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Why you'll Cry and Laugh at the LiBearty Bear Sanctuary

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The LiBearty Bear Sanctuary in Zarnesti, Romania, will possibly be the most memorable experience of a trip to Eastern Europe for families and animal lovers. For starters, Zarnesti is located half an hour southwest of Brasov, a lovely historical town in the middle of the country. It boasts great hotels and restaurants and a lush setting in the Carpathian Mountains.



A CLOSE ENCOUNTER WITH GRAEME, BUT BE CAREFUL OF THE ELECTRIC FENCE

But be forewarned: even as you laugh at the antics of large brown bears in semi-natural habitats – rolling in mud, splashing in ponds, climbing trees, scooping up fruit snacks – you may shed a tear or two. Why? Because the guides who lead you on footpaths through the 69-hectare reserve (separated from the sanctuary's 80 bears by double electrical fencing) want to educate visitors, especially children, about the lives of its ursine residents, and some of these stories are triple-tissue-worthy.

A VISIT TO THE LIBEARTY BEAR SANCTUARY

In the summer months the sanctuary schedules three hour-long tours a day in Romanian and English. Others can be arranged on an *ad hoc* basis. Forty percent of visitors are Romanian, either school children or tourists coming in July and August. The rest are a mixture, including British, Germans, French, Australians, and Israelis, but very few Americans.



LINE-UP BEFORE THE MORNING TOUR OF THE SANCTUARY

The tour begins with a video about the sanctuary and its founding by an extraordinary Romanian animal activist, Cristina Lapis. She was inspired by the brief, sad life of Maya the bear, and you will hear Maya's tragic tale. Then a guide takes you on a route through the property, from one enclosure to another, explaining the history of its occupants.

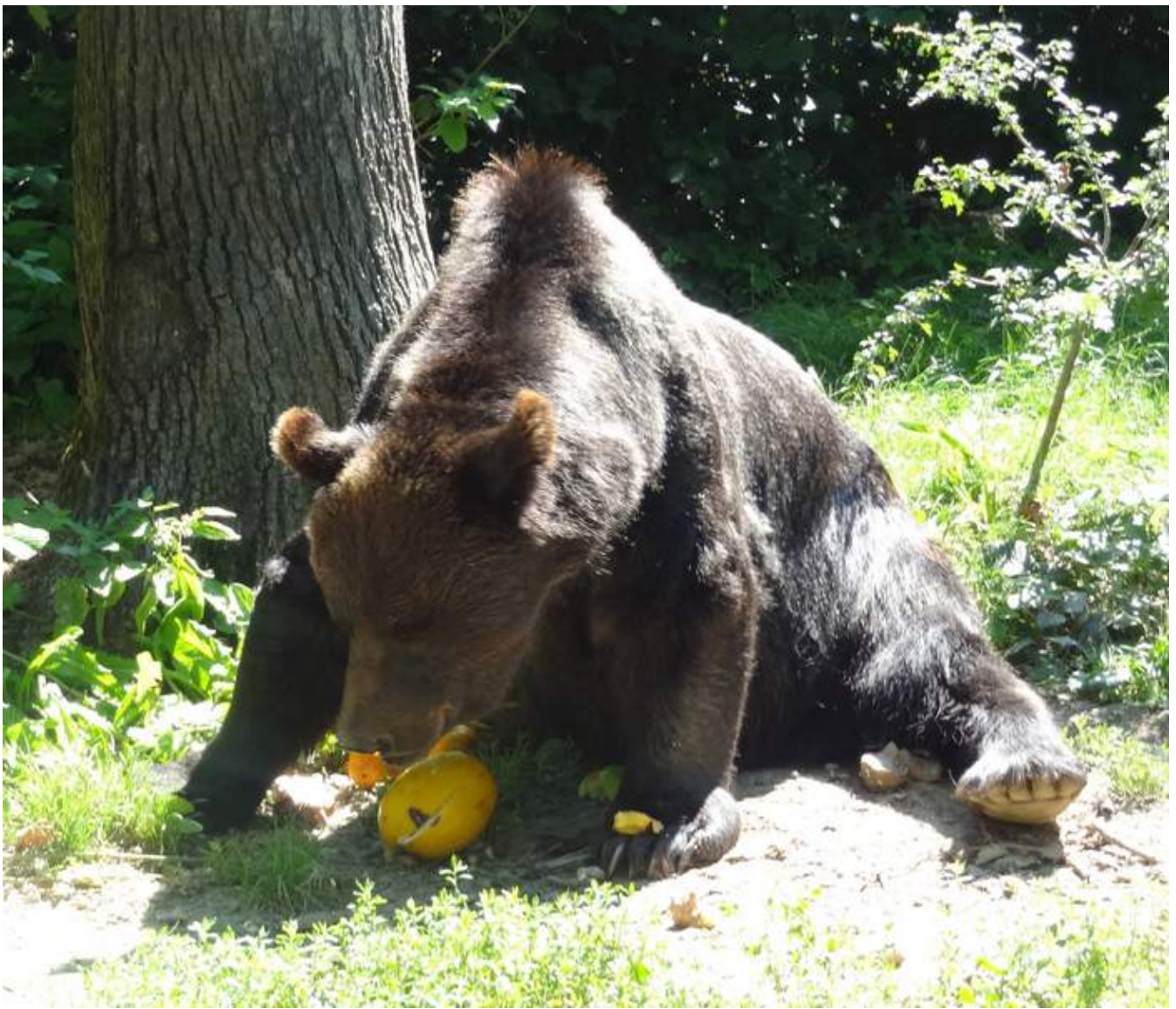
Take Ina, for example. For 20 years she shared a small pen in a run-down Romanian zoo with her sister, Anca. Space was so scarce that the zoo would have the sisters trade off time in the limited walking space and the tiny "pool" they shared. As a result, Ina developed arthritis and requires special medical attention. The sanctuary convinced the zoo to surrender Ina in 2014; now she shares a large wooded space, a pool, and a den with an unexpected companion – Luna the wolf.



LUNA THE WOLF AND HER BFF, INA THE BEAR

Luna is one of eight wolves at [LiBearty sanctuary](#), with stories similar to those of many of the bears. The wolves were confiscated from unequipped, under financed zoos without adequate space for them. They were going to be killed, so the sanctuary stepped in and saved them. A purpose-built enclosure was constructed for the other wolves, but Luna was not accepted into their pack. So she resides with Ina, and they have established an amiable equilibrium.

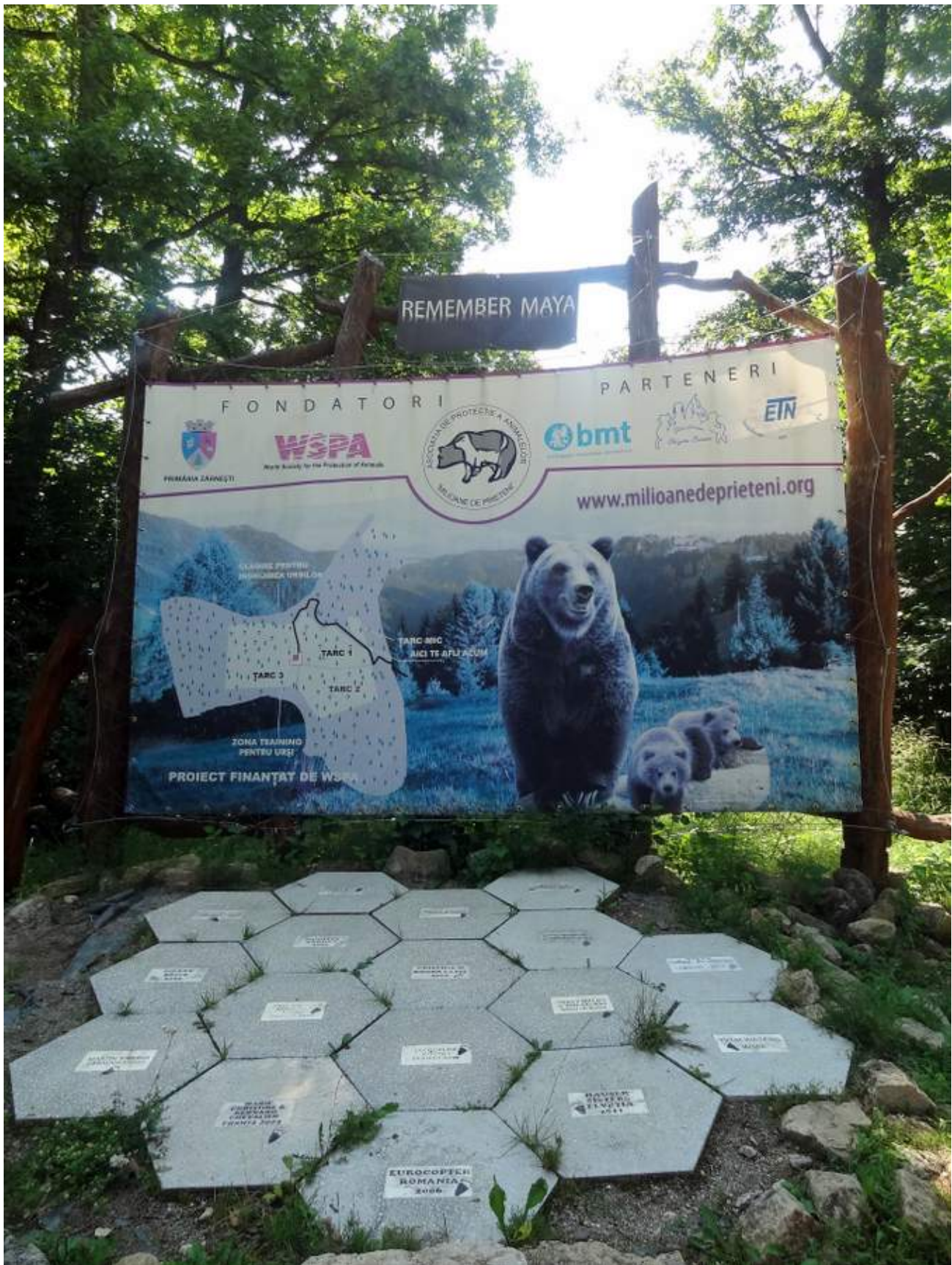
Then there is Max, whose story moves more visitors than any other at the sanctuary. Born in 1997 and orphaned soon after, Max became a tourist attraction as a cub. He was chained near a well-known castle in Sinaia so visitors could pay to have their pictures taken with him . To make sure he wouldn't cause problems as he grew, Max was deliberately blinded and his sharp canine teeth and claws were cut off. Pepper spray was sprayed into his nose to keep him from reacting to smells, and he was drugged every day with tranquilizers dissolved in beer.



BLIND MALIGNED MAX ENJOYS HIS FRUIT TREATS

The LiBearty bear sanctuary confiscated him in 2006 and spent two years trying to restore partial sight. They could not, so have created a private acre-large enclosure for Max, where he can bathe in his own pool, hibernate in his own den, and spend his days enjoying the sun and the sounds of nature.

Harrowing histories are not the only things recounted during the tour. The reserve is the largest refuge for brown bears in the world in both area and numbers. Since Romania hosts 60 percent of all wild brown bears in Europe (not counting Russia) and also is home to the largest remaining virgin forest on the continent, the location makes sense, and so does the need to enlighten visitors about the importance of co-existing with nature.



NEAR THE ENTRANCE TO THE SANCTUARY IS A MEMORIAL TO MAYA AND A THANK YOU TO SOME OF THE RESERVE'S DONORS, INCLUDING BRIGITTE BARDOT

Ignorance, cruelty, and tradition have led to the bears' plight; if future generations of Romanians are not educated, there won't be any bears to protect. Guides explain that brown bears weigh from 200-600 kilos. Notwithstanding their fierce reputations, they are 85 percent vegetarians; they only eat 15 percent meat and they ADORE honey. One of the stimulations the sanctuary provides for its bears is to hide honey in logs and containers so the animals have to seek out the nectar and devise ways to access it. Despite their lethally

sharp claws and teeth, these bears try to kill rivals and enemies by crushing them. One on one, a brown bear can defeat a human (shades of *The Revenant*) but en masse, humans are encroaching on the natural habitat of bears and inexorably destroying them.



BEARS LOVE THE RELIEF OF WET FUR ON A HOT DAY

A new addition to the LiBearty bear sanctuary is a Teddy Bear Museum opened in the spring of 2016. Its 200+ donations include a three-meter-high bear created to celebrate the birth of Princess Charlotte (Prince William's daughter), Mr. Bean's teddy bear, and a Smokey the Bear from the US. Entry cost is minimal (10 lei for children, 40 lei for adults in 2015).

Written by and photos by Claudia Flisi for EuropeUpClose.com



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