

# Balkan magic in MACEDONIA

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

The miniature stone church, painted yellow 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 Balkan Peninsula in southeast Europe. Once part of Yugoslavia, the country boasts

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, who shows us around.

The earliest church here was in the 5th century and today there are buildings from the 12th, 13th and 15th centuries. Inside the tiny Orthodox church, Father Kalist talks us through the magnificent 15th-century frescoes — pointing out where saints

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 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 restaurants — food here has influences from the Mediterranean, Balkans and Turkey, with large salads to start and a meat dish for mains, usually accompanied by 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, bikers and adventure travellers who want

## WHAT TO PACK

Depending on the season (avoid hiking in summer, when temperatures can hit 40°C), wear layers and bring sunscreen, snacks and water for outdoor activities. Monasteries require covered arms and legs and some require skirts for women (bring a wrap or scarf just in case).

something different. In towns and villages, a fascinating mix of history ranges from Alexander the Great to Romans, Byzantines, Ottomans and the Communist era.

Macedonian wine is another surprise. We spend a night in Popova Kula winery which produces 20 different red, white and rosé wines in the Tikveshiya wine

region. Here, we enjoy a walk in beautiful countryside, through forests and across tiny wooden bridges. The following morning, I 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 is more than a wish come true.

## GETTING THERE

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



## WHERE TO STAY

An eight-day Walking & Gourmet Macedonia trip with Macedonia Travel ([macedoniatravel.com](http://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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