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## Magnificent Macedonia is one of Europe's undiscovered holiday highlights

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It may be landlocked, but there's plenty of history, food and fun to be had on the water in this great Balkan country



The Byzantine architecture of the 13th century church Saint John at Kaneo overlooks Lake Ohrid

It's barely nine in the morning, but at the waterfront café on the shores of the sparkling, crystal-clear Lake Ohrid, the owner is recommending I try a bowl of traditional fish stew – for breakfast.

I'm spending a week in Macedonia and have already encountered baked snails, giant flaky pastries and huge sausages at random mealtimes, so by this point I just shrug and say, 'When in Macedonia' – fully expecting a hearty dish of heads and fins.

But I'm presented with a delicious light, lemony broth, with freshly caught lake trout for just £1.20, and I manage to tear myself away from the stunning view for the few moments it takes to slurp it up.

The historic town of Ohrid is probably the biggest tourist resort I'd never heard of. It's in the south-west corner of the landlocked Balkan republic, which used to be part of former Yugoslavia, and visitors flock in their thousands from all over the world to enjoy its lake – one of the oldest and deepest in Europe – and charming Unesco heritage sights.

It's dotted with [Orthodox churches](#), including the stately St John at Kaneo, which perches prettily on a clifftop above the café.



The resort town of Ohrid, on Lake Ohrid in Macedonia



I clambered up to it for great views across to Albania, and the reconstructed, terracotta-tiled Byzantine monastery of St Panteleimon. Dating from the 10th century AD, it has been fought over, demolished and rebuilt many times by the hordes of Romans, Slavs and Ottoman Turks which have invaded over the centuries.

I also visited the impressive Roman amphitheatre, dating from around 200BC, which used to play host to fierce gladiatorial battles. Though nowadays you're more likely to see singers like Placido Domingo warbling on its main arena, as part of the city's annual summer festival.

A road trip around Macedonia is a great way to explore this fascinating but underrated country.

Bordered by Greece, Albania, Serbia, Kosovo and Bulgaria, it has over 50 lakes, three vast national parks and several grape-producing regions, which result in some phenomenal, and phenomenally cheap, wine – look out for the robust red, Vranac.



New Bridge in renovated area of Skopje

I flew in to the capital Skopje (birthplace of [Mother Teresa](#) ) which reminded me a bit of Las Vegas. It has some attractive old neighbourhoods – I particularly

loved wandering around the Old Bazaar, a maze of polished stone streets lined with cafés, tempting bakeries and shops selling slightly odd things, like garlic shampoo.

But five years ago the government decided to give it more appeal in the wake of a huge earthquake which destroyed around 80 per cent of the city in 1963.

This resulted in a lot of money spent on building giant, towering statues of some of Macedonia's historic figures – including Alexander the Great and former ruler King Philip II – usually on horseback, and inevitably sporting a magnificent moustache.

There are also some shiny white Caesar's Palace-style structures lining the city's river Vardar, which turn out to be new museums or civic buildings.



Aerial view of Lake Kozjak

I preferred to lose myself in the authentic Green Market, a massive covered sprawl where you can buy fresh fruit and vegetables, order a tasty lahmacun – a flatbread wrap filled with minced beef and salad – or sit with a glass of black tea and watch the world go by.

Just 20 minutes outside the capital, I got back to nature. Matka Canyon is a vast, towering gorge, cut through by the Treska river, home to several



medieval ruins and dozens of caves. I took a short boat trip to Vrelo Cave, and climbed down a succession of rather slippery steps into the dank gloom.

This limestone cave has been around for over 2,000 years, and its underground chambers are lined with dripping stalagmites and stalactites.



View of old town in Ohrid, with Samuel's Fortress on the top. Ohrid and Lake Ohrid are Unesco World Heritage Sites

It's also home to colonies of bats, which I heard squeaking unnervingly in the roof just a few metres above me.

A further 90-minute drive took me to the lushly forested Mavrovo National Park. In the winter you can ski in its mountains, but in summer you're more likely to find hikers and campers, keen to spot endangered wildlife like lynx, wolves and even the occasional bear, which are all protected here.

I didn't see any, but on a lovely wander round its lakefront I was drawn to the iconic, half-submerged 1850 Church of St Nicholas. It was covered by floodwater in the 1950s, but water levels are now controlled by dams, and the church pokes up above the surface.



The statue of Alexander The Great in Skopje

My last port of call was the cultural city of Bitola, full of interesting monuments. I visited its central clock tower, built in the 16th century reportedly with 60,000 eggs mixed into the cement, which was meant to make the walls stronger.

There are also several large mosques (around 30 per cent of the population is Muslim) and the remains of an ancient Greek city, known as Heraclea.

There are magnificent mosaic floors here in the remnants of old palaces and churches.

After all the sightseeing I plonked myself down at one of the many cafés which line the main pedestrianised street, Shirok Sokak.

When the waiter asked if I would like a huge slab of molten chocolate cake to go with my coffee, what else could I say? When in Macedonia...

## Travel File

**When to go:** May to September, when the weather is warm and there's hardly any rain.

**Good to know:** The Macedonian alphabet is Cyrillic, but many signs are also in Roman script (using our alphabet).

**Getting around:** Hiring a car is best if you want to explore, but there is a good rail service between most main cities. [interrail.eu](https://www.interrail.eu)

**Getting there:** Wizz Air operates five flights a week to Skopje from Luton from £18.49 one-way. [wizzair.com](https://www.wizzair.com)

**Where to stay:** A double room at the Residence Inn, Skopje, from £38. [macedonian-hotels.mk](https://www.macedonian-hotels.mk)

Doubles at Villa Mesokastro, Ohrid, from £20. [visit-ohrid.com](https://www.visit-ohrid.com)

Doubles at Hotel Teatar, Bitola, from £27. [hotelteatar.com](https://www.hotelteatar.com)

**Foodie tour:** Intrepid Travel has a 10-day Real Food Adventure: Montenegro & Macedonia tour from £1,156pp. Flights extra. [intrepidtravel.com](https://www.intrepidtravel.com)

**More info:** [exploringmacedonia.com](https://www.exploringmacedonia.com)