

Magical Street



One of the most popular tourist attractions in Bitola is Sirok Sokak (pronounced *shirok sokak*). It is not a monument or a landmark, but one of the longest pedestrian streets in the whole country. Its name means a "wide alley," and *sokak* is actually a Turkish word for street, referring to the long history of its popularity dating back to Ottoman times. The different street names in different periods tell us about the city's long history and change of its rulers. In Ottoman times it was called Sultania. In the times of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia it carried the name "King Peter". In Socialist Yugoslavia it was named "Marshal Tito".

In 1905 the cinema pioneers of the Balkans, the brothers Milton and Janaki Manaki, opened their photographic atelier in Sirok Sokak. The brothers portrayed many inhabitants of Bitola, different festivities and filmed the visit of the last Ottoman Sultan

to Bitola in 1911. The house of the Manaki brothers still stands on its original place. There are several things which make Sirok Sokak an utmost city attraction and a must see for any visitor of Bitola.

It is centrally located, starting from Magnolia Square and ending down at the City Park. One cannot avoid passing at least part of it, or crossing it, whatever one does in Bitola. The street is lined with neo-classical buildings dating back to the 19th century, which having been renovated and preserved are emitting an aroma of the patina of time. These buildings were erected in the times when Bitola was the second most important European city of the Ottoman Empire, second only to Thessaloniki, administrative and military center, home to rich merchants and educated people who brought the novelties of the European modern life to the traditional Empire. European secular and religious schools were founded in the town with rich libraries and intellectual



ties with the rest of the continent. The city was a diplomatic centre as well. All the European major states had their consulates in Bitola. Rich urban life took place in these big houses beautifully decorated following European architectural traditions. After the renovation, the city's architecture is a living witness of the town's historic splendour and importance. After Macedonia's independence consulates re-opened on Sirok Sokak rather to restore the tradition and to enrich the city's cultural life than to satisfy particular diplomatic interests.

Two Sirok Sokak buildings tell us of the importance of Bitola as a former military centre. The old barracks built in 1848 housed the military academy where the father of modern Turkey Kemal Ataturk studied. Today the City Museum is in this building and it has a memorial room devoted to Ataturk. The Officers' House that was the centre of officers' life between military campaigns is the second military building in the same street. Today it is used for different cultural activities.

Sirok Sokak is also a shopping street.



It has many stores with elegant windows and brand names, and in this respect it is similar to shopping streets in the old city cores of the most prominent European cities. But if one steps into one of the small streets intersecting Sirok Sokak, one will find oneself in the maze of the old shopping streets including the large old bazaar area of which Sirok Sokak used to be part.

What brings the biggest popularity to the street among the inhabitants is the combination of two things. It is the irregular rows of cafes and restaurants on both sides along the street and the preserved function of the street as a walking area. Back in the mid 20th century many towns in Macedonia had their central streets functioning as Italian style corso. They were pedestrian areas where young people walked from one end of the street to the other sharing the news, showing off, and developing friendships and love affairs. Only a few towns, including Strumica and Ohrid, have preserved such areas from the period of

early modernization. Bitola, however, is the only town in which walking down Sirok Sokak is still as popular as in the old days. The dress code is different, the hairstyles are different, the behavior has changed but people are still walking up and down the street at least once a day to see and to be seen, and to socialise. At the same time Sirok Sokak is just wide enough to have numerous cafes serving as comfortable stops for people watching. Because of that, the tables are arranged in the Parisian style with all chairs turned to face the street. Thus people who sit in cafe sare always turned towards the corso and may be seen to converse with their company while gazing at the passers-by.

It is astonishing how Bitola and the whole country have changed over the past three turbulent decades, but Sirok Sokak has preserved age-old behaviours and urban patterns of interaction.

