

Kratovo: A town worth its salt



by Chris Deliso

We went to Kratovo on the second day after Easter, in the second week after the false spring, and I felt lucky because the sun had finally peeked out. There were still plenty of painted eggs around — always an asset for those who enjoy the seasonal sport of egg tapping.

“Ajde, čukaj!” I said, and cracked eggs with Stevče, who was and is the lone tourism promoter

ABOVE: Putting Kratovo back on the map: the inscrutable Stevče Donevski in front of his guest house, with his cat and tulips (photo by Chris Deliso).

in this once-great centre of commerce and mining. The town, and the mines which were for so long the mainstay of Kratovo’s economy, stretch out over the hills within the eroded crater of a dead volcano, in Macedonia’s forlorn east.

Stevče had already lost twice to his wife Valentina in the traditional Easter-time contest with the eggs. But his wife was a good sport and did not boast about her prowess. It also being the fortieth day after the death of her elderly mother, Valentina had just returned from the cemetery. That’s another regular ritual for Macedonia’s Orthodox faithful.

RIGHT: Regional map showing the location of Kratovo in north-east Macedonia.



With a population of just under 7000, Kratovo is a sleepy place but it is also one of Macedonia's most visually distinctive towns. The twin icons of the townscape are the arched stone bridges and defensive towers. It has the peculiar feel of a place

that has faded. During the first half of the nineteenth century, its population topped sixty thousand but, with the waning power of the Ottoman Empire, Kratovo found itself sidelined. During the last century, with the decline of mining and trade — exacerbated even further

by the challenges of transition from a planned socialist economy as Yugoslavia fell apart — local fortunes dwindled. However, while the economy is still sluggish, recent initiatives to improve economic and social affairs are putting Kratovo on the map again.

Those who make the 80 kilometre journey from the capital in Skopje to Kratovo will immediately be struck on arrival by the terrain: Kratovo favours the vertical. Its narrow cobblestone lanes and steep streets access clusters of traditional and newer houses that spread out in three directions: hither, thither and upwards. The town is surrounded by lush mountain pastures that are kept green by the three small rivers that water them. These rivers cascade

down through Kratovo in deep trenches, dividing the town into segments and thus the need for the bridges which connect different parts of Kratovo.

Kratovo displays many different moods. In one street, things that long ago fell apart are left to their fate, with broken windows and yawning doors, while just a few steps further down the alley there is clear evidence of houses being renovated. The property rush is not yet on, but you can still

Splendid in the sunlight: Kratovo's bridges connect the town's different quarters. The bridges are important aesthetic focal points (photo by Chris Deliso).



score a bargain. Stevče bought his eighteenth-century home for just a few thousand euros, though he has surely spent as much again on renovations. Recently it has become a guesthouse, the first such establishment in Kratovo since an earlier one closed in 1930.

SALT AND SLOW FOOD

We were admiring this old mansion, where Stevče insisted we stay, while sampling rustic bread dipped in salt. Indeed, what our host lacked in English he made up for in salt, and not just any old salt, mind you, but Kratovo's secret 'smashed' salt, *k'cana sol*, which includes fifteen herbal ingredients taken from the higher reaches of the Osogovski Mountains, which rise up to the north and east of Kratovo and stretch away towards the Bulgarian border (about 40 km east of the town).

The salt was somewhere between copper and unimproved gold in colour, and it was very tasty in an oddly non-salty kind of way. Stevče and Valentina were extolling its health benefits, and bemoaning the difficulty of finding some of the more reluctant and seasonal herbs that are essential ingredients in the local salt. "I am now the head of the Slow Food movement for Macedonia," Stevče said, "and this is a local home-made recipe unique to Kratovo. Only a few older people still know the traditional recipes for making it."

Rosemary, saffron, basil, peppermint, thyme and crushed corn are just some of the ingredients in this dizzying display of indistinct flora.

Stevče's father had been a saddle maker. He himself had worked for a long time for an electricity company until resolving, about ten years ago, to put Kratovo back on the tourism map, while preserving its ancient customs and highlighting its bygone urban pride. Around then was the first time I visited; the town was clearly stagnating, like other eastern Macedonian backwaters where unemployment and indifference are defining features.

There are some three hundred empty historic houses in Kratovo's warren of streets. Yet despite the prevailing neglect, some places have fared better.

But *poleka, poleka* ('slowly, slowly') things are starting to improve. Stevče's guesthouse, the Šančeva Kuća, remains a work-in-progress, but with a modern bath and kitchen, and three bedrooms going for just eight euros per person, it is a tolerable option for budget travellers, especially in the warmer months. Beneath it is a ramshackle basement museum exhibiting traditional tools, wine barrels, obsolete Yugoslav signage and the occasional trumpet.

"Windows! Windows!" Stevče called, peering around as a white-and-caramel cat came bounding up the stone step beyond which various plants and mosses were hung across a stone wall, protruding from boots and tree stumps and other weird formations. The cat sauntered through the small garden, another work in progress, and past the blue and yellow tulips growing there. Some Dutch guests had been so happy with Kratovo, Stevče said, that they mailed him the seeds, which he then planted. I asked him if Windows the

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LEFT: The view from above: ascending Kratovo's recently reopened main tower, Saat Kula, allows visitors to gaze out on the sprawling town, like Ottoman lords of yesteryear (photo by Chris Deliso).

cat was meant to be 7 or XP and he confidently replied it was a 7.

We walked down the steep streets and back into the modest centre of town, where the bulk of the shops and services orbit a small square occupied by outdoor cafés sprawling under green Tuborg canopies, where stocky and dark men in tracksuits drink coffee opposite the municipal offices and a non-functioning public telephone. On the first stone bridge we crossed, a cheerful old man loping across with his donkey greeted us; it was probably fitting, as we soon learned that the bridge's name was Svinski or Jokširski (both meaning 'pork'); apparently, the Ottoman Muslim lords would not allow pigs to cross it. The porcine ban was meant to protect the leatherworkers of Kožarsko Maalo, on the other side, from coming into contact with unclean animals.

"Hristos voskresna," cheered another old man we met on our walk. It is the traditional Easter greeting in Macedonia, meaning 'Christ is risen'.

"Navistina voskresna," replied Stevče. Truly, He is risen.

We turned down towards a magnificent stone tower called Saat Kule (Clock Tower), where Stevče introduced us to Grandfather Minčo, who is very proud of his 83 years. The man was impeccably dressed in a carefully-pressed suit with a hat, and he leaned on a cane. "This is an old city-style kind of gentleman," whispered my wife. "You see how nicely his suit is ironed? You see how his socks match his suit? Maybe you can learn something." I laughed and after some words and more Easter greetings we let Grandfather Minčo resume his afternoon promenade. Stevče said that he was one of the oldest men in Kratovo and had worked for many years as a court stenographer.

ORIGINS

The old city-style is indeed very old in Kratovo, where traces of urban civilization go back to Paeonian and Roman times. In the sixth century, the great Byzantine Emperor Justinian built a



Down from the mountain: a local and his dutiful donkey on the way back home (photo by Chris Deliso).

frontier fortress west of the town, near today's village of Konjuh; the site has been painstakingly investigated by archaeologists for the past sixteen years and, locals hope, will soon be given special protected status. But in Kratovo itself, nothing remains of Roman times — though town elders still refer to its uppermost, and largely rebuilt Radin Bridge as the 'Rimski' (Roman) Bridge. A five-kilometre hike above the town accesses Gorno Kratovo, the original Roman settlement where coins and artefacts have been found.

KRATOVO SCRIBES

Kratovo is curiously invisible in writings about the Balkan region. Celebrated travel writers like Rebecca West and Edith Durham give no account of Kratovo. Early travellers, particularly 18th-century French topographers, make brief mention of the town and its region, focusing in particular on the abundance of mineral resources in and around Kratovo. The work of the Kratovo scriptorium attracted the attention of travellers. During the 16th and 17th centuries, the town was noted for the quality of the illuminated manuscripts produced there. Many handsome religious books from Kratovo are now in the monastery at Rila. The mineral wealth of the region fed through into the daily work of the scriptorium where gold and silver ornamentation was regularly used to embellish texts.

TRAVEL NOTES

There are thrice-daily buses from Skopje to Kratovo (via Kumanovo, where you sometimes have to change buses). The journey takes about two hours and the one-way fare is 190 Macedonian denari (about €3). Some of these buses from Skopje continue south to Probištip and there is one weekly bus from Kratovo to Štip.

Kratovo's best place to stay is the sharp and renovated Hotel Kratis (€23–30 per person), located right at the entrance to town (www.hotelkratis.mk). For a budget adventure (€8 per person) follow the author's example and opt for the not-quite-fully-restored Šančeva Kuća, in Kratovo's upper town (<http://webhe.eu/shancheva>).

The remaining structure of today's Kratovo, however, reveals it as one of those eccentric inevitabilities of mediaeval commerce, a staging-post under Serbian and later Turkish rule. It was an eighteen-day trip by horse from Venetian-influenced Dubrovnik, and a sixteen-day ride to Constantinople. Salted fish from the Adriatic were brought here and traded for copper and gold. Documents in Dubrovnik's archives still attest to this erstwhile relationship. The town's trade prominence attracted Jewish merchants from Thessaloniki, too, and though Catholics, Turks, Jews and

Unrailed, but progress nonetheless: new riverside walkways allow visitors a different perspective on Kratovo's unique architecture (photo by Chris Deliso).

the enigmatic Saxon miners are long gone, each neighbourhood in Kratovo is still remembered for its former distinct inhabitants.

There are some three hundred empty historic houses in Kratovo's warren of streets. Despite the prevailing neglect, some places have fared better, such as the fine wood-beamed mansion that now houses the town's history museum. An old Masonic symbol on the facade reveals just one aspect of the building's layered history. Along with artefacts and traditional implements, the place displays bright paintings of Kratovo's distinctive

Stevče continued to escort us around, over and even under Kratovo's anthropomorphic bridges, along the way recounting the various tragic legends associated with each structure.

architecture, created by children who come for the summertime 'art colony'. The constantly changing sunlight, graceful bridges and jutting towers conspire to make Kratovo a useful studio for promising students of light and shadow.

We crossed down the winding steps from the museum to the river, where a smooth new embankment allows visitors to stroll alongside the rushing

water from one bridge to the next. We peered up at another bridge, the Grosiski or Baždarski Most, and our guide pointed out how its construction

made it seem to have eyes and a mouth. "There is a legend that all the master builders crafted their own faces into the bridges," Stevče explained. "This one was a toll bridge — you had to pay a local family to cross it."

Nearby on the inside wall, there was a grated area where the Ottoman prison once stood. "Many Christians were tortured there by Turks," said Stevče, matter-of-factly. Incredibly, the dank gaol operated until 1952. I explored a narrow entrance where water oozed out of an aperture and amidst the heaped rocks were unmistakable signs of clandestine sex and alcohol. I recalled the supposedly elaborate tunnel network that is said to connect



the town, and Stevče confirmed that this was one such opening. “We hope that all the tunnels will be opened in a few years for tourists,” he said. “But it is a very big and complicated job.” Currently, the only tunnel entrance you can still partly see is in the wine-cellar basement of the Restaurant Aleksandrija.

Stevče continued to escort us around, over and even under Kratovo’s anthropomorphic bridges, along the way recounting the various tragic legends associated with each structure. High bridges are dangerous places in communities divided by feuds.



NEW BEGINNINGS

After we were back up on higher ground, we went through the small market streets where a few shopkeepers and their friends were smoking under hanging beach toys, just across from a betting shop. Further down, near the entrance of town, Stevče washed his hands in a marble-basin fountain in front of the Hotel Kratis, a spot that symbolized so much about the town’s constant changes of fortune. In October 1689, a Christian lord called Petar Karpoš sought to take advantage of Turkey’s withdrawal from its unsuccessful siege of Vienna in 1683. He launched an uprising in the eastern border area against the Turks, who burnt the town in revenge and executed the revolutionary in Skopje. Among the civic treasures lost at the time was the Kratovo hammam; Stevče claimed it had been designed by Sinan, master architect of Suleiman the Magnificent (who designed the famous bridge over the River Drina at Višegrad, featured elsewhere in this issue of *hidden europe*).

“This fountain is all that remains,” said Stevče. “It was at the entry to the baths, where you would wash before entering.” Today the area is occupied by the Hotel Kratis, which until very recently was a floundering post-Communist wreck. However, the hotel has been spiffed up by new investors who also developed a new restaurant and desultory English pub nearby. We sat down to have a coffee with the manager, who was keen to explain the hotel’s new commitment to perfection in hospitality. I went

Easter greetings: Stevče Donevski shares a laugh with the dapper Grandfather Minčo, one of Kratovo’s elder statesmen (photo by Chris Deliso).

to tour the marble-floored suites and restaurant, and remarked on how different the place was since I had last been. “That’s what the government inspector said,” replied the manager. “He said, ‘is this even the same building?’ It was very funny.”

Back at Stevče’s guesthouse that night, in Kratovo’s perilously unlit upper town of sheer angles, steep drops and loose stones, I looked across the valley towards the hills beyond. All in the houses around were sleeping and the sounds from the town below did not reach us. From the void, a polyphony of birdsong sprang up; the sky was overlaid by skittering jazzy runs, the sounds you expect near dawn, not in the dark of night. And on every fifth beat, some solitary creature dropped the bass note. It was not exactly John Coltrane’s ‘sheets of sound’ but a lovely and unexpected concert nonetheless. Again I felt lucky. ■

Chris Deliso has worked in Macedonia as a freelance travel writer since 2002, specialising in south-east Europe. In addition to many newspaper, magazine and online articles, he has written a travelogue, ‘Hidden Macedonia’ (Haus, 2007), and contributed to several Lonely Planet guides. Find out more at www.chrisdeliso.com.