

Into the Carpathians: A Journey Through the Heart and History of East Central Europe (Part 2: The Western Mountains)

Alan E. Sparks

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Into the Carpathians depicts a journey so breathtaking that it will make even those who dislike the outdoors want to pack a bag and see Sparks's marvels for themselves.

Alan E. Sparks recounts a transformative hiking expedition in his travel book *Into the Carpathians*.

Many may dream of dropping everything and hiking through Europe for months on end. Alan Sparks is one of the few who threw caution to the wind and did so. In this chronicle of the second half of his journey—from Slovakia to Germany—through the Carpathian and Sudeten Mountains, he continues to depend on luck and the kindness of strangers to stay safe and dry. Along the way, he learns much about how local history defined—and was defined by—the enchanting landscape.

Into the Carpathians is part of a series, but it can also stand alone. While Sparks spares a little time for introspection and philosophizing along the way, the star of the book is always the setting. It describes grand mountainsides, picturesque towns, crumbling ruins, and ever-changing weather in reverent prose. Throughout, it weaves in extensive, enthusiastic discussions of each region's history and culture, both ancient and modern.

The book's long sentences are dense with historical details and are at times overwhelming. Its appendices and end notes provide further context, though, and also show off an impressive breadth of research. They help to untangle the web of regional names, historical back-and-forth, and tribal conflicts that make the region as complex as it is fascinating.

This exploration of the Carpathian wilderness is supplemented by other aspects of Sparks's trip. The people and dogs who hiked along with Sparks form a minor piece of the narrative. The expedition's true purpose—to find signs of wolves in the Carpathians—leads to several interesting passages about wildlife conservation in East Central Europe.

The landscape is a majestic counterpoint to the simplicity of the troop's accommodations: aside from an occasional night in a hotel, Sparks sleeps in a tent or under the stars. Intermittent photographs show the campsites and the wonders—both natural and humanmade—that Sparks encountered. He never knew where he would spend the night or when his next full shower would be, and his searches for such accommodations lead to engaging, humorous interludes.

By the time the expedition is over and Sparks boards a plane to rejoin civilization, his worldview has changed forever. His adventures, the book says, would stay with him for the rest of his life; through this travelogue, they will also stay with those who experienced them vicariously. From a disastrous first night in Slovakia to a warm reunion with old friends on the German-Polish border, *Into the Carpathians* depicts a journey so breathtaking that it will make even those who dislike the outdoors want to pack a bag and see Sparks's marvels for themselves.

Into the Carpathians is a detailed travel book that explores one of Europe's longest and most striking mountain ranges.

EILEEN GONZALEZ (January 7, 2021)

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