

Adrenalin in the Sky

Macedonia is becoming a top destination for paragliding. Shar Mountain above Tetovo and Gostivar, Vodno over Skopje, the spacious Polog and Vardar valleys, the hills surrounding Ohrid and Mavrovo lakes, the hills above Prilep and the high lying town of Krusevo descending into Pelagonia plain - all are perfect landscapes for the fastest developing recreational sport in the country. Spectacular videos and images of dozens of paragliders floating in the air have spread over the social media and among advertising agencies. Even National Geographic presented the paragliding opportunities in Macedonia alongside the efforts of tour operators and tourism agencies. The growth of this most popular branch of the so-called active tourism has been further supported by different bodies. Over the years, different state authorities, such as Tourism Promotion Agency, municipal governments and mayors, with the help of foreign donors like USAID and Swiss Agency for Development, equipped several launching grounds with sophisticated weather stations, paragliders' inspection posts, information tables and road signs.

Due to its moderate climate, a large number of sunny days, mountains and large valleys, Macedonia had a huge potential to develop. The area around the Ascension of the Mother of God Monastery in Treskavec above Prilep, is considered to be one of the best launching grounds in the whole Balkans. The amazing rocky plateau featuring circular monastery walls and buildings offers spectacular rides over the Prilep fields down to the Greek border.



The launching ground near Gostivar is over the village of Cegrane, and it is holding its first open competitions. Galicica's bare peaks provide rare views towards both Prespa and Ohrid lake, with splendid navigation above the crystal clean waters and safe landing on the spacious beach in Livadista.

The mentioned investments in these zones enable safe take off and landing and easier navigation. The data that can be consulted via mobile internet saves time and money to the pilots. They do not need to drive up to the spot to check the weather conditions. By using smart phones pilots can receive data about the direction and the strength of the wind as well as the temperature.

With the assistance of ATTA (Adventure Travel Trade Association) and other international organisations Macedonian paragliding clubs popularise paragliding



as well as hang gliding, and parachuting. This kind of tourism has no negative impact on nature and is beneficial to local communities.

Krusevo has so far been the most visited location equipped with launching and landing zones east and west of the town. The good asphalt roads to the final destinations allowing easy access, the combination of shady woods with low grass launching zones, and the vertical slopes ideal for easy start are conditions contributing to growing popularity and increase of the number of visitors. It has already hosted dozens of cross country competitions and different paragliding cups, including European, national and world championships. The town has all the conditions to meet the required standards. The participants are using GPS receivers to locate their position several times thus assuring they have

passed all the necessary phases in the air.

This investment saw a 30 per cent growth in tourism in Krusevo. The pilots are impressed by the splendid nature as well as the affordable prices. By using the techniques of thermal flying and cross-country flying paragliders can travel vast distances. Launching in Krusevo and landing in Skopje is a frequent route of experienced pilots.

The so-called thermals are formed as a result of the temperature differentials caused by the sun falling on the ground features (such as rock faces or large buildings). They set off thermals which rise through the air. Sometimes these are simple rising columns of air. More often, they are blown sideways by the wind and will break off from the source, with a new thermal forming later. Once a pilot finds a thermal, s/he begins to fly in a circle, trying to center the circle on the strongest part of the thermal (the "core"), where the air is rising the fastest. Once the skills of using thermals to gain altitude have been mastered, pilots can glide from one thermal to the next to go cross country. Having gained altitude in a thermal, a pilot glides down to the next available thermal. Landing a paraglider, involves some specific techniques and traffic patterns. Paragliding pilots most commonly lose their height by flying a figure of eight over the landing zone until the correct height is achieved. Then they line up into the wind and give the glider full speed. Once the correct height (about a meter above ground) is achieved the pilot will 'stall' the glider in order to land.

As more and more clubs employing experienced staff are being registered, this sport is being made accessible not only to professionals but also to the wider public. The clubs' experienced coaches train amateur enthusiasts so that they can reach beginner's level very fast, while with the so-called tandem flights, professional pilots can take any enthusiast up into the sky for a flight with spectacular views.