

19. Skocjan Jame – Skocjan Caves, Slovenia



Skocjanske jame or the Skocjan Caves are situated in the south-western part of Slovenia, in the region called Kras or Karst, after which the typical stone formations were named. It is a rather long and complex cave system, over 5800 m long and 209 m deep. The cave environment hosts a significant number of endemic subterranean animal invertebrate species, more than seven species of bats, while the dry grasslands around the cave system hold a significant number of rare and endangered bird species. At the same time, the flora of the collapsed dolines, galleries and shallow chasms of the river valley is extremely diverse and characteristic of the mixed Mediterranean and Alpine climate.

More than 30 archaeological sites are to be found in the region, dating to the Neolithic Age. The Velika doline, in which the Reka River disappears before it enters the Sököcjan Caves, could be the mythological entrance into the underworld, Hades. The entrance to Musja jama cave remarkably resembles the description in Homer's *Odyssey* of the entrance to Hades and a quantity of archaeological evidence found in the cavern supports this theory. The entire south-eastern Alpine region was one of the most significant pilgrimage sites in the Mediterranean at the beginning of the 1st millennium BC, related to the afterlife and communing with ancestral spirits.

Karst ponds built in the villages for watering the cattle, wells, ice pits, mills, sawmills, walls erected to protect the land from the strong north *bora* wind and traditional houses built entirely of stone blend with the characteristic landscape and are proof of the adaptation of human activities to special ecosystems. A land where soil and water were sparse led to demanding cultivation techniques and reduced production sufficing to domestic consumption. Animal husbandry and apiculture supplemented the inhabitants' income. Mills and sawmills along the Reka River supported local economic development, especially between the First and Second World Wars, as well as coal mining and resin production. Lime-kilns were functioning until 1970 and stone-cutting is still today a thriving occupation.

Water shortages have led to exploration of the subterranean and the development of speleology, while horizons were also broadened for a number of sciences, such as archaeology, biology, geology and hydrology. Cave tourism and relevant educational programmes were developed and contribute today to the region's economy.

The churches of the area are of a characteristic architecture, with influences from Istria, Venice and Salzburg. The traditional stone houses have a stone roof, small windows and 50-100 cm thick walls. Mills and sawmill reconstructions are planned for the near future, to preserve and promote their cultural value. Traditional dishes and bread are made from a variety of wheat grains at carnival celebrations, while rituals are still practised. In addition, a multitude of dialects is spoken in the region and several fairytales and stories are preserved.