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Editorial Note: Balkan Mountains – a symbol of liberty – Part II (Central Balkan)

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The middle part of Stara Planina is located between Zlatishki pass in the west and Vratnik pass in the east. It has a length of 185 km, its width varies from 15 to 20 km and occupies an area of 3400.9 km². This is the highest of the three parts of Stara planina Mt: its average altitude is 961 m. The highest peak in the Balkan Mountains is located here: Mount Botev (2376 m above sea level). The relief is mountainous and in places it is typically alpine. It is represented by a series of well-defined peaks, many of which are over 2000 m high. As a result of the ice ages, three small cirques were formed on the eastern slope of Mount Botev. The peaks alternate with saddles, through which pass several passes connecting Northern and Southern Bulgaria. The town of Gabrovo was built near one of the passages during the Middle Ages, which, due to the rapid industrial development at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, was called the "Bulgarian Manchester".

On the northern slopes of the Central Balkan Mountains, a number of transverse valleys are incised by the Vit, Osam, Vidima, Rositsa, and Yantra rivers, and on the southern slopes are the valleys of the Stryama, Tundzha, and Tuzha rivers. Here is also one of the two tectonic lakes in the Balkan Mountains under the Great Kupen Peak.

On the territory of the Central Balkan Mountains, there are some of the largest waterfalls in Bulgaria: Rayskoto praskalo Waterfall (124.5 m), Golyam Dzhendemski Waterfall (120 m), Vidimsko praskalo Waterfall (80 m), Kademliysko praskalo Waterfall (72 m), Babsko praskalo Waterfall (54 m), and Suvcharsko praskalo Waterfall (54 m). Rayskoto praskalo Waterfall is the highest permanent waterfall on the Balkan Peninsula.

I

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The nature of the Central Balkan Mountains is relatively well preserved. For this reason, the Bulgarka Nature park and the Central Balkan National park (Figure 1) were created here, the latter being declared a biosphere park under the Man and the Biosphere Program of UNESCO. In addition to the territory for strict protection in the biosphere park, there are designated buffer zones, as well as transitional zones, in which the application of sustainable practices is encouraged, guaranteeing a combination of economic development of the respective regions and nature protection in them.



A

B

Figure 1. Central Balkan National park: A. Rock phenomenon Lion's Head next to Echo Hut (Photo by Dimcho Zahariev, 2005); B. Panorama towards Uzana Hut (Photo by Dimcho Zahariev, 2005)

In the Steneto Reserve next to the village of Cherni Osam is the Raichova Dupka Cave. This is the second deepest abyssal cave in Bulgaria (-377 meters). It is characterized by numerous cave formations, sinter lakes, petrified waterfalls, cave curtains. The cave is not landscaped.

The beautiful nature has been noticed since the ancient Thracians. They settled not only in the Thracian lowland, south of the Balkan Mountains, but also on its slopes. The tribes that chose the mountain as their home are called Mountain Thracians by historians. This is evidenced by the remains of a number of Thracian fortresses, such as the Chertigrad Fortress (at 1284 m above sea level) near the village of Yamna, Ettorpole Municipality. It existed from IV-III centuries BC. until about the 6th century and was naturally protected - on top of nearly 100-meter cliffs and separated from the main ridge by a narrow isthmus. Other more famous Thracian fortresses are located on Mount Golyam Ostrets near the town of Apriltsi and near the village of Kaleitsa, Troyan Municipality. Thracian burial mounds were discovered near the village of Oreshak, Troyan Municipality.

II

The natural protection of the mountain was sought not only by the ancient Thracians. The Balkan Mountains are a safe protection of the Northern parts of Bulgaria from the campaigns of the emperors of Byzantium, who for centuries tried to win back the lands conquered by the Bulgarians. At the time when Bulgaria was part of the Ottoman Empire, the mountain was a safe haven for the rebels against the new government. Despite its protection, human treachery is why one of the most famous leaders of the national liberation resistance in the 19th century met his death in it. In the Central Balkan Mountains near the village of Ribaritsa, Teteven municipality, in 1876 Georgi Benkovski, one of the most prominent figures for the liberation of Bulgaria, was killed. One year later, again in the Central Balkan Mountains, but this time in its eastern part, a fateful battle took place that determined the course of the war that the Russian Empire waged against the Ottoman Empire for the liberation of Bulgaria. The place is Mount Shipka (or Saint Nicholas) and its emblematic role is immortalized with a monument of appreciation for the sacrifice of the soldiers who gave their lives for the freedom of Bulgaria.

Today, in the northern slopes of the mountain, at the end of the heroically defended pass in the 19th century, which is close to Mount Shipka, there is the Etara Architectural-Ethnographic Complex near the town of Gabrovo. This is the only open-air ethnographic museum in our country. In it you can see a reconstruction of the Bulgarian way of life, culture and craftsmanship (Figure 2). Again, the National Exhibition of Arts and Crafts is held in the Central Balkan Mountains. The place is the village of Oreshak, Troyan Municipality and presents objects of folk-art crafts from all ethnographic regions of Bulgaria.



Figure 2. Houses in the Etara Architectural-Ethnographic Complex (Photo by Dimcho Zahariev, 2021)

III

The city of Gabrovo itself is known for its characteristic humor. There is even a special Museum of Humor and Satire built. While the humor in the Shop area (probably many have heard of the famous Shop salad) is aimed at the surrounding people, the humor of Gabrovo residents is aimed at themselves. It is a curious fact that Gabrovo humor is very close to the jokes of the city of Aberdeen (Great Britain), despite the great geographical distance between the two cities and the lack of contacts in the past between them. Gabrovo is also known for the monument to Racho Kovacha, who is considered the creator of the city. This is the only monument built not on land, but in the bed of a river in Bulgaria. Local people joke that they placed the statue of Racho Kovača on a rock in the Yantra River, on the one hand, to save living space, and on the other hand, not to spend money on flowers for the monument.

On the northern slopes of the Central Balkan Mountains, there are two very famous balneological resorts. The first of them is located next to Voneshta Voda village, Veliko Tarnovo Municipality. The mineral water is recommended for the treatment of skin diseases, metabolic diseases and diseases of the upper respiratory tract. The composition of the water is very close to that of world-famous spas in the Swiss Alps and France. Several hotel complexes with mineral water operate in the village. Next to the village of Shipkovo, Troyan Municipality, there is the second balneotherapy complex. In the resort there are several boreholes and mineral springs, open pools and a balneological center, different in composition and purpose. The mineral water is recommended for the treatment of liver, kidney, stomach, neurological and eye diseases.

Lovers of winter sports can practice them in the Uzana ski resort, located 22 km from the town of Gabrovo. The geographical center of Bulgaria is located here. The resort has one professional ski track with a length of 1300 meters and offers conditions for slalom skiing and cross-country skiing. For beginner skiers there are 7 smaller ski tracks.

Central Balkan Mountains is also a place of culinary traditions. Gabrovo is famous for its pestil, which is traditionally made from local plums. Pestil is a fruit puree boiled without sugar and then dried. The production of this product may seem threatened by the confectionery industry, but it turns out that it is still produced today and is becoming increasingly popular.

Another traditional confectionery product is sesame halva, which is produced in the town of Yablanitsa. Halva originated in India and Central Asia, but was brought to Europe through the Ottoman Empire. As part of the Ottoman Empire, in the town of Jablanica, the production of halva began at the beginning of the 19th century and for a long time it was the main livelihood of the local population. The main ingredients of halva are: sesame tahini, sugar or honey and flavorings. Peanuts, walnuts, cocoa, almonds or pistachios can be added. In Bulgaria today tahini halva is made more often than sunflower tahini. Today, several local companies produce the region's traditional sesame halva and Turkish delight.

IV

Traditionally, one of the few Bulgarian cheeses with mold, called green cheese, is produced in the village of Cherni Vit, municipality of Teteven. It is made from unpasteurized, full-fat sheep's milk. The breeds are indigenous to Bulgaria: Teteven sheep and Karakachan sheep. Climatic conditions are also of key importance in the production: the mild climate, the large differences between the temperature during the day and the night and the increased humidity along the Cherni Vit River. What is unique about this production is that mold contamination is necessarily a natural process during ripening. In addition to molds, green cheese contains 16 species of lactic acid bacteria. All this contributes to the final result - the characteristic pleasant taste and aroma.

A typical meat product for the region is the Troyan lukanka. Lukanka is a specific raw-dried delicacy sausage, characteristic of Bulgarian cuisine. Here it is prepared according to an authentic Trojan recipe from selected beef (or buffalo) meat and pork, dried, smoked and flavored with a combination of Balkan spices.

We cannot fail to mention the drinks traditional to the Central Balkan Mountains: Trojan plum rakiya is a trademark of the entire mountain. Rakiya is a spirit drink, traditional for the Balkan Peninsula. Trojan plum rakiya is 42-43°, aged for one year, in which herbs are added - the list includes herbs from 45 different species of medicinal plants.

In conclusion, the Central Balkan Mountains is a place where you can find everything: history, beautiful nature, romantic places and places for relaxation and balneotherapy, traditional cuisine unique to the region and people who will welcome you with the typical Bulgarian hospitality.

Front Cover

A view of the eastern part of Dzhenem reserve, Central part of the Balkan Mountains

Photo by Prof. Dimcho Zahariev

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