

FACES OF SKOPJE

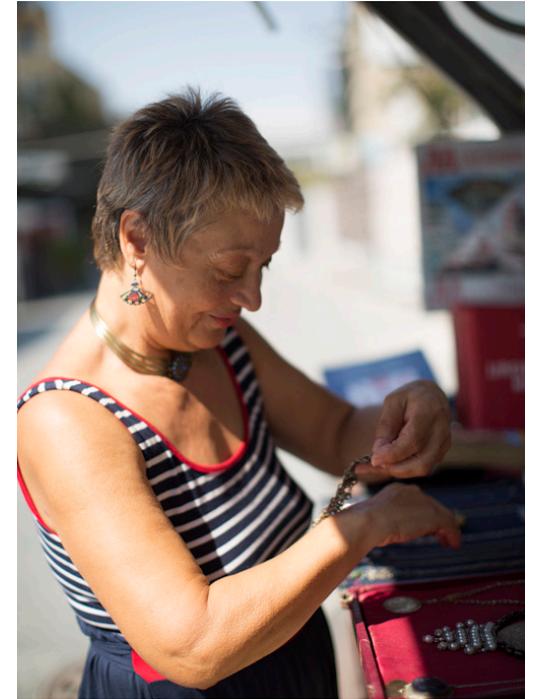
The Macedonian capital is investing in urban renewal, but for the moment its charm still rests on its small-town, rural character

Words James Parry
Photography Tim E. White

MAIN PICTURE: THE NEW WARRIOR ON A HORSE STATUE IS A SIGN OF RECENT CHANGES IN SKOPJE, BUT HAS PROVED CONTROVERSIAL. BELOW: AN AERIAL VIEW OF THE CITY AND ITS SURROUNDS



BELOW: A LOCAL BREW
RIGHT: JEWELLERY STALLS
ON THE BRIDGE
BELOW: THE OLD
MARKETPLACE





LEFT: A BOWL OF PINJUR, A DELICIOUS LOCAL SPECIALITY RIGHT: THE MUSTAFA PASHA MOSQUE, BUILT IN 1492, WHICH STANDS BESIDE THE OLD BAZAAR



BELOW: GEMIDZII MONUMENT BESIDE THE VARDAR RIVER



Summertime and the livin' is easy, runs the famous George Gershwin song – and nowhere more so than in Skopje, Macedonia's small but buzzing capital. Except that here the summer vibe lasts well into autumn, with temperatures still hitting 25° Celsius well into October. The city's vibrant bar and café scene, long appreciated by locals, is now attracting increasing numbers of visitors from elsewhere, drawn also by Skopje's intriguing cultural heritage – the Ottoman Turks held sway here for over five centuries – and Macedonia's growing reputation as the Balkans' best-kept secret.

An obvious starting point for any exploration of Skopje is Macedonia Square, in which stands the enormous – and, to some minds, controversial – Warrior on A Horse statue. Standing 22 metres high and surrounded by synchronised fountains and larger-than-life carved lions on sentinel duty, the statue is a thinly veiled representation of Alexander the Great, Macedonia's famous son. Whether the eponymous hero actually hailed from here or from the neighbouring part of Greece – as the Greeks claim – is a continuing source of debate, but his iconic status in both countries is beyond dispute.

At the base of the statue I meet Dime Melovski, born and bred in Skopje and an aficionado on where to go, what to see



“MACEDONIAN FOOD IS EXCITING AND FULL OF FLAVOUR.”
DIME MELOVSKI

and – most importantly – what to eat. “We have great local cuisine,” he explains, “which reflects the complex cultural influences here. The trick is to know where to go for the local specialties!” The sun is close to setting and so we head towards the banks of the River Vardar, which bisects the city centre, and settle into one of the riverside restaurants. Skopje's Ottoman heritage is immediately evident in the appetiser *meze* – luscious salads and freshly baked flatbread. “You must try some of this as well, it's very typically Macedonian,” insists Dime, offering me a terracotta bowl of *pinjur*, a delicious dish of baked peppers, tomatoes, parsley and garlic. Simple ingredients, elegantly combined and full of flavour.

We stroll afterwards along the riverside, where new buildings and bridges are springing up seemingly overnight. The city centre is undergoing an architectural renaissance, part of Skopje 2014, an

urban revamp that has already seen the installation of *that* statue, along with a triumphal arch, a string of brand new neo-classical buildings and an army of statues commemorating famous Macedonians. There's a little bit of everywhere in this project – Budapest's waterfront, Paris's Arc de Triomphe and London's Trafalgar Square all spring to mind – and now, with the completion of Skopje's new Bridge of Art, complete with statues dotted along its length, Prague and its famous Charles Bridge have become part of the mix. The scale and cost involved

ABOVE: DIME MELOVSKI AND FRIEND BELOW: STATUE OF JUSTINIAN I BESIDE THE VARDAR RIVER



BELOW: SKOPJE'S VIBRANT NIGHTLIFE
RIGHT: MUSICIANS
IN THE CITY PARK



are not without their critics, but there is no denying that the end result will be a dramatic new face for Skopje.

That Skopje is changing in other ways becomes clear when I go for a walk around Debar Maalo, an up-and-coming area near the city centre, with Skopje resident Zdravko Trpkovski. An agricultural consultant by day, Zdravko DJs at least one night a week in Kaldrma, a fashionable bar in the Old Bazaar, popular with students and Skopje's growing cadre of young professionals. "Macedonians traditionally prefer rock music," he explains, "but all sorts of bands are coming through now and the scene is becoming really diverse". Skopje's lively nightlife is concentrated in three main areas: the Old Bazaar, Debar Maalo and around the city park, which is where I head next.

I meet up with Dime again at the Shell, a free stage venue in the park where various acts are going through their moves, including Zvrks, a rock band from Mostar in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Vocalist Ajdin Brković is on his first visit to Skopje, attending a summer music course. He's impressed by what the city has to offer. "There's so much going on here, both musically and otherwise. It's a really cool place, with plenty of opportunities for young people." Yet what I notice are not just the young fans crowding around the stage but people of all generations joining in. Old ladies with small dogs are as much a part of Skopje's alfresco nightlife as their grandchildren, and entire families are enjoying homemade picnics on the grass around the stage.



ABOVE: OLD TOWN BAZAAR NIGHTLIFE
BELOW LEFT: DJ ZDRAVKO TRPKOVSKI

"FOR A GREAT NIGHT OUT, I HEAD FOR DEBAR MAALO."
 ZDRAVKO TRPKOVSKI





TOP: TIVOLI PARK. LEFT: THE TIVOLI MANSION HOUSES THE INTERNATIONAL CENTRE OF GRAPHIC ARTS ABOVE: FLOWERS AT THE RIVERSIDE COLONNADE

“LOOK OUT FOR ANTIQUES AND OLD MACEDONIAN JEWELLERY.”

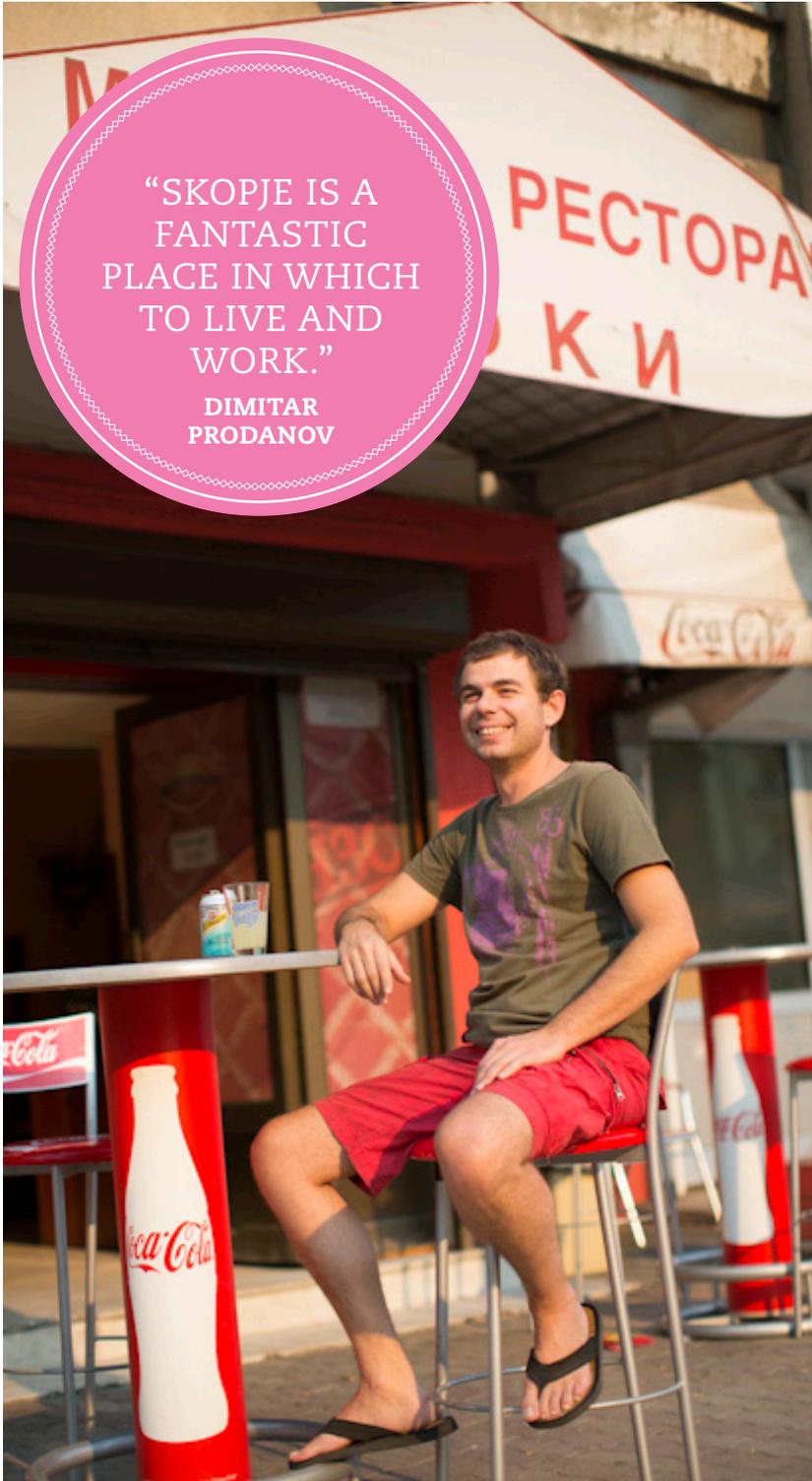
RADMILA KLIMOVSKA

By now it's 1.30am and I'm feeling peckish. "It's time," says Dime, "for a great late-night Macedonian tradition." He takes me to a small family-run bakery where a wood-fired oven is producing delicious flaky pastry pies known as *burek*. Filled with meat or cheese, they are baked and then cut into wedges. It's a sort of high-octane pizza, Macedonian style. Despite the late hour, the place is packed as party revellers grab a bite to eat on their way home.

The next morning it feels like time to explore old Skopje and find some of the history I've heard so much about. Before heading for the Old Bazaar, I browse the stalls set up at the edge of Macedonia Square. Most are selling books, but one has some interesting old artefacts on display. "This is one of the best places to buy genuine Macedonian silverware," explains Radmila Klimovska, a collector of traditional jewellery, "especially rare handmade pieces".

I'd already spotted some antique shops in the Old Bazaar, so head over the 15th-century Kamen Most, or Stone Bridge, and into Skopje's historical centre. With its maze of atmospheric streets and cobbled alleyways, studded with mosque minarets and with the brooding Kale Fortress beyond, there's a real feel of the old-style Ottoman Balkans here. My first port of call has been recommended

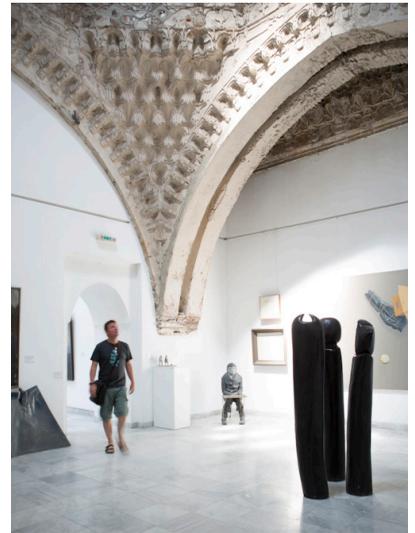




“SKOPJE IS A FANTASTIC PLACE IN WHICH TO LIVE AND WORK.”

DIMITAR PRODANOV

TOP: TIVOLI PARK. LEFT: THE TIVOLI MANSION HOUSES THE INTERNATIONAL CENTRE OF GRAPHIC ARTS ABOVE: FLOWERS AT THE RIVERSIDE COLONNADE



by Natalija Angelova who, like Dime, is a project manager with the Macedonian Ecological Society. Originally from eastern Macedonia, she has a keen eye for Skopje's heritage. "I love the city's historic buildings," she says, "and one of the very finest is the Daud Pasha Amam". Now housing the national Macedonian art gallery, this former Turkish bathhouse was built in the 15th Century, to house a harem according to legend, and is worth a visit for its stunning domed architecture alone (although it's closed on Mondays).

Later on I catch up with Dimitar Prodanov, the director of an events management company and ask him what business life is like in the city. "I really enjoy the scale of Skopje," he says. "You can get everywhere in 15 to 20 minutes,



“LAKE MATKA
IS A MUST FOR
NATURE-
LOVERS.”

BILJANA
STOJANOVSKA



TOP: TIVOLI PARK. **LEFT:** THE TIVOLI MANSION HOUSES THE INTERNATIONAL CENTRE OF GRAPHIC ARTS **ABOVE:** FLOWERS AT THE RIVERSIDE COLONNADE

and work and social life intertwine really well here. A lot of business is done in the city's bars and cafés.”

After a hard morning on the streets I feel in need of a change of scene. Cue a trip to the country, easily done in a city the size of Skopje. Less than half an hour in a taxi brings me to Matka, the home village of Biljana Stojanovska, a journalist with *New Macedonia*, one of the country's oldest newspapers. “I love the hustle and bustle of the city,” she says. “But I always enjoy coming home to the countryside.” Biljana suggests I go hiking around Lake Matka, a hotspot for orchids, butterflies and other wildlife. A narrow trail, cut into the cliffs, winds along the lake. I spot an eagle soaring overhead, and it's hard to believe the city is so close.

