

# A Rescue Plan for a Unique Romanian Mountain Village

## Introduction

The Romanian commune of Rîmeș is located in the south-east of the Trascău Mountains, in the Alba county and it comprises of 13 villages, covering an area of 90 square km. Its altitude ranges between 450- 1250 metres, from hilly slopes to steep cliffs and mountain meadows. The population is under 600 inhabitants and the main occupation is animal rearing (cattle & goats).



The village of Rîmeș is the administrative centre of the commune where we can find the village hall, the school, the dispensary, the police station, the shop & pub.

The commune of Rîmeș is characterized by a unique building feature that is its wooden log built houses, field barns and stores with thatched roofs. This feature is found in other mountainous areas of the Apuseni Mountains but in the commune of Rîmeș it is still kept alive because the buildings are used and some skills for repairing still remain. The houses, barns, stables, pigsties and pantries had a stone foundation and were all thatched in the past. Houses usually had a porch in front and 2 rooms: a vestibule room (with the stove & oven and access to the loft & sitting room) and the sitting room. Some houses had 3 rooms, one vestibule room in the middle and 2 sitting rooms, one on each side of the entrance room. The smoke from the stove went into the loft at a pre-determined height and was allowed to fill the void, giving the loft the role of a smoke room. The smoke preserved the roof timbers and thatch (long straw) on the inside, making it resistant to fungi and insect attack and waterproof. The smoke also cured and preserved ham and sausages. The materials used for thatching were spring long straw, branches of birch (*Betula pendula*) and juniper (*Juniperus communis*); the birch was for stabilization and the juniper to repel mice (the scent being unpleasant to them). Materials are local, sustainable and low cost – the original reason for selection was that these materials were to be found close to every household. The thatched buildings are scattered all around the landscape, some of them are still in good condition, some need repair. Most thatched houses are still lived in but the inhabitants are old and usually retired.



## Background

“Satul verde” Association has been working with the commune of Rîmeș in various projects to help them sustainably capitalize on the natural & cultural assets. Through the VAST VIEW ‘Transfer of Innovation’ (TOI) project, “Satul verde” was able to test and extend ideas and training materials developed in the ‘Leonardo da Vinci – Development of Innovation’ (DOI) project ‘Green Village’ and particularly the ‘Sustainable Building’, ‘Our Sustainable Ancestors’ and ‘Empowering Communities’ elements of that project. Through the VAST VIEW project SV and its international partners built a traditional house with a thatched straw roof. The aim of this action was to demonstrate, teach and learn the skills and techniques of building with stone, wood, clay and straw. These were the local and available materials and skills that were used much as other skills dating back to the early medieval period in northern and western Europe.



The plan for the future of this building is to house the ethnographic collection of the commune of Rîmeș ; act as a training centre for teaching & demonstrating traditional skills (thatching, weaving, carpentry) and be part of a cultural tour for tourists & visitors.



## The work we did in EVEHD

The existence of communes like Rîmeț , set in a working mountain landscape lead us to suggest that montane Romania still has quite intact working medieval landscapes. Our action in EVEHD consisted in surveying some of the thatched old buildings to identify jointing, tool marks, design & building techniques. In the summer of 2014 a group of volunteers from the UK, Iceland, Germany, Turkey, Italy, Slovakia & Romania joined forces for a week .

Volunteers were divided in 2 groups led by Joy Ede & Philip White, English Heritage historical farm experts. A survey sheet to record information was devised by Joy & Philip. Romanian volunteers acted as local guides & translators for each team, providing information and liaising with the building owners. They also cooked meals and helped with logistics. The village hall & council of Rimet were involved in providing accommodation & technical assistance.



A total of 29 thatched buildings were surveyed and we discovered many things about the structure and design that we do not think were previously recorded...

- The majority have a stone base, built from weathered limestone and/ or river cobbles
- The walls were built of hardwood logs; mainly elm and oak (*Ulmus* and *Quercus*), occasionally ash (*Fraxinus*).

- Different styles of corner jointing suggested an ‚older‘ and ‚newer‘ method
- All buildings had a wooden foot plate with larger stones acting as pad stones at key intersections
- Generally the design of field barns was medieval – and had not changed because it was the ideal design
- There are some standard measurements regarding frontage, depth and height – leading to a standard steep pitch.
- The long straw thatch is laid horizontally in layers following the battens and „combed“ so that the outermost stems only point vertically down the roof.
- Roof joists were usually of less durable timber species including pine (*Pinus*), spruce (*Picea*), birch (*Betula*), aspen (*Populus*), rowan (*Sorbus*), beech (*Fagus*); we summarised that tar preservation made these sufficiently durable
- In some places stones were incorporated in the thatch, especially on corners, to hold it in place,

Through this survey volunteers discovered that local, sustainable materials were used for these buildings, namely that people used what was available around them: wood, straw, clay, stone. More importantly, the building technique remained the same over the years. This shows a sustainable way of life, people making the best use of natural materials and passing on skills that they learnt from their ancestors.

Our future plans for the whole area include:

- Recording all the thatched buildings in the area of the Trascau mountains & creating a map of these.
- Repair & restoration of some thatched buildings to be used as accommodation facilities. We are inspired by the Scottish blackhouses. See <http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/scotlandshistory/unioncrownsparliaments/blackhouses/index.asp>
- On a long term plan our efforts concentrate to make the commune into a living museum, having as a model the village of Vlkolinec, Slovakia. See <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/622>

### **The importance for EVEHD**

The EVEHD project is all about successfully engaging volunteers in discovering heritage. What Satul Verde Association and their international partners managed to achieve was a very purposeful engagement that targeted volunteers that had very specific skills. Joy Ede and Phillip White were / are experts in surveying agricultural heritage buildings and our project was very fortunate to attract them. Once they were recruited, they acted as a nucleus for a bigger team of less expert but extremely committed volunteers. The message for others wanting to engage volunteers in discovering and managing heritage is to not be afraid of aiming too high. Europe is full of retired and semi-retired people who enjoyed professional careers that placed them at the top of the ladder in their field. Because people are older and not working full time, we must never underestimate what they have to offer.

In many countries young people are unwilling to volunteer because they feel that they must spend all their time earning money; retired people are under less pressure in this regard. Also retired professionals who are knowledgeable and articulate can make excellent teachers – attracting volunteers to them like a magnet.

The VEHD partnership and Satul verde in particular could not have achieved their goals (and they still have many to reach) without the help of expert older volunteers

### **Reading**

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<http://www.nobregafoundation.org/Content/Projects/Romania/TraditionalSkillsNG/NG/Thatch2.html>

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