

Tastes of the Mediterranean



One doesn't usually think of Macedonia as a Mediterranean country, but Valandovo Valley has an almost Mediterranean climate. Nestled in a small valley in the south eastern corner of the country, Valandovo area is known as an agricultural paradise. Thanks to the mild climate and the abundance of sunny days, here grow fruits and trees which cannot be found in other parts of Macedonia or elsewhere in the north of the Balkan Peninsula. This is why Valandovo is a town

worth visiting in any season. Exotic plants such as figs and pomegranates, and even the strange Japanese persimmon grow in its orchards. All these fruits are still not part of the regular consumption and the majority of Macedonians are still discovering ways of using and preserving them. Few people know that persimmon, or kaki, for example, cannot be eaten when firm but needs time to soften after it is harvested. The fruit is ready to be eaten, best with a spoon, only when it reaches a jelly like consistency. But even fewer

people, apart from the locals, know that there is a variant, which grows on the very same tree, bearing the seeds, which can be eaten like an apple when firm and crisp. This variant is popularly called "male", or "chocolate" kaki, as it is browner than the ordinary yellow fruit. Kaki is full of tannins, vitamins and rare acids valuable for the organism. It is a plant which came from Asia. Japan, China and South Korea hold 90% of the world production. Valandovo, by the number of trees per inhabitant, is very close to the richest Asian regions. As people are still experimenting with recipes, the locals even make a very solid and tasty *rakija*, a traditional Macedonian brandy, that is usually made with grapes or plums. There is a great variety of vegetables also growing in the valley, but in the last two decades local farmers have been planting more and more olive trees. This biblical plant fits perfectly the slopes of the dry hills encircling the valley, above the altitude that is covered with vineyards. Local olives are of a good quality while the prices are far below the prices of the imported ones.

Thanks to its wonderful climate Valandovo has been inhabited since times immemorial. Still not fully excavated archaeological sites feature ancient cultures. Paeonian necropoli were found in the eastern hills while Roman villas with mosaic floors, baths and huge terraces were discovered on the outskirts of the present town in the middle of the valley. The old Greek name of the town was Idomenae, and it was part of the region where the richest Ancient settlements of

Isar-Marvinci and Vardarski Rid were discovered. According to some records, in the late Roman times the settlement was called Small Constantinople.

The Middle Ages have also left traces in the valley. The origins of the present-day town are found just below the Plavus Mountain. The mountain itself is only 1000 meters high, but since the valley is just 80 meters above the sea level, it still gives a grand impression. On the rocky cliff just below the highest peak lies the Marko's Tower, a big square tower, the remains of which are visible from all the points of the valley. This visibility highlights the original function of the medieval structure. It was a warning watchtower with a good view across a large territory from which the alarm was raised if any intruders appeared on the horizon. The tower is associated with the name of the famous medieval hero Krale Marko, one of the last Christian rules before the Ottoman conquest, who left many traces in the popular culture across the peninsula. Yet, historically, the tower and the medieval fortification which spreads below, appeared long before





Marko's rule, as the region attracted many rulers who wanted to keep the fertile land in their possession. Another great medieval personality who left a trace on the mountain is Tsar Dusan, the mighty Serbian conqueror who erected one of the largest and most beautiful monasteries devoted to St. George. It had possessions in the nearest villages, and was a governing unit of Holy Mount Athos monasteries. The monastery complex dominated the western slopes of the mountains, but was later destroyed in fires and earthquakes, the latest being the one of 1931. The present-day church is only a faint reminder of the glorious monastery building described in the chronicle of the famous Ottoman traveller Evlija Celebi. Evlija Celebi admired its white marble and limestone walls and the big wooden gates. Today, the big oak and maple trees are the only witnesses of the former grandeur. The place is frequented by local day trippers, but it also attracts some tourists and pilgrims. The whole area is encircled with remnants of fortification which speaks about the sophistication of this residential area that once included a palace and village

houses. Tsar Dusan's chrysobul names the town Alavandovo, which means a town of flowers. Ethnologists believe the present name of Valandovo is derived from that word. Although other researchers consider the Slavic words "Valjan dol" (meaning "appropriate, good, valley") as the origin of the name.

The eastern slopes of the mountain, just a few hundred meters on the other side, hide large springs and the remains of the bed of a stream which once ran down the limestone rocks. The springs not only gave fresh water to the population but also served a developed network of watermills, remains of which are still to be found down the hill. Just below the streams lie the church and graveyard; there begins the oldest neighbourhood of the present day town stretching down the valley to the small but important Anska River that cuts through the valley. The river got its name from the great number of inns (*an-s* in Macedonian) that sprung up along the river on the routes from Thessaloniki to Skopje and Belgrade, and to Strumica and further on to Sofia. Valandovo prospered while the caravan road was in use. It also had its





own large production of silk. The mulberry trees needed to feed the silk worms are still spread around the valley. Other local products that were traded internationally through Thessaloniki Port but also over land all over the vast Ottoman Empire and even in the Hapsburg Monarchy were leather, grapes, wines and brandy, oil, fat and wool. The town declined in the beginning of the 20th century when a modern railway connecting Skopje and Thessaloniki was built. As it did not pass through the town, Valandovo was marginalised. Yet it suffered a lot during World War One. Its surrounding hills were a site of notorious battles. A memorial to the fallen soldiers still dominates one of the hills over the valley. The earliest known photos of Valandovo were taken during the Great War, and are one century old.

When chrome ore was discovered in the area, Valandovo became a mining town. Its ore deposits are still a subject of studies and estimates by mining companies. As legends have it, gold was once washed from the sands of the Anska River, which still attracts adventurers who search

the riverbed at different locations.

Today Valandovo is again a crossroads, as it is near the border crossings with Bulgaria and Greece, and just in front of the beautiful Dojran Lake and the splendid Belasica Mountain. Many passersby stop at the road stands to buy local fruits, vegetables and other products. It is not only a support for the local economy but also an extraordinary encounter with the rich and exotic crops of the valley. Being famous for the special tradition of folk songs, Valandovo hosts the oldest folk festival in the country, which started in the 1980s. Another more recent traditional festivity is the *Rakijada*, where dozens of *rakija* producers from the whole region compete for the title of the maker of the best *rakija* of the season.

