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# Hiking across Macedonia: finding remote contentment

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At 3:30am, on the fifth day of an expedition along Macedonia's mountainous western edge, we traded our trekking poles for reins and mounted horses in search of yet another peak. Headlamps spotlighted the steam from our breath mixed with the fidgety smoke of rolled cigarettes. We left Galičnik, a village tucked into the folds of the Bistra massif, and plodded nose to tail, hoof to stone over seven dark kilometres and up nearly 1000 steep metres of elevation gain to the top of Mt Medenica.



Camp on Šar Mountain, with view of Titov Vrv (2748m) © Aleksandar Donev / Lonely Planet

For explorers and adventure travellers who don't know this undiscovered expanse of Macedonia, a country on the Balkan Peninsula in southeastern Europe, an excursion to this dovetailing string of summits and massifs (which include the Šar, Bistra and Jablanica Mountains) means some of the best, and most unheralded, hiking on

the continent. But even for the horseback members of the group assembled – all of whom live in the Balkans and have spent a significant amount of time scaling the region's topography – this was a treat.



Horse riding on Bistra Mountain © courtesy of Novagenus

Over the course of eight days, we would hike (and gallop) stages that began in northwestern Macedonia, straddle the Kosovo border, and then steer south along the Albanian frontier. Our journey traversed a national park, and included visits to centuries-old Orthodox churches and a monastery built by St Clement more than 1000 years ago. We stayed in huts wedged into hillsides, and woke with frosty morning dew clinging to our tents. We had stove-cooked-coffee conversations with locals about a myriad of subjects from politics to sheep shearing, and watched as those same locals dragged thick, work-tested fingers across smudged maps and explained how the mountains here once defined the edges of Yugoslavia. The journey ended on the shores of the ancient, Unesco-protected, tectonic Lake Ohrid, 300m deep and stretching over 34km.



On the trail in Šar Mountain, with Vrtop pass and Kobilica (2528m) in the background © Aleksandar Donev / Lonely Planet

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At this moment, however, we were still clip-clopping behind our guide Vasko Velickovski, the founder of Sherpa ([horseriding.com.mk](http://horseriding.com.mk)), a Galičnik-based outfit specialising in horseback tours. We stopped at the summit atop steeds growing impatient under our already sore backsides. It was 5:30am. A clear sky was widening as a new sun cracked the horizon and threw beams across an expanse gilded with morning dew.

To the north I could begin to trace the itinerary from the past several days. The top half of our path had been dominated by a ridgeline wiggling along the Šar mountain range, which has more than 30 glacial lakes, some 200 endemic plant varieties, as well as brown bears, lynx and chamois. The trek – also a leg of the [Via Dinarica](#) mega-trail that runs through the Balkans from Slovenia to Macedonia – provided a slalom course to weave between the country's most inspiring peaks.





Traditional food in Galičnik village © Nikola Spasenoski / Lonely Planet



Aleksandar Donev, a local who organised our trip, trotted up and stopped his horse beside me as I stared across the maze of rippling mountaintops and tried to make sense of where we had been. ‘The beauty of this trail and this country is that you can pack an incredible range of activities, culture and food into a pretty compact area,’ said Mr Donev, whose multi-tasking, Skopje-based company Mustseedonia ([facebook.com/Mustseedonia](https://facebook.com/Mustseedonia)) designs tailor-made trips and promotes responsible tourism across a country about the size of Vermont. ‘This makes Macedonia a perfect place to visit because you get both a pristine landscape and a chance to learn about history with a trek back in time to Europe’s old-world roots. I am glad we’re getting to see it now – because we will have to fight to keep it this way.’



Karanikola glacial lake viewed from Karanikola peak (2409m) © Aleksandar Donev / Lonely Planet

In the distance I could follow that pristine landscape up to the head of our trail and the Šar Mountain: the pyramid-shaped, 2498m Mt Ljuboten. There, we overnighted at Villa Ljuboten ([vilaljuboten.com](http://vilaljuboten.com)), a lodge that provided a perfect starting base and where we devoured a dinner of sausages, steaks, plump tomatoes and grilled eggplants piled high on earthenware bowls and platters. We drank tumblers of homemade *rakija* (local schnapps) and planned our eventual hike south

– a trek would take us past the 2748m Titov Vrv, the tallest point along the Šar massif. We then left the range and scrambled to the top of the mammoth 2764m Mt Korab, the country's highest spot, which looms like a beacon over both Macedonia and Albania. After, the group was engulfed by more than 730 sq km of dense, protected pine forests covering Mavrovo National Park and cradling its famously trout-filled lake.

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Hiking on Mt Plat (2398m), with Titov Vrv in the background © Nikola Spasenoski / Lonely Planet

‘One of the reasons I love hiking in this area is because you stay in the clouds and on some of the highest summits in the Balkans,’ said mountaineer and guide Uta Ibrahim, the owner of the Kosovo-based outfitter Butterfly Outdoor Adventure ([butterflyoutdoor.com](https://butterflyoutdoor.com)), as we reached Korab’s apex. ‘You just ride the peaks that run between three countries – at a sustained 2500m – and stay there... looking out on the beautiful world below for days and days and days.’



As we cantered back into Sherpa's Galičnik ranch, the sun had shifted to the other side of the horizon. We were worn out and dusty, but immediately buoyed by dinner. The smell of green, red and yellow piquant peppers, cooking naked on an iron stove, wafted above the corral. Wedges of young, white cheese sat beside pans of a savoury pastry called *burek*, and waited on a rough-sawn table. We sat and clinked glasses of strong, amber-coloured *rakija*.



Sherpa ranch in Galičnik village © courtesy of Novagenus

‘There’s a wealth in the simplicity here that is magnificent,’ said Thierry Joubert, the director of Green Visions ([greenvisions.ba](http://greenvisions.ba)), a Bosnian-based adventure tourism company. ‘You have just what is needed, and that is more than enough. Perhaps the spirit and the feeling is a product of the particular remoteness of these mountains. Perhaps it is the nature of the people. All I know is, when you are hiking in Macedonia you become part of it and you are truly content.’

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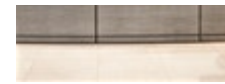


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