

ALL RHYTHMS OF THE SUN – NORTH MACEDONIA

“It’s surprising that North Macedonia doesn’t attract more tourists than it does. The fact that there are so few tourists annually has nothing to do with the country’s lack of attractions. North Macedonia is a great mixture of the Balkans and the Mediterranean. In this small country, you will find the history and culture of these two regions come together in a melting pot of gastronomic delight, unrivalled hospitality, and fantastic entertainment.”

With these words, North Macedonia is presented by the British agency *Undiscovered Destinations*, which has spent the past two decades exploring “the most interesting and unique regions of the world.” So, what is it that makes North Macedonia such an exceptional, hidden gem of the European landscape? Unlike popular tourist destinations tailored to the needs of mass tourism, North Macedonia has not embraced the philosophy of building massive resorts, glass and concrete complexes, cheap attractions, amusement parks, or endless souvenir shops. What might have seemed a few decades ago like a setback in shaping its tourist offer, now proves to be a decisive comparative advantage — the authenticity that is becoming increasingly rare in today’s world.

Modern life is marked by anxiety, a sense of uncertainty, and a longing for a stable and peaceful state of the world as it once was. North Macedonia is recognized as one of the last shelters offering untouched natural splendor and the serenity that comes from living in harmony with nature.

It is a destination where the soul recognizes its primordial home—and once that happens, North Macedonia becomes a place one returns to. At the same time, this is not an oasis reserved exclusively for wealthy or elite clientele. Even visitors with a very limited budget won’t have to give up any of the pleasures available to them during their stay.

Visiting North Macedonia is not merely a change of scenery. Above all, it’s a change of lifestyle, a return to the long-forgotten habitus of carefree living—into a lifestyle of individuality that today mostly belongs to memories and a past trampled by the anonymous collectivism of modern times. The peace of mind that North Macedonia offers its visitors is also supported by the fact that it is an extremely safe and secure country; whether by night or day, in big cities or small towns, one can feel as relaxed as they would in their own home.

While fans of luxury hotels can certainly find a place to suit their preferences, choosing such accommodation means missing out on the unique opportunity to feel at home in North Macedonia, and not just like an anonymous guest in a consumer hive. That kind of closeness with the hosts is provided even by many boutique hotels, and especially by the widespread family-run businesses. These households offer not just lodging and the

benefits of undisturbed privacy, but also traditional Macedonian cuisine that can rival the most prestigious restaurants in every aspect—except for the price.

Often, these homes also include a family craft, for which Macedonian handicrafts are widely known. This kind of “experiential tourism” allows the guest to try out some of the old crafts or gain firsthand knowledge about skills that have been passed down for generations.

The centuries-old culture of hospitality ensures that the visitor does not experience North Macedonia as an exhibition space where they are just a temporary observer, but rather becomes an organic part of it. It is almost certain that this new way of life experienced in North Macedonia will not only exceed expectations but also leave a lasting impression—one that draws them back again and again.

The key to understanding the nature of North Macedonia and its people lies in the role of the Sun in its history and present. On a symbolic level, the sun motif is part of Macedonian national symbols. It is prominently featured as a heraldic element on the coat of arms and flag (the only European country with the sun on its flag), as well as in the Macedonian anthem. The sun’s omnipresence (over 300 sunny days per year) is tied to North Macedonia’s geographical location and, therefore, its history as a region settled by numerous cultures since ancient times. These cultures left their marks not only on archaeological sites but also in the layers of customs and lifestyle preserved to this day.

Climatically, unlike other sunny regions of southern Europe, the Sun in North Macedonia is not associated with unbearable heat, because the country is predominantly mountainous, with mountains covering 80% of its territory. This also means that nights are cool and pleasant for undisturbed rest. It’s a region whose mild climate and moderate temperatures explain why people have found their ideal dwelling here since the Bronze Age.

Among forty mountain ranges, North Macedonia is home to 85 peaks over 2,000 meters, making it unique in Europe in relation to its surface area. The diversity of terrain and its geo-climatic characteristics are the reason for the existence of microclimates that support numerous endemic species of flora and fauna. In the magnificent Matka Canyon, which covers 5,000 hectares, every fifth plant is unique and grows nowhere else in the world. This world of astonishing biodiversity includes 123 bird species found in the forests of Mavrovo, as well as the aquatic ecosystem of Lake Ohrid.

North Macedonia’s geographic location and favorable climate have attracted people of various cultures since ancient times, who found their new homeland here. This is eloquently supported by over 4,700 registered archaeological sites, including one of the oldest: the archaeoastronomical observatory Kokino. The age of this megalithic Bronze Age

structure is estimated at 3,800 years. Its discovery in 2001 was a sensation, and it has been included on the UNESCO list of sites considered candidates for World Heritage status.

Of all the archaeological sites in North Macedonia, Stobi certainly holds the most significant place. This location, named after a city from the Archaic period (800–480 BC), was inhabited until the catastrophic earthquakes of the 6th century by the people of the Paeonian Kingdom, the Macedonian Kingdom, and the Roman Empire. It best illustrates the diversity of cultures that have left their indelible mark on North Macedonia. In Stobi, one can find remains of ancient Greek temples, a Roman necropolis, a Jewish synagogue, and a Christian episcopal basilica built at the end of the 5th century—one of the oldest traces of Christianity in today's North Macedonia.

Equally impressive are the remains of the Greco-Roman Heraclea Lyncestis, a fascinating city founded in the 4th century BC by Philip II of Macedon, father of Alexander the Great. Located along the Via Egnatia, the ancient Roman road connecting the empire's eastern colonies to its heart, Heraclea—with its mosaics, sculptures, baths (thermae), large forum, and ancient amphitheater for 3,000 spectators—is the best-preserved city of the ancient Macedonian empire.

The presence and significance of sacred buildings in this region—with the highest concentration of monasteries in the Balkans—is well expressed by a legend stating that Ohrid, often called the “Jerusalem of the Balkans,” once had 365 churches, one for each day of the year. Beneath the Macedonian sun, in landscapes of surreal beauty, generations of Orthodox Christian monks have found spiritual peace over the centuries and have left behind unique works of art that leave visitors breathless. Among the most famous are the Monasteries of St. Joachim of Osogovo, Holy Mother of God in Treskavec, and St. Gabriel in Lesnovo, but two are especially unmissable: the monumental St. John Bigorski Monastery and the marvelous complex of St. Naum, located on the shores of Lake Ohrid. This monastery is just one of the reasons why Ohrid is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, a designation for the cultural and natural jewels of the world.

Lake Ohrid itself is of tectonic origin, estimated to be between 4 and 10 million years old, making it one of the oldest lakes in Europe and the world. Its crystal-clear depths (286 meters) are home to over 200 endemic species—from diverse aquatic plants and shells to the famous *plašica*, a unique species of trout. While all waterways and lakes in North Macedonia are a dream for kayaking and water sports enthusiasts, the stunning landscapes and diverse fish species make Lake Ohrid, and the nearby Lake Kozjak, especially unique for anglers.

The trout *plašica* is not only part of the local cuisine, but it is also tied to one of Ohrid's most famous symbols: the Ohrid pearls. Descendants of the first jeweler families, who a hundred years ago discovered the secret of making pearls from the nacre of oyster shells and an emulsion derived from the fish's scales, still produce these luxurious ornaments today. Some of their finest pieces are found in the jewelry collections of Queen Elizabeth II, Princess Diana, Queen Margrethe II of Denmark, and Princess Giovanna of Savoy.

The sacred architecture of Ohrid is a must-see for visitors drawn not only by the region's beauty but also by the vibrant historical legacy of Christianity, of which Ohrid was a central part. On the most prominent elevation above the city stands the grand church of St. Clement of Ohrid, the Macedonian patron saint, built during that early Christian period. Clement was a distinguished educator, founder of the Ohrid Literary School in the 9th century, and a disciple of the Byzantine theologians and missionaries Cyril and Methodius. These Macedonian educators are rightly called the "Apostles to the Slavs" for their role in evangelizing the Slavs who had recently arrived on the Balkan Peninsula. Their most enduring cultural legacy, which Clement developed further, was the creation of Glagolitic script, which led to the literacy of Eastern Europe and the development of the Cyrillic alphabet, still used today in many Slavic languages (including Macedonian, Serbian, Bulgarian, Russian, and Ukrainian).

The area between Lake Ohrid and Lake Prespa includes the Galičica National Park, added in 2014 to UNESCO's World Network of Biosphere Reserves. These are locations where exemplary forms of life flourish, making it a haven for birdwatchers from around the world. A special attraction in this region is the multi-day traditional wedding celebration in Galičnik, held annually, where thousands of visitors from North Macedonia and abroad gather to celebrate couples who wish to begin their life together in the traditional way. Events like this—along with the Strumica Carnival and the one held at magical Vevčani Springs—are part of the Macedonian traditional lifestyle, a vivid expression of *joie de vivre* in cultures whose daily lives have never been easy or carefree.

On the eastern shore of Lake Prespa lies Pelister, North Macedonia's oldest national park, famous for its glacial lakes called "Pelister's Eyes." At its heart is the Baba mountain range, with its 2,600-meter-high peak, after which the park is named. At the base of Pelister lies the 2,000-year-old city of Bitola, which has become a model of urban tourism harmonized with traditional architecture. Bitola is also a favorite spot for winter sports enthusiasts, drawn to the sunny slopes of the southern European ski resorts such as Kopanki and Nize Pole, as well as the Šar Mountains.

If solitude embraced by nature is what one seeks, it's hard to find a better place than the Šar Mountain National Park, with its 30 peaks over 2,500 meters. From each of these, there

are breathtaking views of untouched landscapes and vast alpine meadows, which form the largest continuous pastureland in Europe. Beyond hikers, nature lovers, and winter sports fans, this mountain is increasingly attracting dog enthusiasts. Many travel from afar to visit the homeland of the Šarplaninec, a shepherd dog breed featured on the national currency, admired by breeders for its noble traits. The growing number of pet-friendly restaurants, cafes, hotels, and accommodations makes it much easier for visitors to travel through North Macedonia with their four-legged companions.

One place that epitomizes the harmonious interaction between man and nature is the Matka Canyon, on the Treska River. The cold waters of Matka are a favorite for kayakers and rafters, while the canyon's cliffs attract both spelunkers and climbers. Matka contains ten caves, the most famous of which is Vrelo, considered one of the deepest underwater cave systems in Europe. Because of its enchanting beauty, Vrelo was included among the 77 global locations recognized by the international New 7 Wonders of Nature project as invaluable natural wonders. On the 5,000-hectare area of Matka live 77 species of butterflies, and the canyon is surrounded by monasteries, the most striking of which are the Monasteries of St. Andrew and St. Nicholas of Šiševo, both nestled right on the riverbank.

Skopje, the capital of North Macedonia and home to the main international airport, is usually the first point of contact with the country for most visitors. This vibrant city on the Vardar River was devastated by a catastrophic earthquake in 1963, remembered to this day by the stopped clock preserved at the main railway station. In the decades since, Skopje has risen impressively from the ruins, becoming a captivating city.

Only a small number of those who come to North Macedonia inspired by the sacred monuments of Christian or Islamic tradition know that Skopje is also the birthplace of the famous Mother Teresa, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979 for her humanitarian work in India. Born in 1910 as Anjezë Gonxhe Bojaxhiu, at the age of 18 she joined the Catholic congregation of the Sisters of Loreto and devoted her life to humanitarian work in India. Initially, she taught history and geography at St. Mary's High School in Calcutta, but from the late 1940s onward, she dedicated all her attention and tireless energy to caring for the poorest of the poor. This led to the creation of the organization *Missionaries of Charity*, which she headed until her death in 1997. The Mother Teresa Memorial House in Skopje reveals her incredible life journey to numerous visitors and brings them closer to the unique character of a woman who was canonized by the Holy See in 2017.

Among the most famous landmarks that survived the earthquake is the Old Bazaar, which flourished during the Ottoman Empire and remained for over five centuries. After the Grand

Bazaar in Istanbul, it is the largest market in Europe, and as early as the 12th century, it was one of the centers of trade in Southern Europe. The depths of the Bazaar hide thousands of restaurants serving traditional cuisine, taverns, and shops where skilled artisans offer a wide variety of goods and artworks, old caravan inns (*caravanserais*), and Turkish baths (*hamams*). The vibrancy of this place is vividly captured by Hungarian travel writer Szombati Orsolya: *"I felt a little like I was in the tale of Arabian Nights, in a magical environment where every piece of mosaic has significance and every picture tells us something about the past"*.

The image of North Macedonia would be incomplete if we limited ourselves to scenes and customs, omitting one of the region's most recognizable features – traditional Macedonian music, with its unique blend of melody and rhythm. The global cultural public first encountered Macedonian rich dance and musical heritage in 1956, when Macedonian musicians and dancers embarked on a tour of the United States that *Life* magazine critics called *"the most vigorous display of dancing the American audience has ever seen."*

After an equally sensational European tour, North Macedonia became an established name among enthusiasts of traditional music. Its unique features have since attracted the attention of not only ethnomusicologists but also musicians and performers from very different traditions. Although traditional music across the Balkans is known for its distinctive rhythm, nowhere is this rhythm as emphasized as it is in Macedonian music. Its specificity has led to the coining of a term to describe the entire range of its rhythmic and melodic expressions: *Makedo*. Writing about Macedonian music, musicologist Kim Burton highlights the *"tricky rhythms"*—a whole range of uneven beats that present an irresistible challenge even to seasoned percussionists and offer an inexplicable joy to listeners immersed in the typical Macedonian soundscape.

If one expression could briefly characterize North Macedonia, it would be that it offers joy and delight for all the senses. The sights and sounds are just part of its richness, and the nourishing power of the sun is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the wonders of Macedonian cuisine. Everything the land yields here is bursting with flavors and aromas long forgotten by the modern palate. The skill of preparing gastronomic delicacies has made this country a pilgrimage destination for vegetarian cuisine enthusiasts from around the globe. Situated between two culinary empires—Oriental and Mediterranean—Macedonian cuisine is a fusion full of unexpected surprises. Behind exotic names lie dishes that are sure to secure a permanent place in every visitor's memory, if not in their own kitchen. Famous stews such as *tavče gravče*, vegetarian spreads like *ajvar*, *pindjur*, *ljutenica*, and *malidžan*, as well as stuffed vegetable dishes like *sogan dolma* and *sarma*, are an exciting part of discovering the secrets of a new land. And like every happy-ending

adventure, a typical Macedonian meal concludes with a traditional dessert, such as Ohrid or Vlach cake.

The entire experience would certainly be incomplete without being accompanied by one of Macedonian traditional beverages. The 250 currently registered small wineries across North Macedonia guarantee that the fruits of the vineyards from sun-drenched hillsides end up in bottles of top-quality wine. The millennia-old local winemaking tradition is most prominent in the Tikveš region, where passionate connoisseurs can also sample wines made from indigenous grape varieties such as *Vranec*, *Temjanika*, *Stanušina*, *Smederevka*, and *Kratošija*.

Fans of stronger alcoholic drinks looking for new experiences will find North Macedonia the perfect place to try mastika, a specialty of the city of Strumica, as well as many types of rakija, a strong spirit whose distinct aroma is the result of fermenting various kinds of fruit.

For those who prefer non-alcoholic drinks, *boza* will undoubtedly be a delightful revelation. The simplicity of preparing this refreshing and highly probiotic drink made from fermented cereals—typically corn flour—makes it a likely candidate for homemade preparation by any advocate of healthy eating.

The fact that North Macedonia has about 5,000 restaurants (*kafanas*), which for centuries have been social hubs of daily life, speaks volumes about the importance Macedonians place on the ritual of drinking coffee. It reflects the belief that every person has been assigned a certain number of steps in life. Therefore, one should not rush to complete them – instead, allow thoughts to settle, eyes to observe, ears to listen, mouth to taste, and each sense to find its own moment of joy.

North Macedonia is a place where that becomes possible.