

The Winding Beauty

One of the biggest and socially and culturally most important tributaries of the Vardar is the river Pcinja. Thanks to the fact that the river flows along the highway Skopje-Thessaloniki and forms a spectacular gorge through which the highway cuts, it is often mistaken for the Vardar itself. Yet, it is the railway line that follows the Vardar (and also offers spectacular views). Unfortunately it is only the airplane travellers who have the privilege to observe both rivers at the same time as the planes landing at Skopje airport usually turn above the city of Veles, just above the place where the Pcinja discharges its waters into the Vardar at the rate of 14 m^3 per second proving that this fast and wild river is not navigable.

Pcinja belongs to the Aegean Sea drainage basin and runs through two countries, Serbia and Macedonia. It seems that the border divides the river into two contrasting parts. The mountainous upper region of the Pcinja represents one of the fastest depopulating and economically least developed parts of Serbia. By contrast, in Macedonia the valley is just some 25 km away from Skopje, and a string of Skopje's fast growing suburbs is located nearby. If the city continues to grow, in the future it will reach Katlanovo and the banks of the Pcinja. The river's major tributaries are also in Macedonia: the Bistrica, Petrosnica and Kriva Reka on the left, and Kumanovska Reka on the right.



Pcinja originates from several streams on the western slopes of the Dukat Mountain, which meet at the Village of Radovnica and continue to the west initially under the name of Tripusnica. The river creates a micro-region of Pcinja, its centre being the municipal seat of Trgoviste where the Tripusnica meets the left tributary of the Lesnicka Reka from the south and continues to the west under the name of Pcinja. Trgoviste used to be an important trade centre in the Middle Ages. After the Pcinja passes next to the northern side of the mountain of Siroka Planina and the village of Sajince, where it receives the right tributary of Kocurica from the north, its path is blocked by the eastern side of the Ruen Mountain, and it turns south, into the narrow valley between the Ruen and Kozjak Mountains. The small village and monastery of Prohor Pcinjski are located in the valley. Prohor Pcinjski is a very important monastery for Macedonia, as the People's Antifascist Assembly, which declared the independence of the Macedonian state within the Yugoslav Federation in 1944 took place there. There is a plaque and a memory room devoted to this act in the monastic complex. The monastery is under the protection of the Republic of Serbia, and was declared a Monument of Culture of Exceptional Importance in 1979. It also played an important role in the Middle Ages. It was founded between 1067 and 1071 by the Byzantine Emperor Romanus IV Diogenes in honour of Saint



Prohor Pcinjski, who prophesied that Romanus would become emperor. The original church, a modest single nave building, was erected above the grave of this renowned saint and missionary. It was rebuilt several times. One of the most significant restorations was carried out by King Milutin, who in 1316-1317 employed his favourite Thessalonian artists Mihail and Eutychus to paint the new church. After the Ottoman conquest, the monastery was demolished and then restored again in 1489 by Marin of Kratovo with the frescoes painted at this time being considered some of the most important artistic creations of their time. Today's monastery fence made of cut stone is covered with stone plates and tiles; the monastic quarters (*konak*), are on the northern, western and southern side. The southern gate, below the *konak*, faces Kumanovo. It is believed that the tomb of St. Prohor Pcinjski was part of the former church. From the oldest shrine only the chapel with the relics of St. Prohor has been preserved. It is a small rectangular space. In the rounded eastern end are relics, where in the right upper corner is a small hole through which, throughout the entire millennium, a miraculous myrrh poured.

Just after the river passes next to the monastery, after 45 km in Serbia, the Pcinja crosses the Macedonian border. On the remaining 83 km, the river bends gently to the southwest. Ethnovillage complex "Timcevski" is located in a natural

environment on the 15th kilometre from Kumanovo, on the road to Kriva Palanka, near the bank of the Pcinja. It offers traditional meals, has a winery, children's amusement park and bicycle paths.

Another great place after the river passes next to the villages of Karlovce, Dragomance, Vojnik, Klecevce, Studena Bara, Konjare, is Katlanovska Banja, the most popular spa in Macedonia. In the valley there are several springs with hot and cold mineral water. Interestingly, all these springs differ in yield, temperature and chemical composition of the water. For the visitors it is especially interesting to watch the thermal mineral water come out of the 350m long crevice. It is unusual to have thermal phenomena so accessible for observation.

In the Pcinja basin in Macedonia there are two micro-regions: Sredorek and Kotorci, which are separated by a spectacular gorge of Bader recently declared an ecological zone. In the lower course, the Pcinja follows the western side of the mountain Gradistanska and flows into the Vardar River in the gorge of Taor section halfway between the cities of Skopje and Veles.

Yet recently the Pcinja has shown a new face. Heavy rains in the recent years caused increased water level, overflowing and flooding of nearby villages and several hectares of arable land inflicting a serious damage on the region.

