

# Circus bears offered sanctuary from trauma in Romania

July 21 2015, by Mihaela Rodina

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All of the bears in the "Liberty" brown bear sanctuary have a "sad but educational" story

Circus bear Mura wound up in the world's biggest brown bear sanctuary in the heart of Romania's Carpathian mountains after refusing to perform any longer, following five years of unbearable abuse.

Caged, beaten and starved by their owners, 80 bears rescued from

captivity have been taken in to be healed of trauma at the "Libearty" sanctuary, but the process can be slow.

Mura for instance instinctively begins to dance at mealtimes. "She's still afraid she won't be fed if she doesn't dance," Libearty guide Paula Ciotlos told AFP.

After doing tricks for the Globus circus in Bucharest for five years, Mura one day obstinately refused to keep performing and was finally handed over to the sanctuary by her owner.

Set up in 2005, the 69-hectare (170 acre) complex was itself the result of a storm of outrage caused by the plight of a self-mutilating bear named Maia, who hurt herself in protest against the cruel conditions she was kept in, and who eventually died of her wounds.

"The establishment of this sanctuary was inspired by Maia," said Cristina Lapis, president of the "Millions of Friends" animal rights support group.

The first two bears at the sanctuary were Lidia and Cristi, who for seven years shared a small pen—measuring a mere five square metres (yards)—by a restaurant whose clients amused themselves by giving the animals beer.

Their paws still bear traces of cuts from the glass bottles.

All of the bears in the sanctuary have a "sad but educational" story, said Ciotlos.

By opening its doors to tourists, though for no more than three hours every day, the sanctuary hopes people will gain a new perspective on animals in captivity.

British tourist John Hancock is one of the converted. He said he "no longer wants" to see animals at the zoo after seeing some of the effects of captivity first hand.



So far, two million euros have been invested in the "Libearty" bear sanctuary, which welcomed more than 20,000 tourists in 2014—about 60% of them foreigners

### **'Ideal environment for bears'**

"This is the ideal environment for the bears," said Hancock. "They enjoy everything they need here."

The land was donated by the city of Zarnesti, and has ample forest and ponds for the bears, who are fed once a day by staff.

They can never re-enter the wild because they've lost many of their instincts and "would never be able to survive alone in the forest, fight for a female, or for food," Ciotlos said.

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Brown bears are common in Romania, which has a population of around 6,000. In mountainous areas, female bears and their cubs often wander into villages to scavenge for food in trash bins.



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## A 'nursery' for orphan cubs

In another pathbreaking project, cubs separated from their mothers due to accident or human action are being lodged in a "nursery" in the Hasmas mountains, about 200 kilometres (120 miles) north of Zarnesti.

"A cub is very fragile and vulnerable until the age of two or three," said the project's founder and animal lover Leonardo Bereczky.

He said they were protected but also encouraged to fend for themselves, especially to forage for food.

"It is very important that the cubs grow up far from human beings" before resuming a life in the wild, he said, adding that so far about 100 cubs had been successfully released.

Bereczky said the main threats for the bears was the growing infiltration of man into their habitat, and deforestation.

Ciotlos said some people also wanted to turn them into pets.

She said that between 1990 and 2000 a lot of restaurants in the Carpathian region displayed caged bears to attract tourists, but those establishments are becoming more rare because Romania has passed more restrictive laws in hopes of curbing abuse.

"Now there are no more than a dozen [bears](#) waiting to be rescued in Romania," Ciotlos said.

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