

## The Wedding In The Woods

Isn't it lovely, to go where no one else has gone? To have the bragging rights and to tell your story, knowing that no one else can tell it better? I have gone to Hadar. None of my friends- with their illustrious backgrounds, fancy jobs and big degrees- can say they've done that. They have Paris. Or Rome. Or perhaps New York. But I have Hadar. Whilst everyone's Instagram or Twitter feeds have the Eiffel Tower, the Colosseum or that Big Concrete Lady of Liberty, I have Hadar.

But how did I have what I had? Simple. Years ago, my cousin fell in love with a Romanian girl in Dubai and they were to wed in her homeland. Which meant after spending a few days in Bucharest, we eventually made our way towards the rural town of Întorsura Buzăului where the majestic forest region of our Hader Chalet was situated.

The night before the wedding, after watering my throat with the locals, I learnt two things. Look a Romanian in the eyes and bellow out 'Noroc!' before taking a drink. And don't try to keep up with them. If you do, you won't be looking them or anyone else in the eye much longer. Our cab driver at the airport had warned us: "Be careful. You'll start drinking now. And you'll never know when you're going to stop. Drink coffee. Red bull. Do whatever you can to stay awake."

There are many superstitions Romanians follow for weddings. Rain means good luck for a marriage and it bodes well if a relative sneezes before the ceremony or a spider is found in the creases of the dress. More gravely, to drop the wedding rings means death. Before leaving for the Greek orthodox church, the bride and groom met outside. Bread was broken over the bride, whilst the groom presented flowers to each of the bridesmaids. To reach the chapel itself we had to climb up a hilltop. It was worth it, once the divine chanting of the choir took over inside. I gazed upon the paintings of saints and angels and closed my eyes as the priest blessed the couple.

And so to the (real) party- in a barn no less. The celebration had a flow. You eat. You drink. You dance. Literally in that order. Mini breaks are taken throughout the night to go through ten different meals in total. There is also a traditional dance that one must also partake in where everyone moves in a circle, as the bride dances in the middle with different partners. People give up after a while and leave the circle, but the point is to stay until the end. And the end is after 20 minutes of continuous movement. It is gruelling, but it is a sure-fire way of winning over the locals.

I can't remember what time the evening ended. As I left the party for my cabin I got lost in the woods. By some form of ludicrous luck- I stumbled up the stairs and into my room, crashing my head into my pillow. How were they still drinking down there? I consumed enough gin and tequila to last two lifetimes. Still the party went on. I dreamt of home, where I barely danced for 5 minutes straight, let alone 20. The woods below used to be one of the dictator Nicolae Ceausescu's old hunting grounds. The next morning, my family informed me that they were now inhabited by bears. Splendid.

On our final evening in Hadar, the rain pelted down. We'd been spoilt with the sun only setting after 8pm. But this particular evening, the heavens threw a tantrum. This was the extra day- the one where everyone lazed around, hungover and yearning for home. I thought about the blanket and the fluffy pillow in my cabin. We'd been drinking for hours straight. Nothing made more sense than that bed. But this forest at night glistened even more in the rain. The smell of wet wood was alluring. I put my earphones on and pulled my hoody over my head. I walked. And walked. And walked. I passed over cobbled pathways and perfect shrubs and went deeper into the woods. I was not ruled by fear of bears.

And then it happened. The raindrops hit me hard. I had been aching in my search for meaning and fulfilment over the last few weeks of my life and I had not found much. Then, in that glorious, soaking solitude, I felt a sense of purpose on my travels through this unknown village. The

rain washes away bad things you're clinging to. None of my friends had Hadar. And in that moment, as my family slept upstairs in their cabins, nobody else had Hadar, but me.