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Europe Trip, Visiting the Balkans (E19A-4)

Skopje, North Macedonia Day Trip

In 2019, I took a trip to Europe. My focus was on some of the countries in the Balkans, particularly Romania and Bulgaria. While staying in Sofia, Bulgaria, I took a day trip to Skopje, the capital of North Macedonia.

I knew little about North Macedonia, other than it had been in the news recently after it agreed to change its name from the Republic of Macedonia to the Republic of North Macedonia so that Greece would stop blocking its entry into the European Union. Greece lays claim to historic Macedonia, so this had been a point of contention between the two countries.

The area had been under Ottoman Rule for centuries, but with the fall of the Ottoman Empire in the early 1900s, the area was part of Serbia, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia before becoming an independent country in 1991 as Communist governments were falling across eastern Europe.

I can't say I had ever heard of Skopje until I was looking into sightseeing options while in Sofia, Bulgaria. But it's only about three hours away, so I thought it would make for an interesting day trip.

Skopje has been inhabited for about 6000 years. It was a military camp during Roman occupation, and was fought over by the Bulgarian Empire and the Byzantines. It briefly served as capital of the Serbian Empire in the 1300s before it was conquered by the Ottoman Turks, who controlled it for over 500 years.

It's been hit by some devastating earthquakes, so many of its historical buildings have been lost. An urban renewal effort – Skopje 2014 – restored many of its landmarks and put a modern stamp on the city center.

The country has ongoing tensions between ethnic Macedonians (Christian Orthodox) and Albanians (Moslem), and this is reflected in Skopje. The Vardar River divides the city, with ethnic Macedonians mostly south of the river and ethnic Albanians mostly to the north.

My tour begins in Macedonia Square on the north side of the Vardar River.



The Olympus Monument depicts King Phillip II of Macedon, father of Alexander the Great. But the rather neutral name is used in order to minimize provocation of the Greeks, who claim both Phillip and Alexander as their own.



Monument of Saints Cyril and Methodius, brothers and Byzantine Christian theologians. They came up with the Glagolitic alphabet, which was used to transcribe Old Church Slavonic, helping to bring the Bible to the Slavic-speaking populace. Cyril is sometimes credited for the Cyrillic alphabet, which is now widely used for Slavic languages, but that was actually a creation of his students, although it drew heavily from the Glagolitic alphabet. In 1980, Pope John Paul II declared the brothers along with Benedict of Nursia to be co-patron saints of Europe.



Sculpture in front of the Macedonian Holocaust Museum on Macedonia Square. In World War II, Bulgaria allied with Nazi Germany. Although Bulgaria provided some protections for Jews in its own borders, in Bulgarian-occupied Macedonia Bulgaria followed orders from Germany. Most Macedonian Jews were eventually deported to Treblinka Extermination Camp in Poland and killed. Today there are only about 200 people in North Macedonia's Jewish community.



The national art museum of North Macedonia. It is housed in what was the 15th century Daut Pasha Hamam, or Turkish baths.



The Old Bazaar or Turkish Bazaar neighborhood and market area. It dates back to the 12th century, and is one of the oldest and largest such bazaars in the Balkans



One of its features is the old Suli An Caravanserai, which served as an inn when it was built in the 15th century. Today it houses an art school and the Old Bazaar Museum.



Kurshumli An Caravanserai, another old inn, this one built in the 16th century. Parts of it were restored after much of it was destroyed in a 1963 earthquake. Today it houses the Museum of Macedonia's collection of statues.



Mustafa Pasha Mosque. This mosque, built in 1492, survives mostly as originally designed and built.



Church of the Ascension of Jesus a.k.a. Church of the Holy Savior (mid-16th century). Like a lot of churches built during Ottoman rule, the church is somewhat non-descript and behind a wall, as they were barely tolerated by the Ottomans.

One thing I've come to hate about group tours. The marketing for this tour noted this about the church: "Our next visit will be the Church of Holy Savior, which despite its simple construction hides fantastic iconostasis." Except we never went in to see the iconostasis. We could find our way back on our own if we wanted to see it. It's not as rare as it should be that you find yourself standing outside a highlighted building, but going inside to see why it was highlighted isn't actually part of the tour. It's part of why I day tour on my own as much as possible.



Skopje Fortress



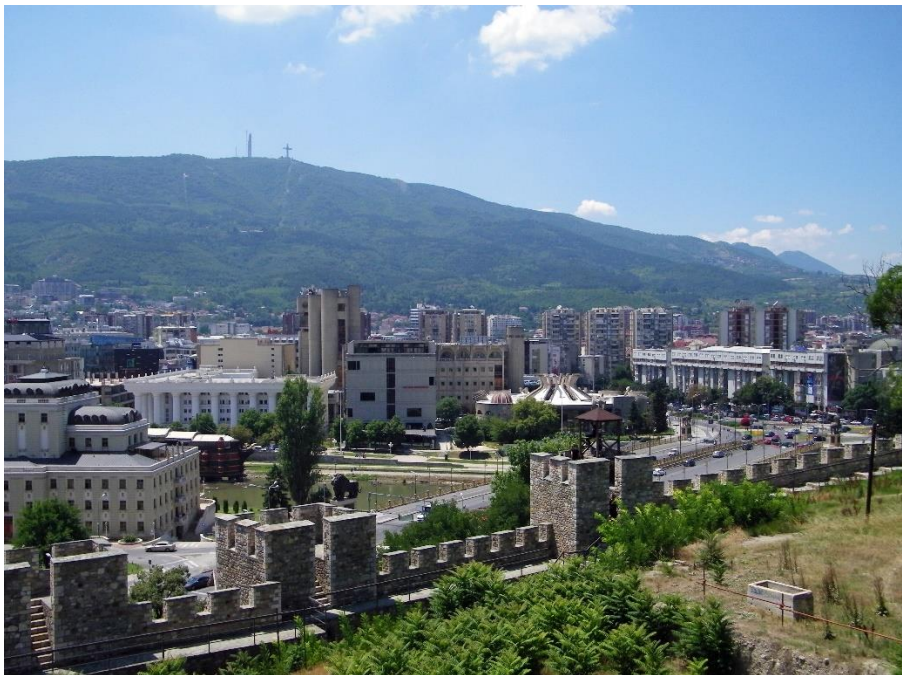
A fortress was first built on the highest point of what is now Skopje in the 6th century, although there is evidence of Neolithic and Bronze Age settlement on the hilltop dating back to about 4000 BC. The current structure was built on top of the ruins of the original fortress in the 10th and 11th centuries.



Part of the fort were reconstructed after the 1963 earthquake.



View from the fortress of a 50,000-seat soccer stadium



View of central Skopje from the fortress. The Millennium Cross is visible in the distance atop Vodno Mountain. To Macedonian Christians, the Millennium Cross symbolically promotes the Macedonian Orthodox Church as separate from the Serbian Orthodox Church. Ethnic Albanians and other Moslems, as well as Catholics, however, see it as a provocation in this religiously divided city.



The Stone Bridge crosses the Vardar River, connecting the north and south sides of Skopje. It was built in the mid-1400s on the foundations of an earlier Roman bridge. It's been damaged and repaired a number of times over the centuries, and it was almost lost in World War II before the retreating Nazis were dissuaded from blowing it up. During the Ottoman era, it was used as a site for public executions.



I suppose you can go swimming in the Vardar River, but it's not very deep, as one diver found out.



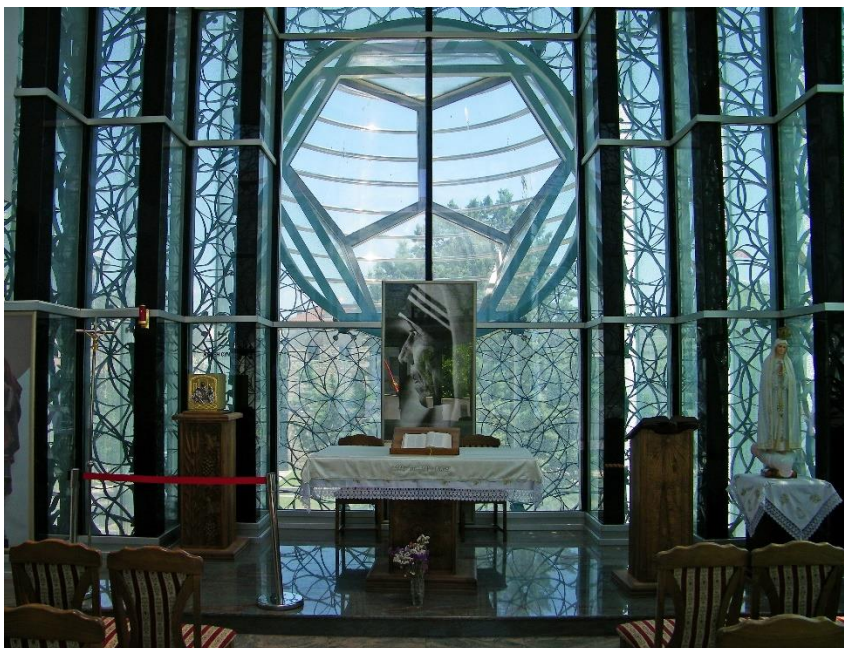
Looking across the Vardar towards Macedonia Square on the south side of the river. The giant statue features Alexander III of Macedon, a.k.a. Alexander the Great. Except it is formally called Equestrian Warrior, again an attempt to appease Greece.



The less controversial statue of Eastern Roman Emperor Justinian I. He was born in what is now North Macedonia.



Statue of Mary Teresa Bojaxhiu, better known as Mother Teresa, who was born and baptized in Skopje when the city was still part of the Ottoman Empire. The statue stands in front of the Mother Teresa Memorial House, a small museum dedicated to Mother Teresa and her work. Her childhood home is long gone. The museum is built on the site of the church where she was baptized.



The chapel in Mother Teresa Memorial House



A Skopje business dedicated to wine and chocolate? Sheesh! Who comes up with these crazy business ideas?



Sign in front of a Skopje bar/restaurant



Sign at a North Macedonia-Bulgaria border crossing

Remember, if you're smuggling anything from North Macedonia into Bulgaria, or if you're just plain corrupt, you MUST declare it at the border.