

Making Ends Meet

Mila 23, Danube Delta, Romania



Traian and Ana Gherasim

Ana and Traian live in Mila 23 with their 4 year old son Octavian and Ana's mother and father. Ana is 25, Traian is 27. Ana is from Mila 23 and is Lipoveni, but Traian is Romanian, and comes from a community nearby, Crisan. When they first married, they lived with his family in Crisan, but three years ago they moved in with her parents.

Traian is a fisherman. Ana's father, who is 69, also fished until a year ago. Ana looks after their garden on a tiny strip of land about a mile away, only reachable by boat. She also looks after their one cow, which they keep on another strip of land. Her mother isn't very well any more and isn't able to contribute much to the livelihood of the family.

Traian and Ana were both quite concerned about the 'prohibition period', when the fish breed and the fishermen are not allowed to fish. Traian told us about the ecological police, as he called them. There are two of them, based in Crisan, who cover the villages round about including Mila 23. They police the area to ensure that fishermen don't fish during the 'Prohibition Period' – the period when the fish breed, when no fishing is allowed. Last year one was killed and people thought he had been attacked by fishermen, but the police investigated and discovered that it was an accident. If the ecological police catch someone with just a few fish they usually let them off, since they know that people have nothing else to eat. But you can lose your permit if you are caught and you can get a big fine.

For Traian, fishing is a difficult life – but he still loves it! But he told us that he isn't sure whether he wants his little son to take up the hard life of a fisherman. He'd like him to have the chance to get a good education if possible.

He told us about the difficulty of getting fishing permits. He explained that there are two kinds of permit: one which allows a fisherman to fish for sale and one which allows him to fish only for his family. There are only a fixed number of fishing permits – this is especially rigidly adhered to by authorities in relation to permits which allow fishing for sale – which means that you can only become a fisherman if another fisherman stops fishing and becomes a pensioner. Usually, permits are inherited from father to son. They can also be bought or given away.

Traian sells fish through a private company which has been formed since 1989. Before 1989, his father-in-law used to sell his fish to the government fish collection point. Of what he brings in, he and Ana keep 3 or 4 kilos per day for the family to eat and he sells the rest through the private company which he is attached to now.

Traian was emphatic that fish is very good for your health! He said that a strong man needs about one kilo per day of fish. Women need a bit less.

Traian agrees with the idea of having a Biosphere Reserve in the Danube Delta but he feels that the 'ecologisti', the environmentalists who run the Delta, don't always understand how important it is to the people of the Delta that they should be able to fish.

Ana took us by boat to visit her garden 3 km away from Mila 23 and showed us all the vegetables she is growing there. She told us that tomatoes and potatoes are particularly important! She comes there quite often with her little boy to look after it. In the winter, she said, they really rely on the produce from it, which she processes and stores - since they have nothing else to eat except the fish that Traian is able to catch through the ice. They never buy any vegetables.

She also gave us a tour of her house. They have a winter kitchen (bucateria de iara) and a summer kitchen (bucateria de vara), and Ana and Traian and their little boy sleep in the winter kitchen in wintertime. Ana told us proudly that they have water in both their kitchens. They have another room where they sleep in summer. Ana's mother and father have their own room, which is like a kitchen, but isn't really one because they don't cook there. But both her parents' room and Ana and Traian's winter kitchen - bucateria de iara - have a lejanka – an stove which is also a bed, nice and warm to sleep on top of in the winter. Ana herself built their lejanka – she told us that a woman always builds the lejanka on which she and her husband and children sleep.