

# The Land of Lakes

The first sentence the guides tell about Macedonia is that it is a landlocked country. This statement of fact immediately provokes a feeling of sadness. Can there be a beautiful country without the splendid landscapes of the sea and its coast? Yes! In the case of Macedonia this statement, although truthful, is misleading. Why? Because Macedonia is a land of lakes. And the lakes are not just a compensation for the absence of a sea coast. The three so-called tectonic lakes: Ohrid, Prespa and Dojran are astonishingly beautiful, and Ohrid is called the Macedonian Sea. (A friend from Marseilles told me that Ohrid water horizon was much wider than the one of his city). Overall, in this small country there are more than 50 lakes. We have to take into account the small glacial lakes but also the significant number of artificial lakes. Macedonia has many rivers and large

plains and plateaus, so in the 1960s, when the industrialization and electrification of the country took off, many hydroelectric plants and water reservoirs were built on these rivers thus creating not only power for the new industries, but also impressive sceneries.

## THREE TECTONIC LAKES

The tourists' attention is usually directed to the three lakes formed few million years ago: Dojran, Prespa and Ohrid. Ohrid is the biggest and the most beautiful of the three. It is famous for its clean and clear waters. Lying at 700 meters above the sea level, it acts like a natural air conditioner. In the hot and dry summer all over Macedonia, Ohrid is a fresh escape. The Ohrid Lake is 300 metres deep, and it harbours many unique water species, willing to tell the history of the mother Earth. The tastiest of them are the endemic Ohrid trout, eel and white fish (*belvica*), which due to



continuous over fishing have become rare. It is forbidden to catch them anymore and they cannot be found on official restaurant menus. The witness of many geological transformations, Lake Ohrid has been a refuge for many freshwater species, some of which can be only found in fossil form in other places. This is why the lake is known among biologists as a living fossil museum.

The Ohrid Lake is almost completely encircled by unique limestone mountains which create a special celestial mood. This was felt long ago by pious people who established over 300 churches and monasteries around the lake. One legend says that Ohrid has a church devoted to a saint for each day of the year.

The Ohrid Lake has a perfect water balance. It is attributed to the connection with the Lake Prespa which feeds Ohrid through the porous karst bedrock underneath Galicica Mountain that separates the two lakes. Ohrid is also fed by the River Black Drim which originates near the lake and runs through it. The path of the current of the river through the lake is visible from the air.

Prespa is the most twisted lake, officially the deepest and the oldest. It actually forms two separate lakes the Big, its

shores belonging to three countries – Macedonia, Albania and Greece – and the Small lying in the territory of Greece. On all sides the lake is surrounded by national parks with many endemic species. It is home to many birds such as cormorants, pelicans, herons and egrets. There are few small islands on the lake. Both St. Achilles near the Greek side and Golem Grad near the Macedonian shore have ancient ruins. They date back to antiquity, but history says they were also the Imperial Seat of the 10<sup>th</sup>-century Macedonian King Samoil. The island is now notorious for its snakes.

Dojran Lake is the smallest, but also the richest in fish and the warmest due to its small depth of only a dozen metres. It also has a beautiful mountain gorge above it, the famous Mountain of Belasica, where one of the most famous medieval battles was fought in 1014. Almost a millennium later, the Small Lake again became a horrid battlefield. European armies fought here during World War I and graveyards of French, British, Greek, Serbian and Bulgarian forces are to be found around the lake. But Dojran has a brighter ancient history. 2500 years ago the Greek historian Herodotus described the ancient tribe of Paonians, who lived in lake settlements



Prespa Lake



accessible only by boat. The records say the lake was so rich in fish that you only needed to dip a pail in its waters to catch a dozen. To this day the ancient way of fishing with mantras and cormorants has survived in Dojran and huts built on the water are still to be found in the shallow waters of the lake. Dojran was on the verge of an ecological catastrophe and almost ran dry during the drought period of the 1990s but due to the government's intervention in 2000 the lake was saved and now its waters are filling the lake bed again. During the lowering of the water level it became famous for its healing mud which formed due to the fast decay of many algae, plankton and other water micro-organisms.

High on the mountain tops there are many glacier lakes. The Shar Mountain is famous for it. The Big and the Small Lakes on the mountain Baba, in the Pelister National Park are called the Eyes of the mountain. It is believed that glacier lakes, over twenty five in total, date back to the Ice Age. They are heavenly rewards for the most stubborn hikers.

### FISHERMEN'S FRIENDS

Then, there are beautiful artificial lakes. Built for the sake of industrial power generation but also for fishing and irrigation, as well as providing fresh water to the growing urban population and spreading in the former river valleys, these lakes have created impressive waterbeds. The lakes near Debar, Kavadarci and Mavrovo are amongst the most beautiful. The Mavrovo Lake has the most impressive scenery, and its appeal is enhanced by

the nearby ski centre. The area is full of the so-called weekend houses and few extraordinary hotels. The lake has many wonderful sights and very often freezes in the winter. The most impressive view of the lake includes the church which is half-submerged in the waters during the winter.

The Lake Tikves is filled with the waters of the famous River Crna (ancient name: Erigon). As it is a protected area, there are not as many weekend houses around it as around other artificial lakes. But still some huts here and there are built to the joy of the local people. The famous Tikves carp is among the most valuable fish on Macedonian tables. Some believe that huge few-meters-long carps hide in the mud of the lake.

The Mladost Lake near Veles is the most easily accessible from Skopje and among the most popular tourist destinations in the region. The boat on by shore became a very fancy restaurant. It is strongly recommended to transit visitors heading south to Greece or north to Central Europe along the E-75 motorway. A legend similar to that of the Loch Ness attracts curious visitors: it says the Mladost Lake hides a giant one-tonne catfish. A few claim to have seen it. But only its 176-kilo cousin was caught in 1997 when the power of three tractors was required to pull it from the lake.

Macedonian lakes are equally loved by tourists, campers and passionate fishermen who populate their scenic shores all year round from early mornings to late nights.