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Macedonian Magic - Adrian Norris

In late March 2005 my wife Barbara and I visited Skopje, the capital city of Macedonia as part of various on-going projects she is undertaking to help museums in the former Eastern block.

Although a major earthquake devastated the main town of Skopje on the 26th of July 1963, it is interesting to note that the old town suffered relatively little major structural damage. Much of the town centre has since been redeveloped, but with the demolition of so much of the main town this left the city authorities with the opportunity to include within the redevelopment large areas of open space. A large area surrounding the ancient stone bridge over the River Vardar, which links the modern town centre with the old town, (also know as The Old Bazaar), and a stretch along its South bank is now an area of open spaces for cafés, concerts and other leisure activities.

The magic that is Macedonia started on our first evening in Skopje when we were entertained by an open-air concert by Irish entertainer and Eurovision Song Contest Winner, Johnny Logan, the stage for which had been set up in the square just outside our hotel.

Whilst my wife was working on a project for the Museum of Macedonia, I was invited by Ivan Dodovski, the Program Director for Culture & Communication of the Open Society Institute, Macedonia, a division of the Soros Foundation, to give two public lectures at the Macedonian Museum of Natural History in Skopje. Museum staff, government employees and the public attended these, with simultaneous translation being available. The lectures were based around the subject of Natural History Museums in the Modern World.

This invitation gave me the opportunity to visit the museum and talk to the director, Mr Klime Korobar, and his staff. This process was greatly helped firstly by Zoran Nikolov, an English-speaking museum guide, who guided me around the public displays as well as introducing me to various members of staff, and my official translator Maja, appointed by the Open Society Institute.

Dr Stanko Karaman founded the Macedonian Museum of Natural History in 1926 when he established through an official act, a Zoological Museum that then included a zoological collection in the city park, which is now run separately by the city authorities. The Zoology Museum, as established at that time, came under the auspices of the Museum of Southern Serbia. The Museum moved home several times over the years but the earthquake of 1963 badly damaged the building then housing the museum and its stored collections, and thus had to be demolished. The present building was constructed in 1969.



Macedonian Museum of Natural History

The Natural History displays are of good quality, even if a bit traditional, but it was interesting to see how they have been able to cover most of the major subject areas using only material collected from within the country's own relatively small political boundaries. This reminded me very much of the many local museums in Britain whose collecting is now restricted to material from within their own political boundaries. However, in most cases in Britain, the natural history displays are supported by material from outside these defined areas.

As indicated above the natural history museum, like all of the National Museums in Macedonia, restricts the content of its collections to material originating from Macedonia. The geopolitical landscape of the region has changed many times over the past hundred years or so, and is now very different from the geographical area known as Macedonia, a large part of which is now in Northern Greece. Prior to 1913 Macedonia was part of the Ottoman Empire and was thus ruled by the Turks, but after the first Balkan War, which started in October 1912 in which Montenegro, Serbia, Bulgaria and Greece took an active part in driving the Turks out of the Balkans, things changed drastically. In 1913, after the Turks had left, the area was partitioned and

a large part, Aegean Macedonia, was renamed Northern Greece, Bulgaria annexed Pirin Macedonia whilst Serbia took over Vardar Macedonia and renamed it Southern Serbia. After World War II the area then known as Southern Serbia, now mostly the present state of Macedonia, became a constituent republic of Yugoslavia under President Tito. After Tito's death nationalist pressures culminated in Macedonia declaring independence in December 1991.

The 1963 earthquake and the more recent troubles in the Balkans have left the staff feeling very isolated from the rest of the world. There are little or no funds to purchase the various publications they require, and little possibility of them travelling to meetings outside the region. I was asked on several occasions if I could try and arrange for overseas visitors to come to visit them, perhaps by organising an international conference, or help to arrange study tour, which could include a field trip and thus include visits to other areas, including the World Heritage Site of Lake Ohrid. I would be interested to know if any of our members would be interested in taking part in such a trip.

Request for Information.

The staff of the museum also asked me if I could help with locating material held in British Museums which originated from within the present boundaries of Macedonia. They are particularly interested in records of birds, but would like information and records on all groups of animals and plants to help them establish a fuller database of the flora and fauna of their country. It would also be very interesting to know how much material is held in British Institutes from the World Heritage Site of Lake Ohrid.

If you have any information, or would like to visit Skopje and Macedonia please contact me at the following address: Mr Adrian Norris, 17, West Park Drive, Leeds, LS16 5BL
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Permanent Bird Display



Permanent Geological Displays



Permanent Palaeontology Display



Permanent Botany Display