

NORTH

MACEDONIA



ЗА ВРЕМЕ НА
МРАЗ И СНЕГ



Внимание!
Коловозот е
широк 5 m
Vnimanie!
Kolovozot e
širok 5 m

ВНИМАНИЕ!
Во време на мраз
и снег се забрани
и спроведување на
до-Автомобил

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It was a perfect spring morning with temperatures nearly ideal for riding. The ventilation zippers on our jackets were closed, but we could ride comfortably with our summer gloves and our helmet visors open. The early morning sun casted long shadows of us riding our pair of G650GS motorcycles across fields of golden-yellow wheat that grew along the shores of Lake Ohrid.

After reaching the small North Macedonian border station, we provided our standard documentation: passport, registration, and insurance. The only problem was that we didn't have insurance for Macedonia. We knew it would be a problem but assumed we could purchase it at the border – just like we did with the previous three Balkan countries.

The border guard tried to explain but we could not understand Macedonian or Albanian – the two major languages of North Macedonia. We waited patiently as he tapped out a message onto the tiny screen of his smartphone. His message was clear: "No insurance available here. Must go to border at Kjafasan."

It was our own fault. We didn't check our iOverlander app before attempting to cross the border. Had we checked, we would have known that this small border crossing doesn't sell the required insurance. Fortunately, Kjafasan was only 45 minutes away and it was a good excuse to continue enjoying our morning ride along the shores of the magnificent Lake Ohrid.





ONE OF THE OLDEST LAKES IN THE WORLD

Lake Ohrid, shared between eastern Albania and southwestern North Macedonia, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site due to the historical significance, unique freshwater species, and wetland habitats that provide winter homes for hundreds of thousands of migratory birds.

As we rode around the entire perimeter of the lake, we made sure to stop regularly to take in the wonderful views of clear blue water, wetland shores, and snow covered mountains. Highlights included the coastal city of Ohrid, the Bay of Bones Museum, and the Monastery of St. Naum.

Within the city of Ohrid, we learned a bit of history during a guided tour of the Church of Saints Clement and Panteleimon. This Byzantine church was built in the early 10th century, but underwent numerous reconstructions during its often tumultuous Ottoman period. Today it stands prominently on a hill overlooking Lake Ohrid and continues to be one of the most sacred sites for Macedonian Orthodox Christians. Within these church walls, Saint Clement became a prominent scholar, writer, and educator who is credited for his collaboration in creating the Cyrillic script that is currently used throughout North Macedonia, Russia, and other Slavic countries. North Macedonia was the first country where we noticed that a majority of the signs were in Cyrillic, making it difficult to make sense of them due to our westernized education and use of Latin script. Fortunately many signs continued to use obvious symbols.

As we continued south along the eastern coast of Lake Ohrid, we came across a sign that read "Bay of Bones", purposely written in Latin to entice western tourists like ourselves. It worked! We made a turn into the parking lot and were rewarded with an interesting archaeological complex located on the excavation site of Ploca Micov Kamen. This area was a site of a Bronze Age culture, dating back between 1200 and 700 BC, that lived in wooden and mud homes built on top of wooden pylons above the shallow shore. The name comes from the many animal bones that were found here along with fragmented but well preserved vessels.





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Just a little further south, near the border of Albania, is the impressively stunning Monastery of Saint Naum, dedicated to another influential medieval saint. Saint Naum studied alongside Saint Clement and the two of them worked together to create the Cyrillic Script and literary schools throughout the region. Saint Naum went on to become a key figure in the establishment of the medieval Bulgarian Empire. Walking among the monastery grounds and taking in the views of lush green gardens, blue waters of the nearby Lake Ohrid, and enjoying the colorful peacocks, was a highlight of our visit there. These peacocks, symbolizing resurrection, renewal and immortality, seemed to enjoy strutting their technicolored blue and green feathers, much to the delight of the tourists.

DISCOVERING BYZANTINE HISTORY

While exploring some roads northeast of Shtip, we came across a sign for the archaeological site of Bargale. Chantil and I looked at each other, nodded our heads, and said "Why not?" After parking our mules in the dirt parking lot, we looked around for any signs of people or some sort of ticket booth. Nothing. We carefully peered around a large stone archway into what appeared to be an ancient town inside a low-walled fortification. Was this ancient site really just open for the public to explore? We were soon greeted by a medium-sized, tan and white dog that seemed to be the only resident of this ancient town. Chantil reached for her doggie treats and before long we had made a new friend that seemed to show us around to all the stone foundations, columns, bath areas, and even a intricate mosaic covered with fabric and dirt to protect it from the winter season.

It turns out we were walking among the ancient town of Bargale. This region of southwestern Europe was once part of the expansive and far-reaching Roman Empire. After the fall of the Western Roman Empire, in the 5th century, the Eastern Romans endured as the Byzantine Empire. Bargale, developed sometime between the 4th and 6th centuries, was now our own personal museum with a stray dog acting as our guide. We decided to name our new friend "Flora" after the Roman goddess of flowers and spring.

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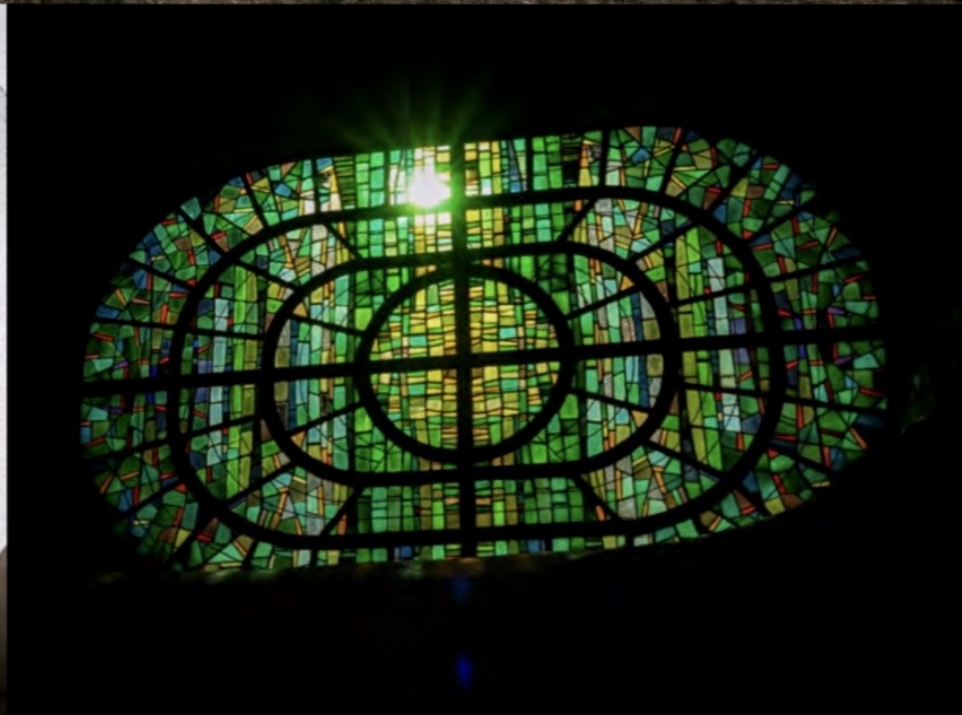


MAKEDONIUM

Towards the central part of the country, we enjoyed riding along narrow and twisty mountain roads towards another tourist destination known as the Ilinden Memorial, or simply Makedonium. This is an example of Brutalist Architecture which gets its name from the French term *béton brut* which means "raw concrete". This style of modern architecture was popular after the 1950s and can be found throughout the Balkan region, especially in monuments dedicated to anti-fascism. The Makedonium was built to honor the resistance fighters of the Ilinden Uprising of 1903 against the Ottoman Empire and the Partisan fighters that fought against the occupation of Axis and fascist forces during WWII.

Architects Jordan and Israel Grabul, a Macedonian husband and wife team, intended the structure to be abstract and open to the interpretation of the viewer. The monument is definitely unique and some have likened it to a heart valve or a virus. Regardless of your interpretation, the Makedonium is definitely unique and represents an escape from the clutches of the past. During our visit, we enjoyed walking inside the large expansive interior, and marveling at the four elliptical stained-glass windows that represent the four seasons and bathe the floor and white-washed walls in a sparkling array of beautiful colors. Additionally there are abstract reliefs that explain the history of Macedonia to include its birth, conflicts of the 20th century, and its future – represented by the shining sun, a symbol of freedom, and the national flag.

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SKOPJE - AN INTERESTING MIX OF HISTORY

The capital city of Skopje seemed to be a hodgepodge of influences. The conquests of the ancient Greeks, Alexander the Great, Slavic tribes, and the Serbian Empire have all left their history here. Most recently, a project called Skopje 2014 was developed to give the capital city a more classical feel. However, it was a classic example of "trying to please everyone and pleasing no one" that ended up over-budget and leaving the capital city with an odd mix of architecture and controversial monuments and statues. As we walked among the city center, we tried to make sense of it all. It felt like a suicide – a mix of beverages from the drink machine at a fast-food restaurant. It was a bizarre mix of renaissance-style sculptures, Balkan influences, mixed with a bit of contemporary art, all smashed together with a hint of neon lights! The experience was bizarre, difficult to comprehend, but also interesting.

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Skopje is also the birth place of Mary Teresa Bojaxhiu, better known as Mother Teresa. She was baptized and received her first communion at a small Catholic Church in the spot where the Memorial House of Mother Teresa now stands. Visitors can enjoy a museum that celebrates the life of this extraordinary woman who dedicated her life to helping the poor and the creation of the Missionaries of Charity – an organization established to help less fortunate people, without charge, and regardless of their religious or social status. Her inspiring legacy is currently over 5,000 religious sisters strong and operates in over 130 countries – truly inspiring!

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KEEP ON ROLLIN'

It was during our time in Skopje that we realized we would need new tires if we planned to continue overlanding. Our long-wearing and trusty Heidenau K60 Scouts had served us well during the first half of the year, but they were quickly reaching the end of their life. Getting tires in a foreign country can often be a difficult process, especially in the remote areas of the eastern Balkans. We contacted numerous motorcycle dealers throughout the region, but could not find any Heidenau K60s. We ended up finding two pairs of Pirelli Scorpion STRs and got them fitted in Skopje. Although we typically like a tire with a little more bite, we plan on traveling more pavement as we continue to explore more of the Balkan regions and beyond. Here's to another 12,000+ miles as we continue our European adventure...

About viajarMOTO: Travis and Chantil Gill started full-time motorcycle overlanding in early 2020 and plan to continue traveling until they make it around the world. You can follow them on their website: www.viajarMOTO.com.

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