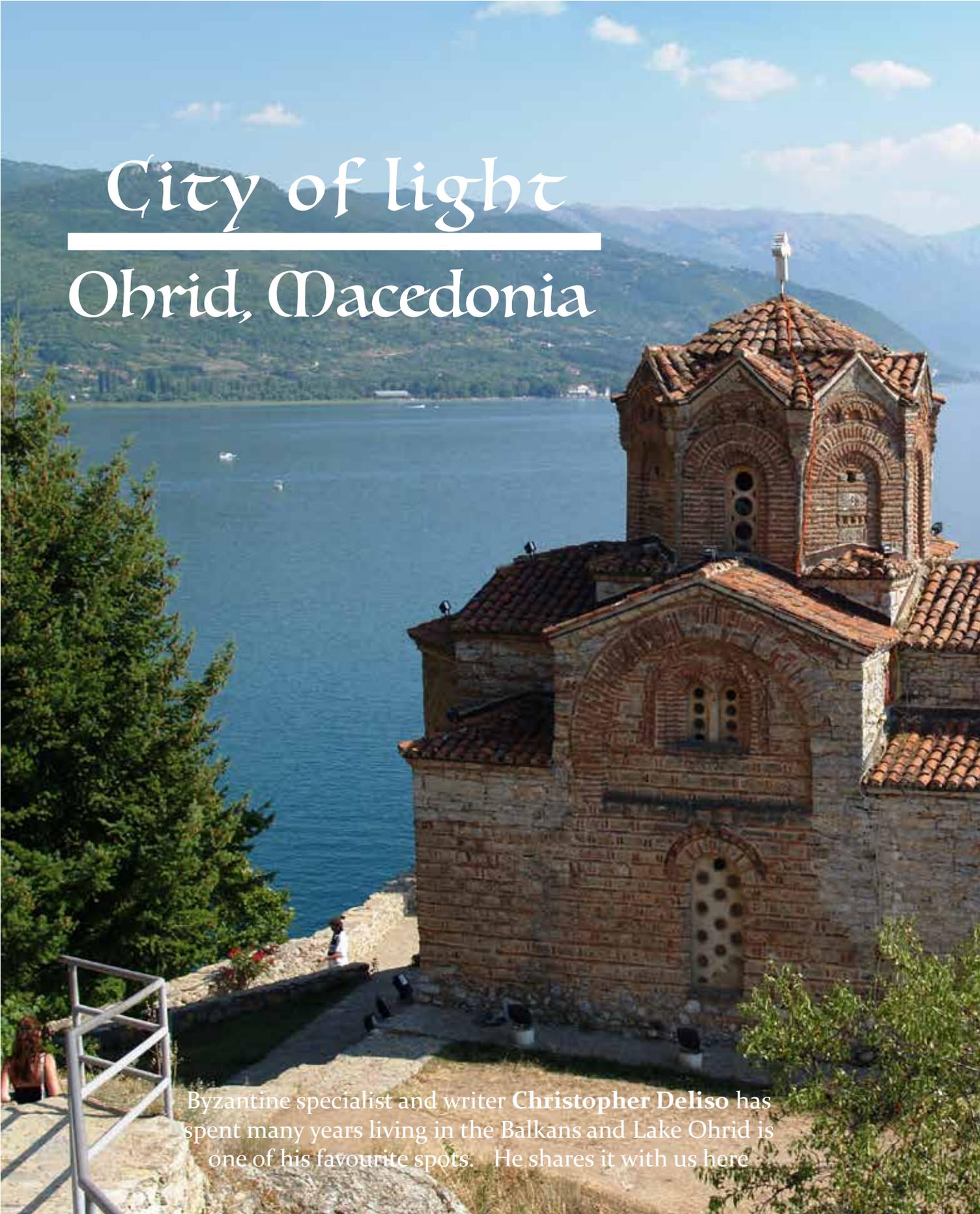


City of light

Ohrid, Macedonia



Byzantine specialist and writer **Christopher Deliso** has spent many years living in the Balkans and Lake Ohrid is one of his favourite spots. He shares it with us here



It was first described for me as 'a lake of ill fortune.' That was in 1998, when I was studying Byzantine history at Oxford. This rather bleak assessment was made by a late 11th-century archbishop, Theophylact, lamenting his pastoral banishment to the 'small and wholly destitute' lake-town of Ohrid. In the empire's Macedonian hinterland, an isolated territory that until a few decades earlier had been under Bulgarian control, Theophylact was far from the capital of Constantinople- condemned to a life surrounded by uncultured 'barbarians.' In its poverty and misery, Theophylact noted, his archdiocese could only be compared to that of Mykonos.

Today, of course, this common curse would seem rather uproarious - shimmering Ohrid is certainly Macedonia's most glorious getaway, while Greece's glitziest tourist isle needs little endorsement. But in the medieval period, life was rather harder. Despite its elevated fortress, learned scriptoriums and elegant churches (as the probably exaggerated saying has it, one for every day of the year), Ohrid might seem rather isolated, despite it having always been a key stop along the Roman Via Egnatia - the road that connected the Adriatic coast with Constantinople, passing through today's Albania, Macedonia, Greece and Turkey.

Having visited and written about Ohrid so many times since 2002, I must confess that I can no longer imagine it as a tourist destination, but rather, as a state of mind. And it seems I am not the first in this regard; indeed, the town's original ancient name of Lychnidos (in Greek, meaning a 'place of light') betrays an age-old awareness of the spirituality of the place; the translucent waters of the massive and deep (up to almost 300 metres) lake, set beneath a forested mountain and ringed by village settlements and an enthralling old town of cobbled laneways and terra-cotta roofs, indeed attest to a setting amenable to contemplation and the celebration of natural beauty.

Tackling Ohrid can be done in just a few days, though a longer stay will invariably be well rewarded. The town of Ohrid itself, hugging the lake's north-eastern bank, has roughly 50,000 inhabitants, while the somewhat smaller town of Struga lies to its west, in the lowlands that



hosted the ancient Via Egnatia that leads into Albania. The Great-Powers politics of the early 20th century, followed by the Balkan Wars and WWI, saw territorial changes. By 1919, Serbs and Albanians had divided the lake itself (two-thirds for the Yugoslav kingdom, inherited since 1991 by the Macedonian republic, and about one-third for the nascent Albania). To the south of Ohrid, numerous hamlets and hotels stretch for over 30 kilometres, running beneath the forested Mt. Galicica, until the grand Monastery of Sveti (Saint) Naum, located just before the southeastern border with Albania.

Thus both Ohrid town and its environs provide unique and varied activities; these range from perusing ancient archaeological sites and Byzantine churches to swimming, hiking and even skydiving from a mountaintop that (in select places) affords magnificent views of the twin tectonic lakes, Ohrid and Prespa, the latter of which feeds the former from the elevated eastern side of the mountain, through hundreds of tiny springs.

Ohrid is a UNESCO-listed Heritage Site, and wandering its old town shows why. But while many venture to the main saints from the centre and

then up, it's far more efficient (and less taxing on the body, especially in the summer heat) to start at the top and work your way down. To reach your starting point is just a short ride up the hill by taxi or car the Gorna Porta, or 'Upper Gate.' The first point of interest, to the left, is the 13th-century Church of Sveta Bogorodica Perivlepta ('Our Lady the Most Glorious'). This evocative shrine is most notable for its recently restored artwork, with the typical Byzantine iconography of saints and biblical scenes brought vividly to life in wall frescoes. The adjacent Icon Gallery in the church courtyard, displays some of the most valuable and unique Byzantine icons anywhere.

The path from the church westward leads next to the Classical Amphitheatre, site of cultural events since Hellenistic times. Built around 200 BCE, it was later used by conquering Romans. While not as spectacular as some other ancient amphitheatres, Ohrid's is still sufficiently well-preserved that it hosts (along with other venues throughout the town) major concerts and performances during the annual Ohrid Summer Festival during July and August.

Just beyond the amphitheatre is the centerpiece of old Ohrid – the 10th-century fortress of

Previous pages:
Church of Sveti Jovan at Kaneo
 (Image: © Chris Deliso)

Above: View of the town of Ohrid from the lake with the fortress of Tsar Samuel in the background

Right, top: Sveti Panteleymon, opposite the oldest church in Ohrid (Image: Diego Delso)

Right: The classical amphitheatre

Bulgarian Tsar Samuel, built on the site of an ancient Macedonian castle from the 4th century BCE. Situated at the highest point of the town, the castle is accessible by a narrow stairway and crowned by an enormous Macedonian flag that billows in the breeze; along with visitors taking the obligatory photos of the old town and lake through the fortress' solid turrets, you may come across a turtle lumbering through the grass, or an itinerant entertainer playing the gajda (a traditional, single-bagged version of the bagpipe).

After the fortress, the path leads to Plaošnik, the most intriguing and complex site in old Ohrid. Partially reconstructed in 2002, it comprises the multidomed Church of Sveti Kliment and Pantelejmon. This medieval shrine was built on the foundations of a 5th-century basilica, and contains a wonderful jumble of even earlier Christian mosaics. As you walk through the church, be sure to gaze down through the glass floor segments to see the original 9th-century church foundations.



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The Church of Sveti Jovan at Kaneo attests to the seamless merger of human construction and natural beauty that have always made Ohrid such a special place, and that have marked the architectural intuition of Orthodox Christianity



Left: The church of Sveti Jovan at Kaneo (Image: © Deigo Delso) today and an old postcard, dating to 1930, showing the church (Image: The State Archives of the Republic of Macedonia (DARM))

Beyond Plaošnik, the pathway descends slightly to its western terminus near a cliff, and a site which is surely the most-photographed in Macedonia: the Church of Sveti Jovan at Kaneo. Although rather small on the inside, Kaneo has some surviving original frescoes behind the altar, and attests to the seamless merger of human construction and natural beauty that have always made Ohrid such a special place, and that have marked the architectural intuition of Orthodox Christianity.

Continue downhill from Kaneo to re-enter the old town and its maze of old houses. First, however, if you fancy a break or a bite to eat, drop into the the diminutive open-terrace restaurant operates in summer beneath Kaneo, from where you can also have a swim in the lake's warm waters. Ohrid is famed for its delectable endemic trout (though, as an endangered species is best avoided); at Kaneo's summer terrace you can instead enjoy golden fry-ups of *plasnici*, tiny lake fish that have been enjoyed for centuries; indeed, the noted Byzantinist Dimitri Obolensky records the aforementioned Theophylact of Ohrid as having sent such fish, in salted form, to friends around the empire, as many as 200 at once.

Indeed, for all his grumbling, it seems that Theophylact felt quite inspired by Ohrid's vital role as one of the key places where the mission of Saints Cyril and Methodius was perfected. Setting off from Thessaloniki in today's Greece in the ninth century, the two monks passed through Macedonia to convert the Slavic tribes, all the way up to Moravia (in today's Czech Republic and Slovakia). Methodius' most learned disciple, Kliment (840-916), continued his work in developing an Ohrid 'Literary School' to translate and comment on Biblical and other Christian texts in the new language, and so to reach the local populations.

As a pious Byzantine, Theophylact felt it his duty to transmit the high theology of the Greek language and the schools of Thessaloniki to his 'barbarian' flock far from Constantinople, and this he did in Ohrid's most splendid cathedral, Sveti Sofija, an acoustically-perfect if smaller replica of its Constantinopolitan namesake. Built in the 9th- or 10th-century, the church is supported by

Opposite: The view to / from?? Mount Galicicia (Image: © Chris Deliso)
Middle: Ceiling frescos from Sveti Sofija
Below: Exterior of the National Museum, Robev House

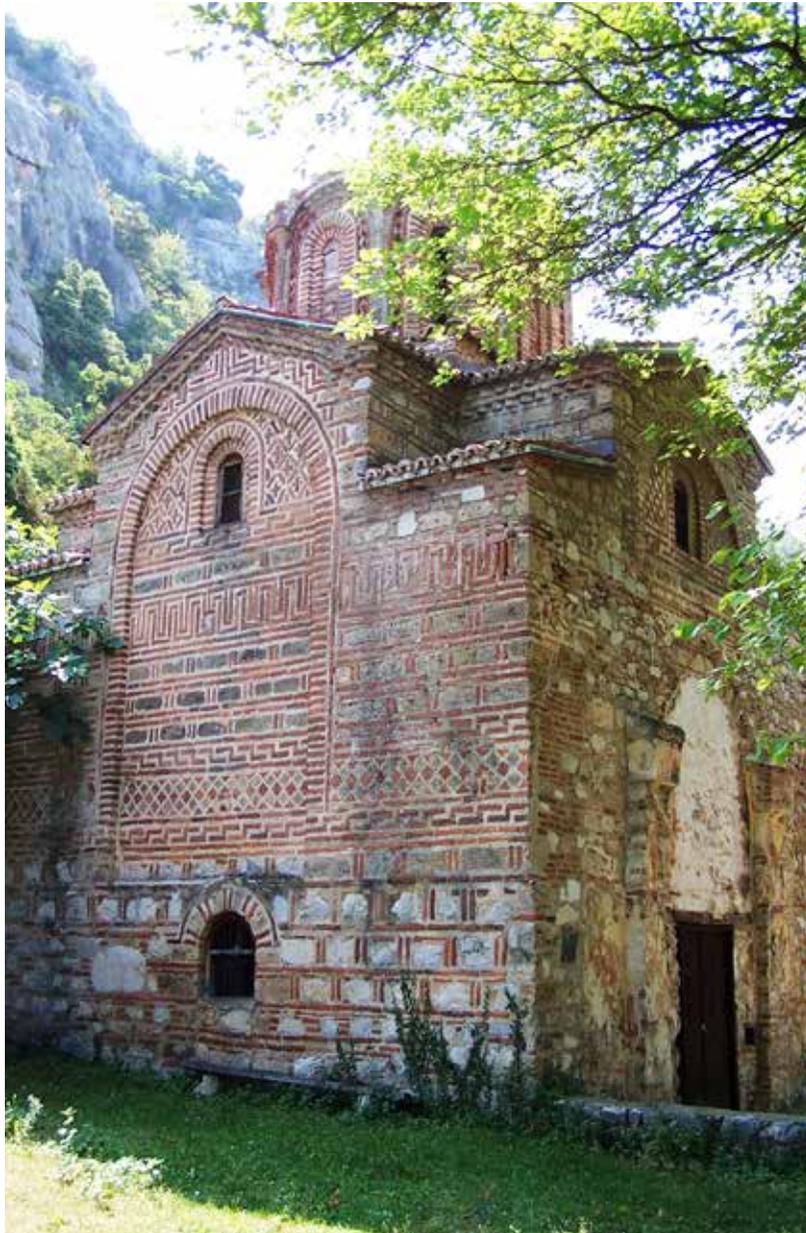
columns and decorated with elaborate, if somewhat faded, Byzantine frescoes. It lies further down amidst the clustered homes of the old town, and is backed by a serene garden. (Like the classical amphitheatre, Sveta Sofija has also been known to host the occasional Summer Festival concert, owing to its remarkable acoustics and ambience).

Not far from the church, among the old town's narrow laneways, stands Ohrid's National Museum (also called the Robev House, after the former owners of this 19th-century mansion). Like the Urania Residence opposite it, the Robev House exemplifies the elegant timber-framed construction of Ohrid's 19th-century revival when the city (and much of Macedonia) was still under Ottoman Turkish control.

On its three creaky floors, the museum-house displays local antiquities ranging from wood carvings and contemporary art to Roman archaeological finds and the most important (and rarest) find of all: a delicate 5th-century BCE golden funerary mask made in Ohrid by the ancient Macedonian dynasty, one of a handful (the others taken by Bulgaria and Serbia when they had control) discovered at a monumental ancient Macedonia burial site in a nearby village. Once rarely on display, the mask (and accompanying golden glove, ring and earrings) occupy a special room of their own; these treasures, and other golden artefacts from even earlier periods of the Macedonian dynasty, attest to the town's most glorious ancient period.

The final two surviving Byzantine churches of the old town, Sveta Bogorodica Bolnička and Sveti Nikola Bolnički, are nearby but easier to miss, owing to their diminutive stature and abundance of more modern distractions, which include some very good traditional restaurants and cafés and jazz bars packed with young revelers by night. These 14th-century churches are small and sometimes closed, but worth a peek when open for their medieval icons. They provided an important function in unhealthier times - the word *bolnica* means 'hospital' in Macedonian, and the appellation indicates these churches' use as a sort of quarantine quarters for outside visitors during





Above: The church of Sveti Zaum which can only be reached by boat (Image: © Chris Deliso)

Left, top: The Museum on Water, Plocha Michov Grad

Left: Fixing roof tiles at the village of Trpejca (Image: © Chris Deliso)

the occasional plague.

Continuing on through the stone streets of the old town, you arrive at the main port and square, lined with shops and cafés; the main pedestrian mall to the left, Sveti Kliment Ohridski, is popular for an evening stroll. Passing more little shops and eateries, it leads up to the newer part of town and past one lovable local eccentricity of nature - the Činar, a 900-year-old plane tree that sprawls up and out of the street's very centre.

Many visitors to Ohrid choose to stay in a

number of atmospheric guest hours, private apartments, or newer hotels (as well some communist-era larger ones) in and outside of the town. From the main port regular boat trips can be arranged, that can take you all the way to Sveti Naum Monastery on the distant southern shore of the lake. Alternatively, you can drive or go by bus or taxi to access the many wonderful places nestled between Mt. Galicica and the wooded waterfront. Rustic life prevails in tiny villages like Elshani, a few kilometers out of town, interspersed in the cool forest air, along narrow roads where the wild raspberries fall effortlessly into your hand.

Along the curvy coast road heading south from Ohrid, you'll find many of its biggest (and most crowded) sandy beaches, inevitably proximate to the handful of large concrete hotels erected when Macedonia was a republic within Yugoslavia, and all of it ruled by Josip Broz Tito. Somewhat more recently, the Macedonian government built a rather different set of lakefront structures based on an earlier taste in housing: that of Ohrid's original Neolithic inhabitants.

Ever since 1977, underwater archaeology carried out near the secluded beach and camping site of Gradište has revealed amazing remains believed to be up to 3200 years old. Exploring at the so-called 'Bay of Bones' off of Gradište peninsula (near the modern village of Peštani), archaeologists working from 1997 to 2005 discovered the buried remains of stilted huts, along with ceramic tiles, animal bones and other artefacts. Believed to have covered an area of 8500 square metres, the settlement was built on platforms and connected to the mainland by a bridge, and inhabited between 1200 BCE and 700 CE. Today, a neat new museum honours these early settlers, with a reconstructed wooden bridge leading to a deck where 24 stilted huts tell the story of daily life in ancient times - with replicas of Neoliths absorbed in their daily tasks and information about the site. For scuba divers keen on history, the underwater site can also be explored through special arrangement.

Some 7.5km down the coast from Peštani stands Ohrid's most traditional and evocative village, Trpejca. Although certainly popular with day-trippers in recent years for its white-pebble

Image: © shutterstock/ Atosan



beach and deep azure waters, it remains very much a working village, set steeply down from the mountain where elderly women descend with donkeys laden with sticks to the waterfront, where fisherman untangle their nets on the hulls of colourful caiques. If you want to get away from it all, or at least from most of it, Trpejca is one of Ohrid's better options, a place where the night is always scattered with stars, gentle waves and the croaking of frogs. It makes an excellent place for swimming, and is also close to the mountain road just beyond that leads up and across to Lake Prespa.

You can also soak up the sun and enjoy some good meals at a very small handful of local restaurants on the waterfront and, if you're keen on more local church history, get a local fisherman to bring you to the abandoned Church of Sveta Bogorodica Zahumska, built probably in 1299. A short boat trip from the village, it is otherwise inaccessible by land, near the very deepest point of the lake, Sveti Zaum comes as a revelation, set gracefully amidst foliage on a small beach. A relatively simple church with a three-sided apse, the walls are decorated with frescoes, some (such as a 1361 painting of Sveti Naum) dating from the period of the Serbian medieval empire.





Image: © shutterstock/ Saitosp

BRIEF HISTORY OF OHRID

Lychnidos ('City of Light' in Greek, evincing the lake's clarity) hugged the Via Egnatia connecting Constantinople with the Adriatic in the 4th century BCE. It became a Byzantine trade, cultural and ecclesiastical centre.

Slavic migrations created the name Ohrid (from *vo rid*, or 'city on the hill'). Bulgarian Slavs arrived in 867, and the Ohrid literary school – the first Slavic university – was established by 9th-century Sts Kliment and Naum. Macedonia's Christianisation specifically, and Slavic literacy in general, were expedited when Kliment created the Cyrillic alphabet.

Bulgarian Czar Simeon (r 893–927) and Samoil (r 997–1014) ruled from here. When the Byzantines defeated Samoil, Ohrid was reclaimed. Ottoman Turks conquered Ohrid (and Macedonia) in the late 14th century. In 1767 Greek intrigue caused the abolition of Ohrid's archbishopric – a long-lasting grievance for both Macedonians and Bulgarians. Today, the restored archbishopric represents the Macedonian Orthodox Church's highest office.

Beyond Trpejca, wilderness takes over and, save for the tiny village and campsite of Ljubanište, there are no signs of human settlement until the road curves westward towards the epic conclusion of the Ohrid experience – Sveti Naum Monastery. This spiritually and historically significant site is preceded by a long and popular beach, where a concentrated jet of cold water comes rushing out of a wooded lagoon south of the lake; incredibly, this mass of water maintains its cohesion under the surface all the way to the opposite shore at Struga, where it rushes northward and into Albania as the Crn Drim River.

While most visitors come just for a visit to the monastery and trip to the beach, the monastery complex does offer a modern hotel and restaurant should you like to stay longer. The monastery is the largest working one in the area, and was invaluable for the transmission of holy texts from Greek into Old Church Slavonic, following the mission of Cyril and Methodius. Naum was a contemporary of Sveti Kliment and their church, built around 900 CE as the Church of the Holy Archangels, was

Top: The Monastery of Sveti Naum
Right: Peacocks are a common sight there
 (Image: © Chris Deliso)

renamed after the saint in the 16th century, when Macedonia was part of the Ottoman Empire.

The multi-domed structure, ringed with rose gardens and home to peacocks that freely roam its well-manicured lawns, is set on a high cliff overlooking the lake. Like Sveti Jovan Kaneo almost 30km to the northeast, Sveti Naum is one of the most beloved and oft-pictured sites in the Ohrid area. Its design and frescoes are quintessentially Byzantine, attesting to Macedonia's rich traditions. Be sure not to leave the church without pressing an ear to the saint's tomb - it is said that his heart beats still through it. ●



Travel tips for visiting Ohrid, Macedonia

Flying

There are several airlines that fly from Europe direct to Alexander the Great Airport, 21km from Skopje (Macedonia's capital city), Macedonia's main airport. Airlines include Wizz Air, Austrian Airlines, SAS Scandinavian airlines while United Ethiad and Qatar Airlines do connecting flights through Europe onto Skopje.

There are a small number of international airlines that fly to Ohrid's St Paul the Apostle Airport, with regular flights arriving from the UK, Serbia, Switzerland and Israel. The airport lies 10km from the main town and there is no public transport available from the airport. Taxis are available for a set fee.

It takes approximately two and a half hours to drive from Skopje to Ohrid. Car rentals are available from both airports. There are a number of crossing points from surrounding countries. The bus station lies 1.5km northeast of the old town and a fixed fee taxi is available.

Getting around

Domestic trains are reliable but slower than the buses. There is no train station in Ohrid. It is advised to book ahead in summer if travelling to Ohrid by bus. Sundays can be busy with locals travelling.

The Essentials

Time difference: GMT + 1

Language: The national language is Macdeonian with official regional languages of Albanian, Turkish, Romani and Serbian.

Water: Tap water is generally safe to drink, but check with the locals. Bottled water is available.

Politics: Macdonia is a parliamentary republic with a president and prime minister.

Electrical Current/Plugs: Electrical current is 220/240 volts AC and plugs are standard UK ones with three round pins.

Visas

Visas are not required for EU, US, Australian, Canadian or New Zealand citizens for stays of up to three months. Citizens of former Yugoslav republics, Australia, Canada, the EU, Iceland, Israel, New Zealand, Norway, Switzerland, Turkey and the USA, and many other countries, can stay for three months, visa-free. Check the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website (www.mfa.gov.mk) for more information. Some travellers have reported being denied entry to Serbia from Macedonia if they have a stamp

Money

Currency: The currency in Macedonia is the Macedonian denar, but many tourist-related prices (such as transport and hotel costs) are quoted in euros. It may therefore be worthwhile to bring euros to pay for hotel bills, but it is often better to pay the smaller costs in denars.

Credit Cards: May be accepted in larger hotels, restaurants and shops, although smaller businesses prefer cash.

Don't miss!
Top tip!
Did you know!

ATMs are widespread in major towns, but surprisingly hard to find around Lake Ohrid except in Ohrid town itself.

Tipping: Is not expected in Macedonia except at restaurants, where 10% is the norm.

Weather

Ohrid enjoys a mediterranean climate with warm summers and cold, snowy winters.