



THE ST JOVAN KANEO
IS BUILT IN THE SHAPE
OF A CROSS AND DATES
TO THE 1200s



FROM CITY TO SHORE

Make tracks from Skopje's historic
centre to the magnificent Lake Ohrid

Words James Parry

THE YEAR IS 1612, AND A PARTY OF merchants rides into the Macedonian town of Üsküp. Its horses laden with bulging sacks and baskets, it has travelled several weeks to reach this important trading centre. Entering the bustling bazaar, which is thronged with people from all over the Balkans, the traders unpack their exotic cargo of spices, silks and tobacco and start doing business.

Four centuries later and the same city – now known as Skopje and the capital of Macedonia

– is welcoming a new wave of visitors. Emerging from the disintegration of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, landlocked Macedonia – or the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, to give it its official title – has remained surprisingly off-radar to overseas tourists. Now increasing numbers are discovering its pristine landscapes and diverse cultural heritage, using Skopje as a base from which to explore.

Strategically located on the Vardar River and home to roughly a third of all Macedonians,

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NIGS IMAGES

“In the hot summer months, Skopje residents often head south to Lake Ohrid, attracted by its cool waters and relaxed vacation vibe”

Skopje can trace its history back over 3,000 years. The city has seen its fair share of historic events, but there is one date indelibly engraved in local memory – 26 July 1963. Shortly before dawn that day, a powerful earthquake devastated the city, destroying 80% of buildings and killing over 1,000 people.

However, the ancient Turkish quarter of Caršija largely survived. The Ottoman Turks had ruled for 520 years and bequeathed a rich cultural and architectural legacy, which lives on around the cobbled streets of the old bazaar. Grocers, bakers, barbers, tailors,

ironmongers, jewellers and shoemakers all go about their business in scenes little changed for centuries.

Must-see historic sights in this area include the ancient Kale Fortress, the Kamen Most (or Stone Bridge), originally from the 15th Century, and the arches of the 16th-century Kuršumli An, now a museum but originally an inn. Sveti Spas, the only surviving monastery in central Skopje, is from the 1300s and contains a beautiful church, while the Mustafa Pasha Mosque was built in 1492 as the city’s biggest and most decorative Islamic place of worship.

ABOVE: LAKE OHRID IS RICH IN BIRDLIFE, INCLUDING PELICANS AND BIRDS OF PREY

MUCH OF THE CARŠIJA AREA SURVIVED THE EARTHQUAKE OF 1963. **BELOW:** THE STONE BRIDGE



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The city is undergoing a rapid renewal. Skopje 2014 is an ambitious – and controversial – urban renewal project that will see the reconstruction of many of the landmarks destroyed by the 1963 earthquake. Almost 40 new buildings and statues are either already under construction or are planned as part of a facelift aimed at revitalising the city and boosting tourism.

In the hot summer months Skopje residents often head south to Lake Ohrid, attracted by its cool waters and relaxed vacation vibe. The city has a significantly lower population density than most other European capitals such as Paris and Belgrade, so the surroundings maintain their natural beauty. The lake is reputedly home to 365 holy sites, including the church of St Sofia, with its breathtaking 11th-century frescoes, and the 13th-century St Jovan Kaneo (St John Church), in the shape of a cruciform or cross, perched on the cliffs overlooking the lake. The charming town of Ohrid itself has a lively community of artists and craftspeople, and every July and August hosts the Ohrid Festival. Concerts, recitals and plays are held in the Roman amphitheatre, fortress and various churches.

One of Macedonia’s greatest treasures, a stunning golden death mask made in the 1st millennium BC, is



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CAFÉ PATRONS ON THE VARDOR RIVER. BELOW: LAKE OHRID, FROM THE VILLAGE OF TRPEJCA



“Wildflowers in summer meadows, farmers and horse-drawn ploughs are a common sight”

in Ohrid and not to be missed. It was unearthed during an archaeological dig at the fortress in 2002 and is now displayed in The House of Robevci, part of the National Ohrid Museum.

The lakeshore and surrounding countryside are rich in birdlife, including pelicans and rare birds of prey. Traditional farming techniques – it’s common to see horse-drawn ploughs and farmers and their families harvesting crops by

hand – ensure that summer meadows are full of wildflowers and there is plenty of local produce. Outdoor enthusiasts head for the neighbouring Galilica National Park (www.galicica.org.mk), outstanding for hiking, rock-climbing and wildlife-watching. From the highest peak it is possible to look in one direction over Lake Ohrid, while to the east you can see Lake Prespa – two sparkling jewels in Macedonia’s impressive crown.



SKOPJE SIGHTS

- Wander Caršija, enjoying the atmosphere and shopping for crafts. See an exhibition or two at the Cifte Amam and the Daud Pasha Amam, former Turkish bathhouses, now art galleries. A typical local *kebabçi* lunch (grilled meat with bread) is also a must – try the cafés around Kapan An, a former inn. Vinoteka Temov is a popular wine bar with live music in the evening.
- Bit Pazar is Skopje’s largest outdoor market and great for finding kitsch gifts.
- In high summer, join the hip young crowd as they flock to the alfresco nightclubs in the city park.
- Many Macedonians consider Alexander the Great a national hero. However, the Greeks claim him too. The controversy reignited last year with the erection in Skopje’s main square of an extraordinary 22m-high column and statue, Warrior on a Horse. Is it Alexander? Judge for yourself.
- Skopje has beautiful countryside on its doorstep. Hike up Mount Vodno, south-west of the city, for superb views. Lake Matka with its churches, caves and waterside cafés, is a half-hour drive away.