

The Magic of Macedonia

Words: Tracey Croke

The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia is topping the polls as Europe's rising star in adventure travel. On a bike and foodie trip there, Tracey Croke discovers its special kind of magic.





Photo: Emilija Manevska

Did you know that Macedonia has the highest number of Magicians per capita? Okay – I might’ve just totally made that up, but that’s how it feels when you’re there.

That’s because the gap between making a wish and that wish materializing is just a matter of a phone call and a surprisingly short space of time.

It seems “I’ll call someone,” is a local catchphrase of guides and business owners. On a five-day mountain bike trip around the country’s southwest region, fulfilling our group’s daily random demands became an informal game of “meet that challenge”.

I know that sounds perverse, like we were reveling in the privilege of behaving like a complete bunch of a-holes, but believe me, everyone from our guides to the locals willingly joined in on the fun – it was largely their idea.

Off agenda activities, between our group of five, included climbing, slack-lining, an outdoor massage in a mountain village, and popping into Albania for cake and coffee.

This game and the banter attached to it became a crucial part of discovering

a formula that I believe is unique to Macedonia.

Alex Jovanoski, owner of Velodrome Bike Tours, substantiates “unique” by explaining how Macedonia’s southwest businesses came together to create a cluster of experiences for a discerning adventure market.

“We created sustainable and responsible experiences that highlight the natural beauty and cultural heritage of our region,” says Alex, who, along with tourism and aid agencies, was one of the driving forces behind “we”.

Spreading the tourism dollar was key to this teamwork and sustainability. “We convinced people they can earn extra tourism income from their own lives,” added Alex.

Coupled with that, the country’s got some serious bragging rights (ones that I didn’t invent) that it’s only just started shouting about. Look past the uncontrolled slapping up of the communist era eyesores, (mainly around the capital, Skopje) and you’ll see how nature has shaped this beauty over millions of years.

The topography of this landlocked



Photo: Tracey Croke

country, which is roughly eighty percent mountainous with vast natural lakes, balances a warm Mediterranean to snow-covered alpine climate. And because it’s so small, it packs a ridiculous amount of easily accessible and diverse adventure opportunities.

The icing on their snow-covered mountains is the Macedonians themselves, fun personalities full of banter who are bursting with pride about their homeland, their local food and their cozy B&B family businesses.

ADVENTURE AWAITS

If there’s an epicenter to this adventure wonderland then it has to be Ohrid. It’s where our bike trip started and one of the few places in the world where a natural and a cultural UNESCO heritage site of “outstanding universal value” sit side by side.



Photo: Tracey Croke

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Ditch the pavement, ride the dirt.

From Ohrid, paragliding, caving, kayaking, canyoning and diving can be arranged in and around one of the world's rare ancient lakes, described as a "natural phenomena that has continuously existed for at least two to million years".

Sitting humbly on its shores is the UNESCO heritage town of Ohrid - one of the oldest human settlements in Europe. Among narrow cobbled streets

National Park (one of three in Macedonia) - which offers a mix of old village roads, dirt double-track and narrower natural goat and walking trails.

Over the days, the landscape switched between lake vistas, dense beech forest and a wild wilderness, where the clouds shifted in fast-forward changing the landscape in a blink.

stay at Saint Naum, a converted ninth century monastery close to the Albanian border. An opportunity for a bonus short ride to round off the day with coffee and cake in Albania, proved irresistible to the chronically curious among us.

FUELLING UP

Back in Macedonia, the cuisine was a firm highlight for me. They say the



Photo: Tracey Croke

it harbours a preserved ensemble of ancient urban architecture dating back to the seventh century housing quaint shops, traditional restaurants and boutique hotels.

ON YOUR BIKE

Road cyclists can take a spin on around the lake's 87 kilometres of shoreline. But don't forget your passport because it straddles two countries, so you'll be popping in and out of Albania.

We headed out with mountain-bike guides Goran and Alex's son, Jovan, to sample the off-road trails of Galicica

One day, our guides – also mountain rescue volunteers – took us to their rescue hut for a break. The changing weather can occasionally catch out self-guided tourists, otherwise, rescues on their watch have been few and far-between. "Mostly we hang out and play guitar," Goran explained. Nevertheless, a framed condom on the wall with a note "In case of miracle break glass," proved in the funniest possible way, that this boy's club take their duties extremely seriously.

The journey was interspersed with other special moments such as a boat journey to a 'forbidden' island and an overnight

unpolluted air, soil and water, especially in the rural and mountain areas, make the difference in their flavorsome dishes – many are vegetable based.

Food is generally meze style mix of Mediterranean and Middle East influence, the latter from the days of the Ottoman Empire. Homemade, organic and locally grown are as common as muck and almost everything, it seems, is turned into their national tipple rakija – a strong spirit washed down with almost every meal.

I nick-named Alex "the magician" when, at the top of a long climb, he appeared out of nowhere and produced

a picnic of “Gjomleze” a dish from a local village made only from pastry, which considering its lack of ingredients was surprisingly tasty.

Apparently the secret of the flavour is slow cooking. “My friend spent all morning making it, Enjoy!” Alex exclaimed. We washed it down with a runny tangy yogurt, another Macedonian favourite I came to love.

We witnessed Alex’s rural team spirit in action in the mountain village of Elshani, where we parked ourselves and our bikes one night. It doesn’t get much homelier than Risto’s guesthouse, where the multi-tasking Anita cracked jokes while giving us a cooking lesson, introducing us to local friends and mingling with other guests.

It was Anita who had a massage organized for us before we had chance to grab a shower – a good thing it was outdoors. This is a place where the hospitality is so warm you’ll want to pay the dinner bill and then offer to wash up afterwards, which we did.

On the last day, I thought there might be a chance to pick up a bag of my



Photo: Tracey Croke

favourite fruit and Macedonia’s most famous – the Ohrid cherry. “No, they’re not in season,” Jovan explained. Just as I was going to turn it into a challenge, he held up a finger, “wait, my grandmother preserves them, I’ll call her,” he said.

It’s no wonder Macedonia is leaping on to the adventure travel scene. This is the ultimate adventurous can-do country with a personal kind of magic. And there just

aren’t that many places in the world like this.

The Author travelled with Velodrome Bike Tours
Email Contact velodrome@t-home.mk

For more information about visiting the southwest region of Macedonia see <http://eden.mk>

FIVE OTHER UNIQUE EXPERIENCES IN MACEDONIA

1) Be a bear ranger

Macedonia is one of the few areas in Europe where brown bears wander free without borders. Spend five days trekking in the forest with park rangers. Learn about bear behaviour and how Macedonia is connecting tourism, local people and conservation to protect bears and other wildlife.

To join a bear conservation trekking adventure Email: gorki.balojani@balojani.com.mk

Web: www.balojani.com.mk



Photo: Tracey Croke

2) Go to a traditional wedding that everyone's invited to

Every year on 12th July, The tiny mountain village of Galichnik attracts people from all over Macedonia for their traditional Wedding Festival and everyone's invited - tourists included. For a special experience, stay in the cozy B&B home of Borka and Pavla, a legendary couple who are the only permanent residents of this summer holiday village. During the summer season, their homestay is the perfect base for exploring Mavrovo National Park.

For accommodation and more info email: Marko Bekric galichnik@outlook.com

3) Visit a 'forbidden Island'

Golem Grad is not really forbidden but it is highly protected. This uninhabited island of global scientific interest – known for its endemic flora and fauna, significant birdlife and high concentration of ancient

ruins - can only be reached by boat. It's definitely one for the nature-cum-history lovers and the kind of place you imagine a T-Rex could stomp up at any second.

More info at:<http://eden.mk>

4) Spot a Lynx in one of Europe's oldest National Parks.

With over 500 kilometres of mixed-use trails, Mavrovo National Park is a peaceful wilderness with panoramic views known for its extensive beech forests, alpine meadows and pristine rivers. It's home to the critically endangered Balkan Lynx. Latest reports say up to 45 Lynx wander between Macedonia and Albania. You'll be very lucky to see one.

For Mavrovo trekking and horse-riding contact info@macedoniaexperience.com and see www.macedoniaexperience.com

For Mavrovo Mountain Biking contact Marko Bekric - Galichnik Mountain Bike Adventures galichnik@outlook.com



5) Dive The Bay of Bones – Ohrid Lake.

The Bay of the Bones is where a stilted bronze-age settlement once existed. "The museum on the water" is village reconstructed from the archaeological remains. Uncover ceramics and artifacts, which tell a story of a civilization that existed thousands of years ago. Aptly described by a journalist colleague as "the coolest diving spot you've never heard of."

More info at: www.macedoniaexperience.com 📍

Tracey Croke is a travel journalist addicted to offtrack adventure and exploring on her bike. Her quest for a good story has involved venturing into post-conflict Afghanistan to join an expedition across the Pamir Mountains, being rescued by nomads in Kyrgyzstan's Talas Range and having her smalls rummaged through with the muzzle of a Kalashnikov.

More at: www.traceycroke.com



Photo: Tracey Croke