

How Deep is Vrelo Cave?



It's a poorly known fact about Macedonia that its small territory hides more than 340 caves. They are of different sizes, shapes and origins. Although some have been covered by the international media, their beauty and splendour are hardly known and not popularized enough, and their touristic potential is yet to be unlocked.

It is Vrelo Cave in the Matka Canyon near Skopje that has been raising the adrenalin and making the world news in the recent years. It has created a hype that might grow into a greater attention to speleology and the emergence of cave visiting as new brand of tourism in the country.

Vrelo is a system of two caves, one above and one under the water, and a lake which is 30 meters long and about four meters wide. What attracts the attention of the world-famous divers and the global media reporters is the unknown depth of the submerged cave. The bravest estimates say it may be well over 500 meters, which would make it the world's deepest underwater cave. Over the recent years different teams of international divers and speleologists together with the local club have explored the subterrain. Each diving team reported the feeling that the cave is much deeper than they had expected. No one has felt or seen the bottom while diving as deep as they



can. The registered depth of 212 meters makes it the fifth deepest in the world, the second in Europe and the deepest in the Balkans. This measurement is a result of the 2012 expedition that also discovered a gallery at the depth of 165 meters.

The current target for the divers is 300 meters. If this depth is reached, the cave will be ranked the deepest in the world. The current official deepest cave is Boesmansgat Cave in South Africa with 282 meters reached in 1996 by the diver Nuno Gomes. The world famous scuba divers who explored Vrelo, such as the Italian Luigi Casatti or the Belgian Mark Vandermuellen, did not hide their admiration. Casatti told the media that Vrelo is magnificent and the most beautiful cave in the region.

Vrelo's entrance is about 1.5 km from the Matka Dam. It can be reached by the lake boats which can be hired near St. Andrews Church. The boat ride takes around 20 minutes. There is a special platform for the boats, but the cave entrance that is around 7 meters above the lake level has to be reached on foot. There is a ground section above the cave entrance, called Suva, which has stalactites and stalagmites. One of the most precious elements of the cave is the three meter high stalagmite called Pine

Cone. Crystal clear white twin six meters high columns cause special admiration. The lakes Small and Big lie in the depth of the cave. The Russian beech growing in the cave is believed to have been brought there by the Russian pilots employed in Macedonian aviation crews who used to bathe in the cave. The Small Lake has a form of an eight and is half the size of the Big Lake which is 35 meters long, 15 meters wide and around 18 meters deep. There is even a gallery in the cave which is called Concert Hall. On the left side there are the so-called "written rocks" which need to be explored and possibly deciphered as at first glance they look like a system of signs. The bats flying around in big numbers are the ordinary residents of the cave. Speleologists analyzing the stalactites suppose that the cave was not always filled with water. They believe the cave was submerged after the building of the dam on the river in 1936.

The cave was nominated for the Seven Wonders of the World competition and made it to the semi-finals. It is part of the over 5000 hectares of the Matka Lake and Canyon with high vertical rocks attractive to alpinists and many endemic species of plants, butterflies and vultures, which make it a prime tourist and adventurers' destination.