

# Romania: The return of the European bison



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If you go down to the Romanian woods today, you're sure of a big surprise. Tipping the scales at 1,400lbs, Europe's largest mammal has returned from near extinction.

We encountered the herd of European bison (*Bison bonasus*) 100 yards away in a forest clearing near Armenis village. Staring towards us in docile fashion, tails metronomically swishing at flies, they were protectively encircling a newborn calf. Beneath tassels of shaggy fur their powerful, beefy shoulders and bulbous humps elevated them from family saloon cow to V8 turbocharged bovine.

Adrian Hagatis from WWF Romania oversaw their reintroduction in May this year. He counted 17 of them. One was missing. The errant bison belatedly appeared just 50 yards away. She was not happy, shaking her brunette-furred head and stamping at the thyme-infused meadow. “She’s the dominant female,” whispered Adrian. “The real boss of this herd; let’s retreat.”

Armenis is in the Tarcu range of the Southern Carpathian Mountains within a historic region south of Transylvania called Banat, which western Romania shares with Hungary and Serbia. Hagatis calls its mosaic of ancient forests, meadows and mountains “one of Europe’s wildest places”.



Out in the Romanian wilderness (Picture: Mark Stratton)

Romania’s last bison were hunted out by 1790 as the species headed towards extinction across Europe. They disappeared from Britain by the 12th century and from western Europe by the 15th century. In 1919, hunters shot the continent’s last

remaining wild specimen in Poland's Bialowieza Forest. Only 54 survived in captivity to become the nucleus for all future reintroduction programmes. All of the 3,200 wild bison reintroduced into Europe come from an incestuous gene pool of just 12 families.

Other bison reintroductions have taken place in Romania, but this joint initiative at Armenis, run by WWF and the Dutch organisation Rewilding Europe, is the first to reintroduce them properly to the wild, rather than into protected reserves.

“We want to create a self-sustaining, viable population of 500 bison by 2025 that will roam free and breed,” said Hagatis. To stir up the genetic soup, the Armenis herd is assembled from bison brought in from Italy, Sweden, Belgium and Germany.

But quid pro quo, the bison are going to have to prove their worth. Rural depopulation has led to declining livestock grazing, so it's hoped these mighty herbivores will help prevent open, ungrazed meadowland scrubbing over. Armenis, meanwhile, is being marketed as Europe's first “Bison Village” and will offer bison safaris to help boost the local economy.

“The local community has been enthusiastic about their arrival,” said Hagatis. “Even the Orthodox priest came out to bless their good health.”

I spent three days visiting the bison and exploring the Southern Carpathian range they will be free to roam into: about 750,000 acres – roughly the size of Cambridgeshire.

The countryside around Armenis is eye-catching: the traditional houses have lustrously glazed tiled facades; ponies and carts clip-clop down lanes; the poncho-wearing shepherds look tough enough to audition for spaghetti westerns.



My accommodation wasn't bad, either. Pension Wittmann is a snug hillside guesthouse in Teregova hamlet run by an octogenarian couple, both ethnic German speakers. Dining on Wiener schnitzel one evening on their lake-facing, rose-trellised veranda, Ioan Wittmann explained that his Germanic ancestry heralded from a 17th-century migration from Swabia – one of many waves of migration from Germany, which date back to the 12th century and the arrival of the Saxon Germans, who were invited to come and help defend the region from invasions from the east .

From Wittmann's pension we hiked to the bison, crossing sunlit meadows of ox-eye daisies and purple harebells, before entering elm and hazel woodland in the White River Valley where dippers hopscotched between rocks. Lying abandoned were many traditional stone summerhouses where shepherds once lived during transhumance, the seasonal movement of livestock between summer and winter pastures.

The bison temporarily reside in a 300-acre fenced enclosure of forest. Before full release, they must undergo quarantine and acclimatise to their new habitat.

In appearance they are seemingly slimmer versions of North America's Great Plains drifters. At six feet, full-grown European bison actually stand slightly taller than their American counterparts yet appear less bulky because their

transatlantic cousins possess thicker coats. European bison are also more self-effacing, spending much of their time within forests browsing bark and branches.

Hagatis was unsure if any of the four young males had yet asserted himself to become the dominant breeding bull. “When the time comes, they will fight. The rejected bulls will go away and may rechallenge for dominance when they’re stronger,” he explained.

Although undoubtedly magnificent beasts, the experience of viewing them inside the re-wilding enclosure was a little tame. But it is early days. Once they are fully released into the wild this autumn, plans are afoot to fit them with GPS collars to monitor their whereabouts and create a more authentic safari-style experience of tracking them.

A treat lay in store, however. After leaving the bison, the newly employed bison ranger, Daniel Hurduzeu, drove us back to our pension via his grandparents’ stone summerhouse near Plopu. There is a formula to the warm, spontaneous local hospitality you will receive in this region, whatever the time of day. This starts with home-made plum tuica schnapps – dangerously refilled the minute you drain your glass. Then, whether you are hungry or not, delicious home-made goodies appear for an impromptu feast: crusty bread, addictively salty sheep’s-milk cheese, plump tomatoes, and spiced sausage. “I’m 74 and will live another 50 years on this food,” said sprightly Grandpa Hurduzeu, laughing.

Over the following days, with different local guides, I explored the vast future bison range. But it’s a wilderness tainted by concerns about hunting and deforestation.





It's a 'wilderness' tainted by concerns about hunting' (Picture: Mark Stratton)

Two hours away are the 88,000 acres of Retezat – a designated national park since 1935. The jagged massif rises spectacularly to 8,000ft; cold glacial lakes fill U-shaped valleys; wild blueberries sweeten alpine meadows. Among 185 recorded bird species are black woodpeckers and ring ouzels (blackbirds with vicars' collars). “In 40 years coming here I’ve seen chamois, boar, packs of wolves, and many bears,” claimed Sandu Bulacu, a guide.

In one forest-choked valley we encountered the spoor of a very large bear. A gnawed hoof found in one pile of bear droppings suggested a penchant for lamb, while black hairs stuck to pine resin on a back-scratching tree at my eye-level of six feet confirmed this was a hefty ursine. “Somewhere nearby he’s watching us,” Bulacu hardly reassured. Time to keep moving.

Retezat National Park is an important refuge for bears because beyond its borders hunters, quite legally, shoot them. I later asked Hagatis if he was worried that hunters might align their sights upon his bison. “Working with the local community and providing jobs through tourism is the best way to ensure they don’t,” he said.

Next morning, with conservation forester Daniel-Ord Turcu, we drove deep into the Tarcu Mountains’ Hidek Valley seeking virgin forest untouched by human activity since the

previous Ice Age, 12,000 years ago. Turcu estimated that three per cent of Romania's forests remain in this pristine state.



Something was wrong, however. He hadn't visited Hidek for two years and couldn't recall the rough forest track extending up the valley. Soon we spotted 500-year-old beech logs lying prostrate along the track. Turcu visibly crumpled in shock. In just two years, much of the Hidek Valley's ancient timber had been logged; the forest devastated. "It is the National Forestry Administration's fault," he said, meaning the agency known as Romsilva. "They care more for production than protection."

On my final morning I bade farewell to the bison, camouflaged in woodland. They rustled branches and I caught only glimpses of them eyeing me through the leafy undergrowth. Their ability to melt into the forest in a region prone to human malpractice was reassuring.

## **GETTING THERE**

The package: Mark Stratton travelled with Wildlife Worldwide (0845 130 6982; [wildlifeworldwide.com](http://wildlifeworldwide.com)). A five-day Rewilding Bison in the Tarcu Mountains Reserve trip costs from £1,645 per person, based on two sharing; the price includes return flights to Timisoara, four nights' full board in two guesthouses, three visits to see the bison, all activities, park fees, transport throughout and an English-speaking guide. Departures are May-June and Sept-Oct 2015.

Independently: It is possible to fly from Heathrow to Timisoara with Lufthansa ([lh.com](http://lh.com)) via Munich, or direct from Luton with **Wizz Air** ([wizzair.com](http://wizzair.com)). From Timisoara airport, hire a car ([europcar.com](http://europcar.com)) for the two-and-a-half-hour drive to the new Bison Visitor Centre in Armenis to arrange visits to

La Magura bison enclosure. Currently this costs around £30 for a 4WD trip with rangers taking around three hours. Wittmann Pension at Teregova ([wittmanns-huette.de](http://wittmanns-huette.de)) is excellent value at £25 per person (half-board). Contact: Adrian Grancea (English-speaking) on 0040 743 775130, or [contact@turismarmenis.ro](mailto:contact@turismarmenis.ro).

## **WHEN TO GO**

The easiest time to see the bison will be from April to October, when new stock is annually added into the rewildling enclosure. By next year, longer tracking safaris will be available to seek those released fully into the wild.

## **FURTHER INFORMATION**

Details about the project can be found at [rewildingeurope.com](http://rewildingeurope.com) and [panda.org](http://panda.org) (type “bison”).