

Discover Hideaways in Macedonia

This article will not focus on the places such as Ohrid, Prespa, Bitola or Kratovo that are considered the main tourist destinations in the country. I exclude them not because they should not be visited, but because this story is about places where one goes to recharge, to contemplate or spend some time away from the noisy and busy everyday life. Here I hope to mention less popular places that will inspire even those who have been in Macedonia for a few years. There are many more of these "secret" places, but we cannot mention all of them and expect them to remain secret. So, how about you start with these and expand your itinerary as you discover the places that only few others had visited before you? Surely, more people have actually been there at different times, but when you are there it feels like no one else has found these heavens, as if they were created to be your private refuge. There is more to Macedonian hideaways than Ohrid, especially during the summer season when the tiny streets in the old town are flooded by tourists.

RELIGIOUS OR SPIRITUAL SHELTERS

There are a lot of spiritual shelters that offer inner peace and a thought provoking atmosphere. Regardless of which religion, sect, or movement built them, they can offer their energy to those who need to recharge spiritually. Some of them have monks, nuns, priests or imams, but there are also those that function as cultural monuments or museums. Whatever the case, all of them have historical or cultural value and can be visited as monuments without the religious element.



Markov Convent (*Markov Manastir*) is located behind the southern slopes of Mount Vodno near Skopje. It was built in the fourteenth century and is a very well preserved complex of buildings. It takes only 30-45 minutes to get there from Skopje and it is worth making the effort. It is a living convent and you will need to cover your legs and shoulders to go inside the church.



Joakim Osogovski is a twelfth-century monastery situated three km east of Kriva Palanka, a peaceful place with very good conditions to accommodate people overnight.



St. John Bigorski is one of the more popular monasteries. Few monks live there and maintain the premises. They perform their Orthodox rituals, including Byzantine singing during the services at 07:00 and 19:00. The iconostasis in the church was carved by the famous Filipovski and Frchkovski wood carvers in the 19th century and is considered one of the most valuable artifacts of the Macedonian culture.



Zrze Monastery stands on a plateau with a breathtaking view. The monastery is located 34km northwest of Prilep on the road towards Makedonski Brod, and getting there requires some effort. The last part of the way is a dirt road, so make sure you have an off-road four-wheel drive vehicle. Once you get there you will realize it was worth the effort!



St. Archangel Michael Convent and Treskavec Monastery are located near Prilep. The former houses five nuns and the latter just one monk. Treskavec Monastery is situated under the peak Zlatovrv, in a striking mountain landscape and offers a great view of the Pelagonia Valley. The monastery complex consists of the Church of the Assumption of the Holy Virgin, monastery inns and a dining room. The monastery is believed to have been built in the thirteenth century.



Arabati Baba Teke was built in the second half of the eighteenth century by Redzep Pasha and his son Abdurahman Pasha, who were also involved in the construction of the Painted Mosque in Tetovo. The Teke is a complex of religious objects around

the grave of Sersem Ali Baba, a dervish who belonged to the Bektashi Order. The Bektashis have lived in the Teke for 120 years, even though there have been some difficulties regarding the ownership of the land in the last two decades. Their order is among the most significant among the Dervish orders and there is still a small community practicing their rituals in the Teke.



Tetovo's Painted Mosque is a beautiful piece of art with the most vivid colours and a magical garden around it. It is neither isolated, nor serene because it is in the town, on a busy street, but the courtyard creates a magical illusion that lets you forget about all the noise and summer dust raised by the passing cars.

ROMANTIC SPOTS

You can be romantic almost anywhere, but there are those places that are worth visiting with your loved one, taking a photo and framing it the day after, so that it makes the living room richer with yet another moment of love. Driving towards Galicnik you cannot help stopping here and there and having that photo taken because it is only you, the forest spirits, and the wonderful landscape. The view towards Streževo Lake from the village church in Gopes near Bitola and all the purple and

yellow flowers is another inspiring spot for a romantic afternoon. Prespa's long sandy beaches offer wonderful background colour if you wish to offer the two loving faces to your camera...

AQUA VITA

There are so many rivers on all of the mountains throughout Macedonia that and I cannot recommend enough that you go to Pelister and either hike up to the Lakes "Pelister Eyes" or walk up along mountain streams that have so many flowers, bushes and moss-coated rocks that feel better than any sofa because they come in a package with the forest sounds, colours and fresh air. One can have almost the same experience walking up the River Bošava near the village of Konopište or any other village on that magnificent mountain. On the western side lies the Tikvesh Lake surrounded by dramatic mountains, which are home to some endemic species of birds, including vultures. I have not yet explored the wonderful mountain streams on the southern side of Kozuf Mountain, in Mariovo, where one experiences landscapes like those in Milčo Mančevski's films, but that is very high on my list as well.

Macedonia has few waterfalls that one can enjoy depending on the water situation during the summer. Among them are the Smolari and Kolešino Falls near Strumica, Kriva Šija and Lešnička on Popova Šapka above Tetovo, and Rostuše Waterfalls on the way from Mavrovo to Debar.

MOUNTAINS, HILLS AND FORESTS TO AVOID THE HEAT

For those living in Skopje and having to spend the summer in the city, I suggest good planning to survive July and August. Think about hiking routes – Thammy Evans' *Bradt Travel Guide to Macedonia* offers a dozen – day trips outside the city and maybe even weekends close to a lake or a river, preferably on a mountain or in a



forest, where at least the evenings would be cooler. For those who prefer comfort there are Mavrovo and Krusevo ski resorts with their bigger hotels, but also Berovo, Pelister, Mariovo and Kožuf, where you can find smaller hotels, bungalows or pensions.

HISTORICAL, CULTURAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES



Heraclea Lyncestis is an ancient Macedonian city, built around the fourth century BC. Emperor Hadrian built its amphitheatre, which hosts a music festival every summer. The site has the most amazing mosaics that are covered with sand from autumn to spring, but can be seen in all their glory in the summer. You can enjoy their vivid colours and be impressed by the sizes of the well-preserved mosaic floors.

Stobi is on the highway to Greece, just before Negotino, which makes it a 45-minute drive from Skopje. The most attractive parts of the site are the Bishop's Church, Partenius' and Peristeri's Palaces and the Amphitheatre.

Kuklici ("Dolls") is a site near Kratovo. There are many legends about the stone dolls, but the most famous is the one that says that the stone figures are wedding guests that were cursed by a forsaken bride who turned them into rocks. There are 120 stone figures up to ten meters high positioned close to one another. According to the scientists, the



stone figures were formed by tectonic erosion whereby the minerals that dissolve in water were gradually washed away to leave today's figures standing. Locals say that every five to six years a new figure appears.

Kokino, the Megalithic Observatory, is located about 30 km northeast of Kumanovo. This site has the diameter of 100 m and reaches the altitude of 1013 m. When discovered in 2001 it was believed to be a special mountain sanctuary from the Bronze Age. A detailed archaeological and astronomical research carried out afterwards showed that the locality has all the characteristics of a holy place, but also of an ancient site for the observation of celestial objects. The most important characteristic of the observatory includes positions for observation. Special stone markers have been used for recording the movements of the Sun and the Moon. The observatory used a method of static observation marking positions of the Sun at the winter and summer solstice, as well as the equinox.

