

Riding in the Clouds

While the civil war rages on in the east of the country, **Aldona Juozaityte** ventures into Ukraine's Carpathian Mountains for a ride she'll never forget.

It rains in the mountains. I hadn't thought of this. I only knew that it snowed, and that summer happens. I knew that here they drown in blue fog. I knew that the air was scarcer but fresher. I had also heard that the mountains change your life.

They say that if you want to know someone, either take a long trip with them (ideally to the mountains) or share some extreme, stressful situation (ideally more than one) with them. I went off to the Carpathian Mountains as the team's rookie; we were eight, dragging our motorcycles in trailers. Even though I had no idea what awaited me, I was sure that the trip would be unique.

ENDURANCE CHECK

"I can't anymore," I blurted out, my heart pounding, breath racing, and my heart beat pounding in my head. My hands, neck, and back are getting hammered. I can barely straighten my spine. But this still isn't as hard as my struggle with the enemy within, my instinct for self-preservation.

Fighting your limits often seems inconceivable. It can be the steep climb, full of broken rocks, it can be a narrow or slippery path with a huge drop to one side. It can be cutting across a simple, swampy strip of mush, and losing your concentration while trying to control the sliding motorcycle. Though I got used to it, I got bored of falling. What follows is so tedious. Pick up the



Aldona manages a smile despite being battered by the Carpathian Mountains

motorcycle. Catch your breath. Stop your teammates. Get at least one foot's toes on the ground. Start up the engine and try to dominate your enemy again. It's terrifying when your own body stops listening from fatigue, but yet you still must also control the mechanical stallion.

In the mountains, you can't just leave the motorcycle and go and get some sleep or food. Just to reach the nearest village requires a descent. Here, you never separate yourself from your friends, and they always come to help you, equally worn out and tired, soaked with sweat, reddened by the heat, hungry and charmingly dirty.

"Wait up!" I turn off the engine and try to breathe deeply. I glance at my teammate

who's giving a thumbs-up, dishing out suggestions, and nodding approvingly, willing me to carry on.

'OK, Hard, let's go,' I say to my bike, even if we both fall down again or if it doesn't work out as I wanted.

The limit that's so difficult to overcome in your thoughts. The limit that steals your tongue and binds your body. The limit when you can't even engage the clutch. The limits multiply, even though the strength fades. All that's left is to trust in stamina. But how much is left of that?

IN THE CLOUDS

It's hard to squeeze my first day in the mountains into any combination of ▶



► words. It rained all night and the dawn was cloudy and unpleasantly humid, the mountains are hidden. We dress quickly and fire up the bikes in the rain.

I learn to stand on the foot pegs on a gentle incline over a twisting road with ruts and rocks. We start out slowly and climb bit by bit. I painfully fall into a puddle of clay and split my knee pad, but everything is fine. It hurts but after all pain is nothing but weakness leaving your body.

The next step is the mountain before our eyes. That moment is as clear as the present; I had never experienced that feeling. ‘We’re going up there?’ Voiceless but wide-eyed, I follow behind my teammates. We laugh and help each other, even as we all fall and slide around in the wet ruts. I break off Hard’s tail and the cover for the clutch, but we reach the top.

An icy wind hammers us mercilessly, tearing right through us as we’re completely soaked and dressed only in t-shirts. There’s nowhere to go, we are wallowing in rain clouds, in the damp fog. We race further, but once I can’t feel my hands anymore, I stop. I change my gloves, but they stay dry only for a few minutes. Even higher up, the team splits as some of us decide to descend to the base, but others are still hungry for more. I figure the former would be calmer; if we’re descending, we won’t be climbing anymore.

PEOPLE IN THE SKY

Pushing through the clouds, I look down. The slope has splotches of snow. In the distance below are some people in rain jackets. Where did they come from? And they’re not paying attention to us? I put down the motorcycle for what feels like the 66th time; it’s slippery both on the mountain’s vegetation and on the snow. After a while it’s difficult to lift it back up, and the electric starter is beginning to struggle, showing its final signs of life. I’ll have to kick start. A teammate comes to help.

A hard, cold rain is rinsing our backs, our feet are sinking into the snow, and water is pouring into our shoes. I look around and see only clouds, but somewhere there are mountains hidden. There’s neither road nor path, only colourful and stiff mountain grasses. How do you brake when everything’s sliding? After all this stress, it’s hard to think, but I’m glad that it’s not getting dark yet and that we still know the way, even though we’ve strayed from our course. There’s water in our canteens, but even if there weren’t, there’s snow all around. That’s enough for us not to give up (is there another option?) and so we move on.

WHEN SILENCE SMILES

After the slope comes a ditch-ridden descent through a wood covered in slippery leaves from yesteryear. How am I to control my bearing and acceleration when I left all my strength up in the clouds? I roll, but after a few efforts to maintain my balance between obstacles, I seriously spill out. This uncontrollable feeling isn’t a fun adventure anymore, it’s become something dangerous. The rest of the way, again and again I brake, gasp for air with my heart soaked in stress, lie down, slide, and try to take the motorcycle down with me. I can’t even fire it up when we have to cross a stream.

How much stamina can a person have? Back at the base, I slowly drag my body to the second floor. All of those moments when it looked like I wouldn’t manage have piled up, and now there is just silence. When a teammate asks, ‘How?’ I have no words, I can only smile quietly and keep breathing. It’s impossible to describe all of these intense experiences. I peel the drenched clothes off my body and throw them on the ground, feeling my water-logged skin. Fatigue prevents me from even taking off my neck brace. ‘Regrets?’ I hear. ‘No!’ I’ll never regret these experiences, but I’ll also be forever grateful that I



Top left: Riding in the clouds
Above: Steep, slippery descents

‘How much stamina can one person have?’

returned in one piece. To go to the mountains, one has to know when to stop.

That was my first day in the mountains with a motorcycle. In truth, it was my first day in the mountains period.

RUMLINGS IN THE GARAGE

The next day some are pulling on their shirts, some are filling their canteens with water and tanks with fuel. Some are changing oil, clutches, or brake fluid, and some can’t find their gloves. I’m repairing the rain gear with tape, and a teammate is drilling a hole in a shoe and ‘fixing’ the motorcycle’s plastic with a ‘zipper.’ Boxes, bottles, tyres, tool kits, canisters, helmets, shoes, and slippers clutter the entire garage. The men dressed in their protective gear are pacing back and forth. Who pushes the motorcycles out, who fires them up... Others are only showing up now from

the cottage in their shorts, opening their luggage to choose which thermal clothing smells better.

I always try to be physically ready with all my gear, so that I can slowly choose my emotions and string them together carefully, like beads on a necklace. The garage is more than just a place to hold motorcycles. It also holds the team’s feelings, morale, and general state.

The who are prepared are already waiting with their helmets on. No one is angry, and no one is bickering. Finally, everything that’s not needed is pushed back into the garage. We lower the orange gates and take off. It doesn’t matter if it’s raining or if the day is a gift of clear, sunny skies.

MOUNTAIN LAUGHTER

It echoes near the garage when we, filthy, drenched, and toppling over, get together ►

Who’s writing?



I am **Aldona Juozaityte**, keen to ride motorcycles and explore my limits. I used to ride a street bike, but off-road is now my way of living. I’m a freelance writer and journalist and I work with various motorcycling events too – organising, promoting, and of course, participating!

Today I own two motorbikes – my brother’s JAWA 638, almost a retro one, made in the former country of Czechoslovakia (it is ‘ridable’ too! I did the APL rally, a race of 1,250 miles around my country, on it this summer) and a KTM 250 EXC-F, which is totally new to me. I had ridden it only six times before taking it to Ukraine’s Carpathians! What an extreme and beautiful challenge it was!



➤ afterwards. We toss our backpacks aside, and the dirt runs off them, but it still jams their zippers shut. Someone stretches out on the only chair, others sit against the motorcycles, and still others undo their shoes to carry them to the stove nearby. Slowly sipping, nearly everyone shares their experiences and waits in line for the pressure washer for their motorcycle. We're all in a good mood, but we don't forget those who crashed hard or even got injured.

As you laugh loudly and sincerely all night long, you understand that everything has its value. After extreme, intense sensations, breathtaking moments, or even lessons of survival — that's the mountain laughter. It's a rejoicing of life that resounds at full strength from happy hearts. The laughter puts everything in its place — the immense fatigue nourished by fear, breathtaking sights and incidents, and the limits of your power. The laughter softens and gives meaning to the present.

SNOW CLUSTERS

Our last day in the mountains is clear and colourful. My eyes and heart protest dozens of times, and I often stop and fall. The tops of trees are drawn on the surrounding peaks like soft fur or gentle feathers. They are spread out, imbuing a greenness that holds your gaze. The blue fog hugs the horizon, while the snow is like clusters of nuts, melting daily.

A wooded tunnel lies deep in my memory, a mountain road, swerving downward, hidden among tall, thin trees. On the right, their roots writhe in the air, but when you

look up, it's almost impossible to see the sky among the soaring trunks. On the left, there is a pine tree populated precipice with no bottom in sight. The rays of the evening sun pierce through the branches and illuminate the riders hurrying nearby, the reflections off the white helmets tickle my eyes.

We ride together in the verdure of spring. This is a time that slips through your fingers, you can only be in it, enjoy it, and later remember it. It goes past, but it never goes away.

The velvet soft zephyr fills my lungs and I am very happy that I came here.

EVEN BETTER THAN ALIVE

I return to the base standing on my foot-rests. It is a tiny victory after this kind of week. I thank my travelling companion, Hard, who forgave all my mistakes.

Soon, at dusk, we load the motorcycles and go home. That moment when only one star burns in the evening sky could go on. In the distance you can hear crickets or grasshoppers, but they sound differently than at home. And in the meantime the mountain wind brings the summer. The next morning, blooming dandelions show us the way.

The mountains change lives. Here your friendships crystallize. You understand what giant meaning and power your dreams and values have. Here you find today's limits, which you will surpass either tomorrow or in the next year. Here laughter echoes. Here you understand that your loved ones wait for you at home. What else does a person need? In the mountains, you are alive. Even better than alive. **ABR**



Top: Aldona's friends taking a quick break
Above: Aldona picks her KTM up