



# The Town of Bridges

**A**lthough it's a small town deep in the northeast of Macedonia, Kratovo has seen the biggest growth in tourist visits in recent years. With its distinctive location in the middle of a volcanic crater, old architecture of medieval towers, underground tunnels, traditional stone and wooden houses, and many legends about its rich past, Kratovo is a real discovery. It is one of the oldest continuously settled towns in the Balkans. The glory of Kratovo is connected with its wealth. The abundance of gold, silver and lead mines in its surroundings brought wealth and glory to its rulers. It also fostered the growth of trade, manufacturing, crafts and many uncommon businesses.

Geography has been a major influence on Kratovo architecture including its wonderful ancient bridges. Although the town is built in the volcanic crater, three rivers, the Manceva, the Baba Karina and the Tabacka, flow through it and form the Kratovska River in the city centre. More than seventeen bridges used to connect the town quarters lying on different river banks. Of course, not all are functional today but they continue to exist in the legends. Stefan Simic, the famous Kratovo scholar, recorded that 14 bridges were still in use in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Today the town is connected with four stone and one wooden bridge. There is only one concrete bridge serving the modern needs of the town. The old bridges were built with hard rocks while the arches were made with stones cut at precise angles and richly decorated. The hard stones of volcanic origin used in the foundations are not very susceptible to water erosion. The bridges are a highlight of Ottoman architecture that incorporated previous Slavic and Byzantine traditions. The bridges are elegant and have decorations. Kratovo had a large community of traders including Jewish people and



Dubrovnik merchants, who kept very close connections with Istanbul, Thessaloniki, Vienna and Venice. The intensification of trade in the 19<sup>th</sup> century created the need for many new bridges. Thus Radev, Radin, Grofcanski, Bazaar, Yorkshire, Saray, and Argulica bridges were built.

The most famous is the Radin Bridge. The legend says that its foundations were not stable until a woman, the beautiful Rada, was buried inside it alive. The desperate masons, the nine brothers' company, decided to sacrifice the youngest of their wives to stop the bridge from collapsing. As she had a young baby boy they left her right breast out so that she could nurse him. According to the records, it was erected in 1833 on the foundation of two 28 metres high towers.

One of the largest bridges, Grofcanski, was built in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and named after the family that sponsored its construction. The family came from Asia Minor and was one of the richest in town. They spared no money for this public piece of architecture making it 30 meters long, eight meters high and four meters wide.

The grand scale satisfied the growing communication needs of the town. The hardest to build was Yorkshire Bridge. It is called after the famous pig breed. One legend has it that the bridge was named after the great many animals slain to feed the masons who built it. According to another legend, the pigs were needed to feed the monster that disrupted the building, a scenario not unlike the Radin Bridge legend. Not all the Kratovo bridges have been preserved. The records say that one of the most beautiful bridges was the Upper Bridge with three arches.

The towers and bridges are connected into a magnificent secret network by underground tunnels. They are again associated with the wealthy rulers and their fortunes. The tunnels that connect the towers lead to the bridges to facilitate the flight from town in case of danger. According to the legends, the beautiful Sara, daughter of a wealthy local landlord, and even Elena, the wife of despot Konstantin, fled Kratovo through the tunnels with their gold and jewellery so that they did not fall into the hands of Ottoman beys.

