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CHAMPAGNE HIKING

The 100 Best Champagne Locations in the World

Photo by Pål Allan and Friends

Translation by Björn Mattsson

VINGHÄSTEN

52. Poloniny National Park

Slovakia

Champagne: Vilmart Coeur de Cuvée
Time: April to September.

This Slovak champagne excursion is probably the worst planned ever. Pål and I have a relationship like an old couple, we usually leave nothing to chance, planning everything down to the smallest detail with a clear distribution of roles. We did a quick hiking in Budapest and were suddenly an extra day at our disposal. We decided to look for a Central European primaeval forest. Since we like to visit as many different countries as possible in our quest to find champagne oases, a detour to Slovakia was the logical choice. I would have preferred if this forest had been located a little closer to Budapest and our flight home, not on the Polish-Ukrainian border, but it is a little tricky to move nature. A diligent Google search revealed that we could find ourselves in such a forest – listed as UNESCO world heritage since 2007, within four hours.

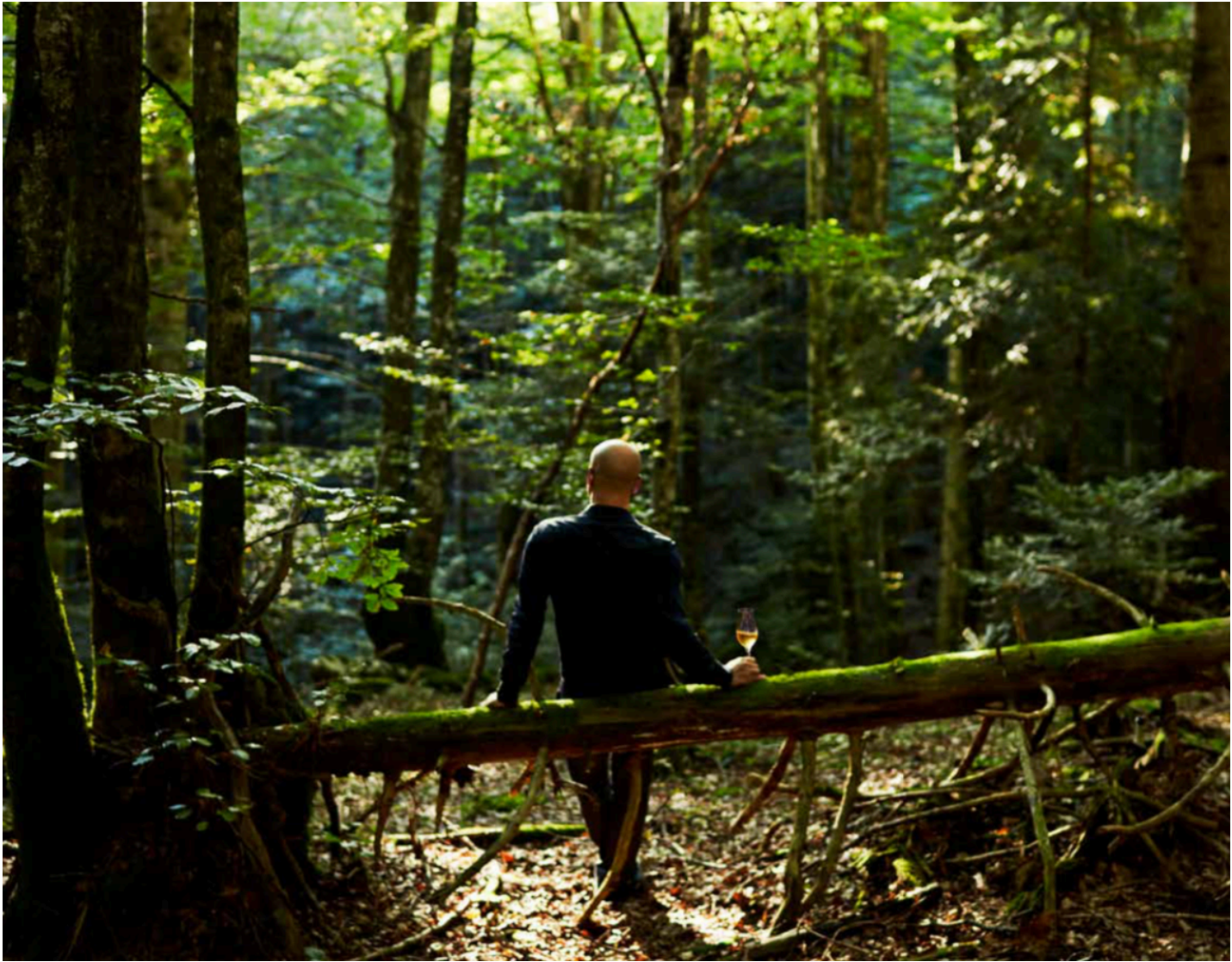
Activate the GPS and put the pedal to the metal. When time is of the essence, Pål is the map-reader, and I will handle the BMW. After a while, the landscape became more undulated, and we realised, with a certain degree of shame, that the Carpathian Mountains goes far beyond Dracula's Romania. The huge and deserted national park appeared painfully desolate and wild when we drifted into the preserve. We parked the car, took our heavy ice bucket and camera equipment and selected a trail

at random. We had been walking for a short while when we suddenly stopped and began to laugh hysterically. What were we doing here? How would we find a nice spot, and how would we make our way back? What if there was no suitable primaeval forest for our picture? Most of the surrounding was way too similar to the beech wood that we had already photographed in Poland. When we saw the signs that told us about bears, lynx and above all the European bison, we felt like Huey and Dewey missing uncle Donald. Completely lost and in peril. Still, we went even deeper into the forest, like Hansel and Gretel in search of our gingerbread house.

After an hours walk the forest began to change in nature, and just as we had hoped conifers started to mix in with the deciduous trees, and suddenly there it was—the Holy Grail of places. We saw it at the same time and cried out “there” in unison. Several overturned trees, a mysterious John Bauer-esque light that trickled in between the trees and a lovely fresh forest bouquet in the air. I half expected a siren of the woods or a witch to show up behind the mammoth spruce as I removed the cap from my bottle of *Vilmart Coeur de Cuvée*. It was an enchanted place, and the oak fermented champagne made it the happiest of marriages.

Someone once said that all good things must

come to an end, this was true for our enchanted moment also. We had been photographing for a few minutes when the sun disappeared, and we had to cancel the session. We emptied the ice bucket and drained the precious organic droplets, in so adding a dash of noble French chalk soil to the primaeval forest. Call it our modest contribution to the continental drift. Now we had to hurry back before we were swallowed up by darkness, or worse, by bears. It wasn't as dramatic as all that, but both Pål and I have very active imaginations, to say the least, and must in spite of our professionalism be characterised as unusually timid adventurers. By the time we finally found our car we were famished and attacked our Hungarian picnic bag voraciously, first making sure to bear-proof the car, before heading for home. Desperately looking for a lodging house and failing, we parked in one of the few fields we encountered and were out for the count until the sunrise rejuvenated us. Full throttle for the airport in Budapest. Did we make the flight? We did, entering the security check at the same time as the announcer called for “Mr Paul Ellen and Mr Rett chart Joe Lean to please go to gate ...”.





52. Poloniny National Park, Slovakia

Type of location

Primaeval forest in a temperate, inland climate.

Directions

Drive by car from *Champagne Hiking* No. 51 in Poland, or fly to Bratislava and take a car from there. I recommend combining this with a *Champagne Hiking* in Budapest, though. From the Hungarian capital, it is a four-hour drive to the national park. Take the E71 east until you reach Miskolc, Slovakia, where you take the E79. Follow this road, and turn on to route 37, that later become route 79. Turn right towards Dlhá. Continue on route 18, that turns into route 74, until you reach route 558, which will lead you to the park.

GPS coordinates

Latitude: 48.963831 | Longitude: 22.418706

To do in the vicinity

The park borders on Ukraine and Poland. The national park is huge, and I leave it to you to find the perfect spot. We were looking for the ideal ancient, primaeval forest, but there are lakes, streams, meadows, and mountains that are worth exploring. Unfortunately, we did not find the time.

Restaurants

Bring a picnic basket.

Accommodation

Camping, sleeping in the vehicle as we did, or stop at an inn along the way. If you crave hotel comfort, wilderness is not for you.

Type of champagne

Powerful grower champagne with great depth.

Preferred age is 12–18 years.

Champagne selected

Vilmar Coeur de Cuvée (20 % PN, 80 % CH)

The aromatic fingerprint makes this champagne one of the easiest to identify in a blind tasting. Always a highly concentrated wine, with a strong touch of new oak barrels and crackling young tropical fruit with a tinge of kiwi, mango, papaya and pineapple. The depth and notes of oak are especially pronounced in woodlands. In hot climates, the tropical fruits are accentuated.

Alternative: *Michel Arnould Mémoires de Vignes, Paul Bara Comtesse Marie de France.*

Budget version: *Vilmar Grand Cellier.*

Non-alcoholic alternative: *Slovak non-alcoholic beer.*

