

Lake Ohrid: A Macedonian Treasure for Cultural History and Nature Lovers

I had my first glimpse of Lake Ohrid while descending steep mountain roads after crossing the Albanian border into southwest Macedonia. I had my first taste of Lake Ohrid with a grilled Brown Trout for lunch, a delicacy found only in this lake and its river tributaries. With a flavour between a trout and an Atlantic salmon, this simply-presented entree was a delicious introduction to Macedonian cuisine and the many unique natural and cultural treasures of Lake Ohrid.

Ringed by snow-capped peaks and situated at 695 m/2,280 ft above sea level, this ancient lake has been home to documented settlement for thousands of years including nearly 2,000 years of Christianity. Here is one of the first Christian churches of Europe built years before Christianity was even recognized by the Roman Empire. On the crossroads of civilizations east and west, north and south, it has witnessed many cultural and spiritual changes, while surviving and thriving through them all.



Declared in 1979 to be a UNESCO World Heritage Site with both cultural and natural significance, Lake Ohrid is the deepest lake in the Balkans (286 m/940 ft deep) and one of Europe's oldest lakes. It straddles the mountainous border between southwestern Macedonia and eastern Albania with two-thirds of the lake in Macedonia. Thought to have originated three million years ago, Ohrid is one of a handful of lakes in the world as ancient as this, Lake Baikal and Lake Tanganyika among them. Its longevity is attributed to the fact that it is 50% fed by underground springs whose flow filters out much of the river-fed sediment that fills most lakes within 100,000 years. Because of its age, the Lake has fostered the development of many unique fish and other aquatic creatures, hosting more than 200 endemic species of worldwide importance.



Also a part of the UNESCO World Heritage designation is the charming small city of Ohrid (ohrid.com), population 43,000. Exploring the Balkans in September 2013 on a 24-day small-group **ElderTreks** (eldertreks.com) adventure tour of Albania, Macedonia and Bulgaria, I welcomed our longer-than-unusual, three-day stay in Ohrid. I felt immediately at home strolling the expansive waterfront boulevards with shade trees and benches as well as the cobbled streets and stellar shopping of the old town. Once the capital of Old Macedonia, Ohrid has long been a popular vacation destination for Europeans and more recently for international visitors as well.



In antiquity, the earliest inhabitants were ancient Greek and Illyrian tribal people, dating back to King Phillip II of Macedon (Alexander the Great's father), who built extensively in the Ohrid area. A few hundred years later, the region became part of the Roman Empire, leaving behind plenty of archaeological heritage, much of it impressively restored. Next came the Slavs and the Bulgars in the 9th century, a time when the name Ohrid first appeared. There was a Byzantine re-conquest of the region in 1018, then much later the Ottoman Turks folded it into their vast empire until 1912. Even today the city's religious mix is 80% Orthodox Christian and 18% Muslim.

There is a legend that Ohrid once had 365 chapels within its town boundaries, one for every day of the year. There are far fewer today but the area remains a treasure trove of 46 exquisitely-decorated chapels and churches, some in small caves that are a challenge to access but well worth the effort. With a documented 2,500 square meters of icon frescoes in Ohrid, it is no wonder that the city has earned the name "Jerusalem of the Balkans."



Not to be missed, the icon gallery of Ohrid is a small museum with striking icon art through the ages, all from the area. It is well lit, the icon panels are dramatically hung, and signs are in English. Next to the church of St. Clement, the gallery is easily appreciated in an hour.

Ever heard of Ohrid pearls? Incredible but true, the story goes that a local family invented a pearl in 1924

using mother-of-pearl shell covered in an emulsion made from the scales of the small Lake Ohrid Plasica fish. The recipe for these apparently-durable, man-made pearls with a velvety shine reflecting all the colours of the rainbow, remains a family secret to this day. Even Britain's Queen Elizabeth has a necklace, presented by the President of Macedonia on a state visit. It is best to buy your Ohrid pearls at accredited jewelry shops as there are fakes for sale too.

Ohrid Airport, known as Apostle Paul Airport, is open year round to international flights. One of many reasons to visit the city and its famous lake is a series of well-established festivals. These include the Ohrid Summer Festival, July to August; the Ohrid International Choir Festival at the end of August, the Balkan Festival of Folk Songs and Dances at the beginning of July; and Ohrid Fest in August in which musicians from across the Balkan Peninsula participate. While there is plenty of hotel and self-catering accommodation in the city and surrounding area, booking around these festivals should be done early.

By Alison Gardner

Editor/journalist, Alison Gardner, is a global expert on nature-based vacations and cultural/educational travel. Her Travel with a Challenge web magazine, www.travelwithachallenge.com, is a recognized source of new and established operators, accommodations and richly-illustrated feature articles covering all types of senior-friendly alternative travel.

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