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Editorial Note: Rhodopes Mountains - a fairy tale in green – Part III (Western Rhodopes)

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Bulgaria is a world-renowned producer of rose essential oil. Almost all the areas where roses are grown are in the Thracian lowland in Southern Bulgaria. It is a little-known fact that in the Western Rhodopes in the area of the city of Bratsigovo, oil rose is also grown. It has been the main livelihood of the people in the region since the time of the Ottoman Empire. It is not by chance that one of the villages in the region is named Rozovo. The quality of the rose oil is like that of the roses grown in the famous Thracian plain, and the quantity, according to the opinion of the local producers, is higher. The reason is the specific microclimatic conditions: high temperatures during the day and cool weather in the evening, because of the mountain.

Although a mountainous climate prevails in the Western Rhodopes due to the higher altitude compared to the eastern and central parts, along the river valleys the climate is moderated by the warm Mediterranean air masses penetrating the river currents. The low parts of the Western Rhodopes are characterized by a transitional climate, while the southernmost parts of the mountain have a continental-Mediterranean climate. The Western Rhodopes include the highest parts of the mountain. The highest peak in the western part of the Rhodopes Mountains is Golyama Syutka peak (2186 m above sea level). It is only 4 m lower than the highest peak in the entire Rhodopes Mountains. Golyam Perelik peak (2190.2 m above sea level). The variety of climatic conditions makes the mountain a suitable place for many different activities.

One of the famous ski resorts in Bulgaria is located in the area of Tsigov Chark next to the Batak Dam. It offers good conditions for skiing and snowboarding. The ski slope is 1500 meters long and the gradient is about 100 m. It is suitable for beginners and intermediate skiers. Close to this track is a 20,000-meter track that is used for cross-country skiing. The low prices in the resort, the well-built ski base and the beautiful nature attract a large number of tourists.

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For lovers of warm mineral baths and spas, the Rhodopes Mountains are a true paradise. Two towns offer rich opportunities for treatment and prevention with mineral water: Velingrad and Devin. Velingrad is known as the town with the most springs of thermal mineral water in Bulgaria: 80 in number. The water temperature varies and reaches up to 96°C. The total flow rate of the springs is also impressive and amounts to 10,000,000 l/day. It is no coincidence that Bulgaria is in second place in Europe in terms of wealth of mineral waters and spring waters. The healing properties of water in the region have been known since the 1st century AD. The few archaeological excavations carried out in the town show the active use of the springs during the Roman and Ottoman Empires. The oldest and still functioning baths in Bulgaria are right in the town of Velingrad and were built in 1750. Velingrad was declared a balneological resort of national importance in 1951 and a balneological resort of international importance in 1981. In 2005 the town was declared a SPA capital of Bulgaria, and in 2008 for the SPA capital of the Balkans.

The mineral water in the Devin balneo-climatic resort is suitable for drinking balneotherapy and balneoprophylaxis. It has a beneficial effect on renal-urological diseases, gastrointestinal diseases, biliary-liver diseases, diseases related to metabolism: various types of diabetes, gout and hypertension, chronic occupational intoxications. The SPA hotels in the town of Devin have modernly equipped consultation and diagnostic centers and highly qualified specialists. In addition to medical consultation, various spa treatments, massages, mud treatments, mineral water therapies and semi-precious stone therapies are available.

The Western Rhodopes are also known for the only naturally carbonated mineral water on the Balkan Peninsula in the village of Mihalkovo. Apart from being drinking water, it also has healing properties. It is suitable for the treatment of diseases of the cardiovascular, digestive and nervous systems, as well as for the treatment of endocrine and metabolic diseases.

The region offers great opportunities for hiking and visiting interesting natural and archaeological sites. One of the most interesting rock phenomena is the Elephant near the town of Devin. It is located about 5 km southeast of the city near the road to Smolyan town. It is a rock that at one end has the shape of an elephant with its trunk resting on the ground. Another similar rock phenomenon is Probitata skala near the village of Slashten. It is located only 500 m in a straight line from the border with Greece. The rock resembles an arch that was naturally formed by the waters of the Mesta River. It can be likened to a large elephant that has dipped its trunk in the waters of the river.

Two of the most beautiful caves in Bulgaria are located in the Western Rhodopes: Snezhanka cave and Lepenitsa cave. The Snezhanka cave (Snezhanka = Snow White from the fairy tale) gets its name because of a cave shape that resembles the fairy tale heroine. It is rich in stalagmites, stalactites, stalactons, draperies and sinter lakes. The figure of Snow White is located in the Magic Hall, which is covered in snow-white crystal sinter. The Snezhanka cave is located near the town of Peshtera.

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The Lepenitsa cave is located near the towns of Rakitovo and Velingrad. The cave is built of marble rocks and has 3 floors: a river flows through the first floor and there are underground lakes. The second floor is dry, but in rainy weather it also fills with water. The third floor is completely dry. The cave is not landscaped and there is no lighting, which gives you the opportunity to feel the original appearance of the cave, without traces of human activity. It can only be entered with a guide and equipment: boots, a helmet and a lantern on the head. And in it there is an abundance of cave forms (Fig. 1). The most impressive objects in the cave are: the hall with the starry sky, the walls with tiger skin, the crocodile, the waterfalls, the icon with the Holy Mother of God, the hall with the newlyweds, the leaning tower of Pisa, the stalacton with the slit, the fireplace, the singing draperies, the sound of the chamber hall, the hall with the guards, the lakes. It is one of the few caves in which there are cave pearls. Unique for Bulgaria is the hall with cave craters. Cave craters in Europe are found in only two places: in the Lepenitsa cave in Bulgaria and in the Gouffre de Padirac cave in France.

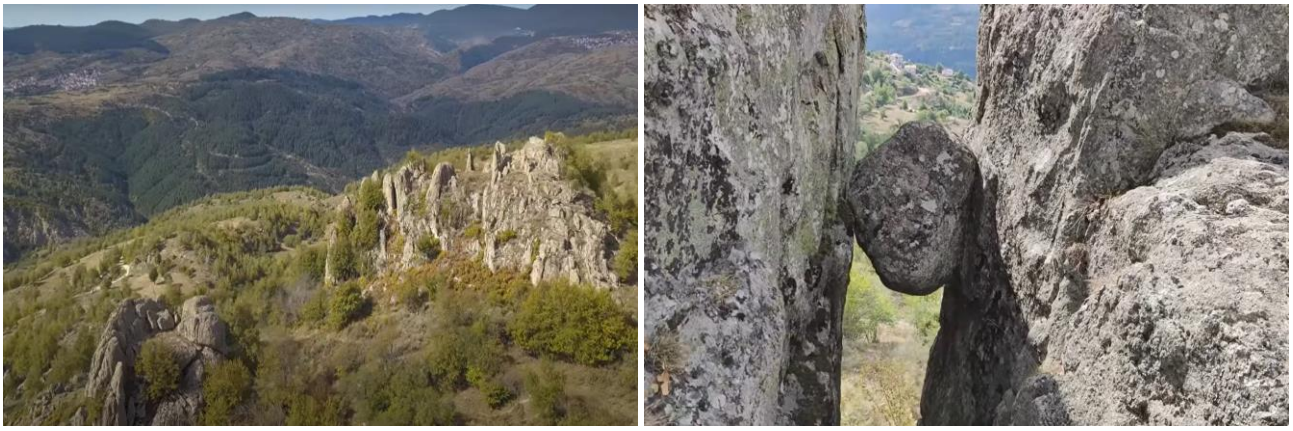


Figure 1. Lepenica cave - the wild beauty (Photo by https://www.facebook.com/lepenitsacaverakitovo/, 2021)

The extraordinary rock formations in the Western Rhodopes have impressed people since ancient times. Some of them have been thoroughly turned into rock sanctuaries. Such is the rock sanctuary Skaleto next to the village of Tsrancha. The impressive composition of vertical rocks resembles a fortress with numerous towers (Fig. 2A). Between two of the high rocks is an oval-shaped stone wedged in, dropped from the top there for a special purpose. Because of its unusual location between heaven and earth, this stone probably played a role in the beliefs of the people who used the sanctuary (Fig. 2B). A similar prehistoric rock sanctuary with a stone stuck between the rocks can be found under Mount Mitrovitsa in the Western Rhodopes (the nearest settlement is the village of Osenovo) and in the area of Karadzhov kamak in the Central Rhodopes (the nearest settlement is the village of Mostovo).

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A **B**

Figure 2. Skaleto Sanctuary above the village of Tsrancha, Dospat municipality: A. A panoramic view (Photo by Marko Totev, 2018); B. The Stuck Stone (Photo by Penko Penkov, 2021)

Even more impressive is the megalithic sanctuary Gradishteto near the village of Dolno Dryanovo, whose age has been determined to be 7,000 years. Here the rocks are further shaped by human hands to take the shape of human faces or animals. The complex of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic megalithic figures includes rocks up to 88 m high (Fig. 3).

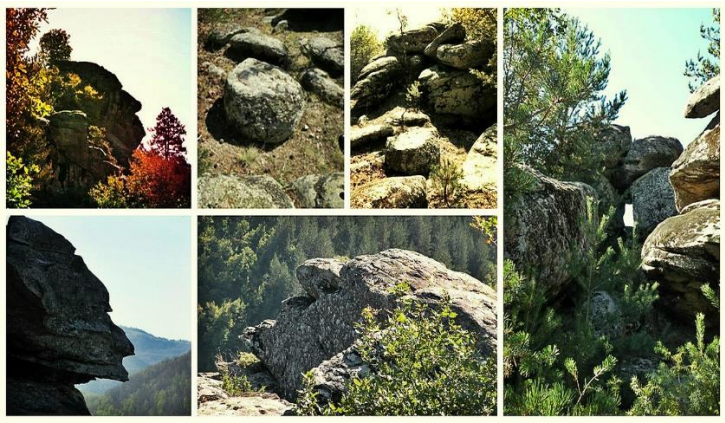


Figure 3. Anthropomorphic rock formations (Photo by Ivo Filipov, 2016)

In the foothills of the Western Rhodopes near the village of Garmen are the ruins of the Roman city of Nicopolis ad Nestum. It was built by order of Emperor Trajan in honor of his victory over the Dacian tribe. This is where the name of the city comes from, which translates as "City of Victory at Nestos". "Nestos" is the ancient name of Mesta River, which is adjacent to the city. The city had significant dimensions for its time and was one of the creations of Emperor Trajan, who went down in history as one of the five "good emperors" because of his rule, associated with the stability and prosperity of the Roman Empire. The city existed for 11 centuries - from 106 AD. until the 13th century, when it was destroyed by the Crusaders.

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A very well-preserved object from the time of the Roman Empire is the bridge near the village of Zmeitsa (Fig. 4). It is a stone bridge with a width of 3 m, built in the II-I century BC. It passes over the Sarnena reka River, which is a left tributary of the Dospat River.



Figure 4. Roman bridge to the village of Zmeitsa (Photo by Wikmapia, 2012)

Dospat Dam was built along the length of the Dospat River. It is one of the largest dams in terms of area and volume in Bulgaria: 19 km long and about 3 km wide. It is a preferred place for recreation, relaxation and sports fishing.

In the Western Rhodopes is the only active narrow-gauge railway line in Bulgaria. It has a gauge of 760 mm width, suitable for mountainous areas, which is known as Bosnian type gauge. This railway line connects the small towns of Septemvri and Dobrinishte and has a length of 124.7 km. It connects the Upper Thracian lowland and the mountains Rhodopes Mts, Rila Mt and Pirin Mt. It passes through the picturesque gorge of the Chepinska River and the Avram Saddle, which separates Rila Mt and Rhodopes Mts. The highest railway station on the Balkan Peninsula is located here: Avramovo station, at 1267 m above sea level. From there, along the Mesta River, the line continues to the foot of Pirin Mt, where its final station is town of Dobrinishte.

The narrow-gauge railway connects two worlds - the past and the present. As well as the tale that the Rhodopes Mts tell: a tale of Orpheus and his mountain, which is still alive today.

Front Cover

A view of the Horseshoe meander of the Arda River, South Bulgaria

Photo by Prof. Dimcho Zahariev

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