**Small but perfectly formed, Macedonia may just be Europe’s best-kept secret. Get there before the crowds, says YVONNE GORDON**

**Balkan magic in MACEDONIA**

**THE MINIATURE STONE CHURCH, PAINTED YELLOW AND RED, SITS IN THE SUN.** Before it, a small fountain is lined with yellow roses and grey cobble stones which has taken on a poetic hue in the sun. The path disappears between boulders at the top of the hill. We’ve been hiking for two hours and are half-way to the monastery.

At the start of the walk, we see tobacco fields and wooden tobacco drying racks outside houses. Almond, hazelnut and linden trees grow around the houses at the base of the mountain — some fancy, some traditional; all merging into a pile of indistinct red roofs from above. Bird trees obligingly fall to earth and there’s a stream of people from somewhere between the place of rocks. I realise that if I don’t want to be a tourist I probably need to stop on the top of the mountain, they’re chosen a pretty nice location.

We’re not north of Prizren in the centre of Macedonia, a land-locked country on the base of the mountain, yet we’re chosen a pretty nice location.

**WHAT TO PACK**

Depending on the season, temperatures can hit 40°C, wear extra sunscreen, water for outdoor activities, insect repellent; wear covering arms and legs and some re-usable things for a gym bag. The walking clothes are painted to look like nobility, and the Byzantine images where Christ is climbing to the cross, symbolising something different. In towns and villages, a fascinating mix of history and industry.

**WHERE TO STAY**

An eight-day Walking & Gourmet Macedonia trip with Macedonia Travel (macedoniatimeless.com) includes stays in Skopje and Ohrid, a taxi to the Treskavec monastery, a boat trip on Ohrid Lake and a wine-tasting dinner at Popova Kula winery.

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**GETTING THERE**

Turkish Airlines (turkishairlines.com) flies from Dublin to Skopje and Macedonia Travel (macedoniatimeless.com) flies from London Luton and Brussels Charleroi, to Skopje. Ryanair flies from Ireland. See also macedonianovise.com.