



painted vellow and red, signals the way. Beside it, a walking trail curves up the hill, lined with yellow gorse and grey silk grass which has taken on a purple hue in the sun. The path disappears between boulders at the top of the hill. We've been hiking for two hours and are halfway 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 modern buildings; some traditional; all merged into a pile of indistinct red roofs from above. Birds tweet enthusiastically and there's a hum of bees from somewhere between the piles of rocks. I realise that if there are any monks in the monastery at the top of the mountain, they've chosen a pretty nice location.

We're just north of Prilep in the centre of Macedonia, a land-locked country on the tiny Orthodox church, Father Kalist the Balkan Peninsula in southeast Europe. talks us through the magnificent 15th-cen-Once part of Yugoslavia, the country boasts tury frescoes — pointing out where saints

he miniature stone church, more than 50 lakes and is two-thirds covered by mountains. It's the perfect place to come hiking, walking, biking or exploring culture, food and wine, without the mass tourism of neighbours like Greece.

> When we get to a flat part at the top of the hill, our hiking guide points to an empty path running across the top of the mountain, through a huge rocky valley, and then up to a tiny pointy roof in the distance, which almost looks too far away to be reachable — Treskavec monastery, set 1.420m above sea level. We set across the path, and after another hour — and a stop at a spring to fill up our water bottles — we arrive at the monastery, a small collection of buildings sheltering under the rock face of Golden Mountain. A stone archway leads to a cobbled courtyard where we meet Treskavec's resident monk, Kalist,

The earliest church here was in the 5th century and today there are buildings from the 12th, 13th and 15th centuries. Inside

are painted to look like nobility, and the Byzantine images where Christ is climbing a ladder to get up to the cross, symbolising that he went onto it of his own free will.

The monastery was once home to more than 100 monks. Although it's now reachable by road, Kalist is the only one stationed at the monastery, and the church is used for services just four times a year on big holidays. Kalist is also overseeing the restoration project for the frescoes and the monastery itself, much of which was destroyed by fire in 2013.

Kalist doesn't mind being on his own at ${\it Treskavec-in fact, he admits his delight}$ with his posting. "All the monasteries are nice, but this is a really nice one," he says. "It's really something special. I am supposed to be modest about it, but it's very hard to be humble and talk about it. I thank God for being here."

A more famous religious figure from Macedonia is Mother Teresa, who was born in Skopje in 1910. Then, Skopje was part of the Ottoman Empire while now it is the capital of Macedonia, home to around half a million people. It's a quirky city — its

Clockwise from main: Ohrid, Macedonia: the entrance of Saint Naum Monastery; some burek, cheese-filled pies

government has been on a controversial spending spree, buying giant statues and putting up enormous buildings to change the style of the city, while alongside this sits a fascinating old Turkish bazaar and a 15th-century stone bridge.

Ohrid, to the southwest, is home to the shimmering Lake Ohrid, and both town and lake are UNESCO World Heritage Sites. One of Europe's oldest lakes, Ohrid is said to be four million years old, as well as one of Europe's deepest. Once, Ohrid was said to have 365 churches, though there are just a handful now.

The old town's small

streets are full of shops and restau-WHAT TO rants — food here **PACK** has influences from the Mediterranean. Balkans and Turkey, with large salads to start and a meat dish for mains, usually accompanied by wrap or scarf just in a filled Burek pie, made of dough and filled with cheese that I realise will take more than a five-hour hike to burn off.

With so many mountains, Macedonia is well set up for hikers, walkers, bik- which produces 20 different red, white ers and adventure travellers who want and rosé wines in the Tikveshiya wine is more than a wish come true.

TM A HACT HP T

Depending on the season (avoid hiking in summer, when temperatures can hit 40°C), wear ayers and bring sunscreen, snacks and water for outdoor activities. nasteries require covered arms and legs and some require skirts for women (bring a to Romans, Byzantines, Ottomans and the Commu-

> Macedonian wine is another surprise. We spend a night in Popova Kula winery

something dif- region. Here, we enjoy a walk in beautiful ferent. In towns countryside, through forests and across tiny and villages, a wooden bridges. The following morning, admire the valley and mountain views at sunrise while listening to the dawn chorus

On the last day of the trip, we pass the monastery of St Naum, known as the miracle-maker. There are many legends of miracles he is said to have performed People who pray to Naum believe that he will fulfil their wishes.

But for me, getting to see places like this

GETTING THERE

Turkish Airlines (turkishairlines, com) flies from Dublin to Alexander The Great Airport in Skopie, with one stopover in Istanbul, Wizz Air (wizzair.com) also flies from London Luton and Brussels Charleroi, to which Ryanair flies from Ireland. See



WHERE TO STAY

An eight-day Walking & Gourmet Macedonia trip with Macedonia Travel (macedoniatravel.com) includes stays in Skopje and Ohrid, a hike to the Treskavec monastery, a boat trip on Ohrid Lake and a wine-tasting dinner at Popova Kula from €785pp. Gourmet, family, hiking and biking trips are also available. April-June or autumn are the best times to travel.



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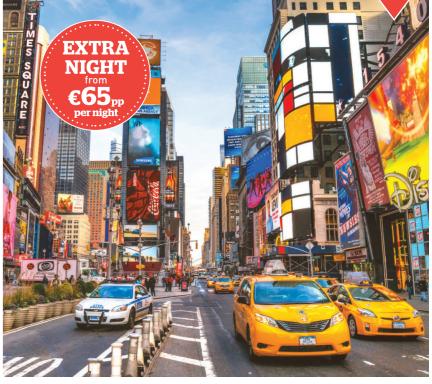
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