities and the surrounding countries. There is a lot of evidence in these parts of Romania of the period when much of the country lay within the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the widespread use of the 760mm “Bosnian” gauge on narrow-gauge railways is one example.



Fig. 2. Outline map of Romania showing approximate locations of the four narrow-gauge lines visited.

The first narrow-gauge railway that we visited involved a section of the former 760mm gauge line from Sibiu to Agnita. Originally, this ran all the way from Sibiu to Sighișoara, and there was also a branch line to Vurpăr. Unlike some of the other narrow gauge lines visited on the tour, which were built to carry timber, this was designed and operated as a local railway for passengers and freight. The line, on which construction started in 1895, originally lay within Hungary, and the Hungarian State Railways operated it until 1919, when Transylvania became part of Romania. Closure of the section from Sighișoara to Agnita took place in 1965, and the branch line was closed in 1993. The Romanian State Railways (CFR) closed the final section of the line from Sibiu to Agnita in 2001.

After an initial attempt to reopen the line as a tourist route failed, a group called Asociația Prietenii Mocăniței (“Friends of the Narrow-gauge Railway”) was created and has restored a 7km section of the line from Cornățel station to Hosman. The route takes the train through pleasant pastoral countryside where shepherds can be seen tending their flocks, overseen by large numbers of lesser spotted eagles, which are a common sight in that district in the summer months. There is an interesting collection of rolling stock at Cornățel station, but there are no steam locomotives on the line at present (Figure 3). To our surprise, we discovered that several of the volunteers working on the line on the day of our visit were from the UK, and some of the Romanian volunteers from Cornățel have spent time on the Ffestiniog Railway in Wales, gaining experience in track maintenance.



Fig.3. Cornățel station on the restored section of the Sibiu to Agnita railway line. Diesel No. L12H-001 has arrived with a train from Hosman. (Photograph: David Murray-Smith)

The second 760mm narrow gauge line visited is also in Transylvania and is known as the Mocănița Sovata. This 14km long railway runs from the town of Sovata to Campu Cetății and previously formed part of a larger network of narrow gauge railways involving lines to Târgu Mureș and Praid. The remaining short section follows the Sovata River, and ascends the Săcădat valley where it passes through dense forest and fields before starting a gradual descent to Campu Cetății. After closure towards the end of the twentieth century, the line was restored to operation in 2011 and is now run by a private company. The locomotive in use on the day of our visit was 0-8-0 tender locomotive No. 764 052, which dates from 1949 and was

built in Poland. It runs on a mixture of coal and hardwood. A diesel locomotive also appears to be used in regular service, and another 0-8-0 No. 764 055 is stored in the open air at Sovata. That second steam locomotive is clearly in poor condition and in need of substantial repairs. Figure 4 shows No. 764 052 being prepared for the day's work with a large quantity of wood about to be loaded into the tender via the footplate door. Figure 5 shows the locomotive running round the train at Campu Cetății, while Figure 6 shows a very unusual steam-powered vehicle at Sovata, which may have been used at one time for track inspection and maintenance.



Fig. 4. Scene on the Mocănița Sovata. The 760mm gauge 0-8-0 No. 764 052 is being loaded with wood. (Photograph: David Murray-Smith).



Fig. 5. No 764 052 running round the train at Campu Cetății before the return journey to Sovata. (Photograph: David Murray-Smith).



Fig. 6. An unusual steam-powered rail vehicle in store at Sovata station. The tender in the background belongs to 0-8-0 No. 764 055, also in store. (Photograph: David Murray-Smith).

Our travels then took us much further north into the more remote province of Maramureş on the border with Ukraine (Figure 7). In the past, the mountainous terrain made access to this area from the rest of Romania difficult, and the culture and traditions here remain different from those of most other parts of the country. Much wood is used, both for houses and for the many Eastern Orthodox churches. Large wooden-arched gates are a feature of many private properties in this region (Figure 8).



Fig. 7. Our mainline train about to depart from Sighetu Marmatiei for Vişeu de Jus. Standard-gauge and broad-gauge tracks can be seen at this station, as it lies on the border with Ukraine. Although this train started on its journey in the early afternoon, it included a sleeping car bound, eventually, for Bucharest. (Photograph: David Murray-Smith).



Fig. 8. A typical wooden gateway to a private house in Maramureș province. (Photograph: David Murray-Smith)

A trip on the last operational forest railway in Romania was an important part of our time in Maramureș province. This 760mm gauge line is known as the CFF (Căile Ferate Forestiere) Vișeu de Sus or Mocănița Maramureș and runs up the Vaser Valley close to the border with Ukraine. It was built between 1933 and 1935. After the first section, there are no roads, which is the reason for the survival of the railway as a genuine working forest timber line. In 2004, with help from a group of Swiss railway enthusiasts, the owners recognised the line's significant tourist potential, and a passenger service was introduced along part of the route. The Vaser Valley is a very scenic area (see Figure 9) with a large population of brown bears and lies within a region that has national park status, and attracts many visitors. Steam locomotives (Figures 10 and 11) are used for passenger services, while timber traffic is handled mostly by diesels. Rail-mounted road vehicles are used for staff movements along the line and also for the transport of national park rangers and border police.

Most of the steam-hauled services are handled by Romanian locomotives built at Reșița between 1953 and 1955 (Figures 9, 10 and 11), but there are also older steam locomotives by Orenstein & Koppel (1910) and Krauss (1921). The steam locomotives are wood-fired (see Figure 12). The diesels used on the line date from the 1960s and 1970s.

At its peak, the railway had 63 km of lines, but now the main route for timber extraction runs for about 43 km from Vișeu de Sus to Comanu near the border. Steam-hauled passenger services are normally restricted to a 21km section on the lower part of the route, ending at Paltin. Two branches, one 13km along the Novăt Valley, and the other for 3km towards Steviara were included in the total distance covered. Towards the top of the section of line used for passenger services, there is a large gateway across the line, similar to that in Figure 8. The bottom station at Vișeu de Sus has a collection of narrow-gauge and standard-gauge locomotives (Figure 13), including some from other parts of Europe, such as Austria. Coaches used on the line originate from many different places, including some from Swiss narrow-gauge railways.



Fig. 9. A typical view from a descending train on the Vaser Valley railway. (Photograph: David Murray-Smith)



Fig. 10. Reșița -built 0-8-0T, named COZIA-1, about to depart from the lower terminus at Vișeu de Sus on the Vaser Valley railway. (Photograph: David Murray-Smith)



Fig. 11. An afternoon scene at Paltin, the top station of the Vaser Valley railway for passenger services, with a train waiting to descend the valley. (Photograph: David Murray-Smith).



Fig.12. One of the vans used to carry wood fuel for the steam tank locomotives on the Vaser Valley railway. These are coupled immediately behind the locomotive and act as tenders to augment the limited space for timber on the engines themselves. (Photograph: David Murray-Smith).



Fig. 13. Some of the plinthed narrow-gauge and standard-gauge locomotives at the lower terminus of the Vaser Valley railway in Viseu de Sus. (Photograph: David Murray-Smith)

Travelling on into the province of Bucovina, we visited the Mocănița Huțulca. This former forestry railway runs from Gara Moldovița along the roadside through a picturesque valley to the village of Argel. The line was built in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and continued as a forestry railway until 2001. The section of line currently in operation is from Gara Moldovița to Argel and is 10.5 km long. Although built to a gauge of 800 mm, it was converted to 760mm in 1909. Originally, the route was 23.9km long, running from Moldovița to Roșoșa, but was extended over the years to a total length of 73 km by 1987. Following closure in about 2001, much of the line was abandoned, and the rails on most sections were lifted. Since July 2005, the remaining route has been managed by an organisation that, in English, is called the Association for the Preservation of Narrow Lines in Romania. Services are normally steam operated (Figures 14 and 15). There is a second shorter section of diesel-operated 760mm line from Gara Moldovița to Vatra Moldovița (Figure 16). That station lay at the end of a standard-gauge branch, which is now closed, and it appears likely that the standard-gauge line ran through Vatra Moldovița towards Gara Moldovița and was converted to narrow gauge during the restoration in recent years. The standard-gauge rails are still visible at Vatra Moldovița, and they are connected directly to the 760mm line through an extraordinary and amusing transition arrangement from the narrow-gauge to standard-gauge. (see Figure 17).



Fig. 14. Built at Reșița in 1957, 0-8-0T 764 431 stands at Gara Moldovița at the head of a train for Argel. (Photograph: David Murray-Smith).



Fig. 15. At Argel, 0-8-0T No. 764 431 receives attention from the crew before heading its train back to Gara Moldovița. (Photograph: David Murray-Smith).



Fig. 16. The station at Vatra Moldovița with diesel locomotive 370 014 running round the train which has just arrived from Gara Moldovița. The famous Moldovița Monastery can be seen in the background. (Photograph: David Murray-Smith)



Fig.17. The transition from 760mm gauge to standard gauge at Vatra Moldovița. The track in the foreground is 760mm, but through the bushes, there is a gradual widening to link the narrow-gauge rails to the track on the now-closed standard-gauge branch from the mainline network to Moldovița. (Photograph: David Murray-Smith).

Romania is a fascinating country, and the scenery in the areas we visited is well worth seeing. People are friendly and proud of their traditions. Tourism appears well-supported, and there are many interesting places to visit and things to see. Most of the narrow-gauge lines mentioned have easily accessible websites in English that provide information about days of operation, special events and fares. Some of them clearly work closely with businesses to offer refreshments, locally-sourced food and souvenirs at terminal stations and some intermediate stops. Trains were generally well-patronised on the days when we visited. Speeds are lower than on most narrow-gauge heritage lines in the UK, as the condition of the track is relatively poor on most lines and locomotives and coaching stock are generally loose-coupled, without continuous brakes. This requires much action by guards or brakemen, especially on downhill sections, to avoid excessive snatching of couplings. Although these railways appear to have a good safety record and are well-managed, it is interesting to note, for example, that the published regulations relating to travel on the Vaser Valley line start with a clause which states that *“Mocănița Maramureș is a privately operated forestry railway that functions mainly for the transport of wood. Therefore, no claims can be made regarding public passenger transport...”* A later clause gives this even more emphasis through the statement *“Travelling on tourist trains is at your own risk”*. Such statements might not be viewed well by the ORR in this country if heritage lines in the UK tried to run on this basis. However, the risks on the Romanian lines are not, I think, very high. The continued operation of these lines is one of the very good aspects of life in rural Romania. Being fifty years behind has some real benefits.

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