

16. Prespa Lakes - Albania, FYROM, Greece



Prespa is a complex of two lakes shared among Greece, Albania and the FYROM, encircled by a ring of tall mountains. Due to its isolation, antiquity, climatic conditions and geomorphologic characteristics, the region's biodiversity is rich and many rare or endemic species are found there. The wetland area and its surroundings support an impressive number of plant species and provide a feeding and breeding habitat for a large number of bird species (among which is an important pelican colony, the largest in the world). The area is an important stopover for many birds during their spring and autumn migrations. In 2000 the Prespa Park was established by the three neighbouring countries, the first trans-boundary protected area in the Balkans.

Earliest archaeological finds date back to the Bronze Age. Prespa has been under the rule of the Macedonian Kings, the Byzantines, the Bulgarians, the Franks and the Ottomans, until the beginning of the 20th century when the borders were secured by the Treaty of Bucharest in 1913 and the area was divided among the three states. Many Byzantine and Post-Byzantine monuments can be found in the region, such as the basilica of Agios Achillios (10th century AD), where the relics of the saint were kept, brought from Larissa by Czar Samuel. Across the border, in FYROM, the small church of St. George in Kurbinovo is decorated with frescos painted in 1191. On the shores of both lakes small hermitages are carved in the rocks (with important rock paintings).

Traditional boats, dugout canoes, were in use until the end of 1960s, when they were replaced with punts (shallow hulls, used mainly in rivers). Most common fishing methods practised were seine netting, long lines, gill and trammel nets (pezovola, characteristic of the region). *Pelaizia* is

an ancient fishing method used by the fishermen of both Micro and Macro Prespa. Traps are used, in order to catch fish that nest around *pelaizia* or *kedra*, which are constructed piles of juniper branches (*kedra*).

Protected by the surrounding mountains, Prespa people managed an almost self-reliant way of life up until the 1960s. Fishing has always been a major economic activity. Traditional architecture is distinctive. Locals have always been using raw materials from the wetlands, as well as stones from around the region for the construction of houses. Although restoration efforts are taking place, the danger of deterioration of the local architectural character is apparent. Moreover, during the last decades, locals abandoned many other traditional activities, such as buffalo and cattle grazing on the reed-beds, burning the reeds during winter time, thus providing spawning grounds for fish and amphibians (and consequently, food for many waterfowl). In addition, farmers on the Greek part of the wetland turned to intensive monoculture of beans, abandoning other traditional cultivations, while on the FYROM's side intensive apple growing is practised. Traditional fishing is now almost extinct.

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Research and collaborative efforts with the local population have resulted in combined efforts to restore the former human-nature relationship and traditional practices towards natural resources (e.g. restoration of the wet meadows). The Greek NGO that is currently active in the region is the Society for the Protection of Prespa (SPP). Among the programmes organised and implemented by SPP is the restoration of three traditional buildings, the publication of booklets on the restoration of traditional houses, the promotion of traditional products and the establishment of the Prespa Centre for Nature and Anthropos.

Although the festival of *Narcissus poeticus* is now abandoned, folklore festivals are still organised by locals, while culinary traditions are still alive and practised among the population of the lakes.