



Bear Conservation Survey Expedition – Macedonia

Pre-Adventure (PRE)

Over 70% of the Macedonian territory is mountainous, covered by large forests, high valleys, crystal water lakes and wild rivers running through deep canyons.

Macedonian National parks cover large area of these mountains, protecting the untouched wilderness and rich biodiversity. Among others, they are home of the Big Five European mammals: the Bear, the Wolf, the Wild Boar, the Deer and the Lynx. Also, a significant population of endemic wild goat (chamois) – which is crucial for the existence of the endangered Lynx – lives here.

On this expedition you will practically become part of the Rangers team, working with them on surveying, feeding and conservation activities and accomplishing very important tasks for the sustainable existence of the wildlife. You will also learn how to behave in the wilderness, to trace wild animals and to capture their presence. You'll follow "Leave-no-trace" practices, learning how to minimize human impact in nature. But the greatest attraction will be the real chance to see and observe Bear, Wolf, or if lucky, a Lynx in their natural habitat.

The idea behind this newly-developed tour is for small groups of paying guests to join the park rangers and take part in conservation activities under their direction. These activities will include habitat repair, help with scientific survey work and the construction of some 'guest amenities' such as fencing, pathway construction using only natural materials, and related items, which will help the parks to better manage tourism and limit the impact of visitors. These tours will also allow Macedonia's National Parks to generate an income from responsible tourism that will directly fund their conservation work (all the protected areas in the region are desperately underfunded).

Guests will also take part in some feeding programs which are necessary to conserve the populations (a European Brown Bear has a home range in excess of 45,000 hectares, larger than nearly all the parks in the region, and the parks sustain the greatest number of animals – around 150 Bears in Mavrovo and 50 in Pelister). When the Bear stays outside the protected area in search of food they often fall victim to unlicensed hunters and road traffic, they may also cause a nuisance to local farmers. For this reason local farms donate food to the parks to help the Bear and Lynx through lean periods. Feeding is normal during a particularly dry summer, heavy winter or when they have young. This process has been going on here for a long time, and the parks have now constructed viewing hides close to the feeding stations for small groups of paying guests to spend a night guided by Park Rangers.



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Detailed Itinerary:

Pre-Adventure (PRE)

Day 1: 06 May 2016 Skopje

This adventure begins at Skopje Airport, with a warm welcome by our agency's staff. Guests will be picked up as they arrive and we will transfer them to the hotel in Skopje. After checking in, there will be time to rest, refresh and for individual activities.

17.00 After a brief introduction and orientation presentation at the hotel, our guide will take the group on a sightseeing tour at the city center and the old town core.

19.30 Dinner at a traditional restaurant with local cuisine.

21.00 Transfer to the hotel and overnight.

**) For the late afternoon arrivals we'll organize separate transfer to Skopje. Depending on the timing, guests could check in to the hotel and join the group for dinner.*

Day 2: 07 May 2016 Skopje - Mavrovo National Park

07.00 Early breakfast and check out of the hotel.

**) During the breakfast, our staff will put the luggage in the vehicle(s), to be ready to go.*

07.30 Departure to Mavrovo National Park. After around 1,5 hours driving we'll reach our destination and accommodate at Trnica Mountain Lodge. The accommodation is not luxury, but clean and well maintained, with joint toilets/showers. Check in, refresh and prepare for the daily activities.

10.00 Transfer to the Park's Information center, to have a brief (30 min) orientation presentation and meet our hosts, the park Rangers and mountain guides. Continue to the Reproduction Center, where our hosts will explain the purpose of the facility and the seasonal conservation operations the guests could attend to. The group will be divided into 2 parties of maximum 6 persons, each accompanied by a park Ranger and depart on foot to different locations. After accomplishing their daily tasks, both parties will join and exchange experiences. A picnic lunch will be offered during these activities, followed by a brief orientation and behavior instructions for the afternoon conservation operation. The rangers will provide food for the wild goats and the equipment we will need on our expedition.

14.00 Leave the Reproduction center and join a 4x4 Jeep safari to the wild goat habitat area of the park. The wild goat is a main prey species of the Lynx, but also an important part of the feeding chain of the bear, wolf and even the golden eagle. Its sustainable existence is one of the most important challenges of the park management. We will take salt licks and mineral tablets for the goats, a vital supplement to their diet in this period of the year. During the drive, we will also look for many of the other animals which inhabit the higher regions of the park including eagle, falcon, wolf, deer and bear. To reach the feeding stations, we'll continue hiking through dense woods and rocky grounds, stalking to capture wild animals' presence, learning how recognize their traces, scent and sounds. After delivering the animal foods, continue stalking and observing while heading to the vehicles and drive back.

18.30 Back to the mountain lodge. Time for rest and refreshment before we depart for dinner.

19.30 Dinner is held in a traditional restaurant where we will try local specialties, before an early night in preparation for the next day.

Day 3: 08.05.2016 Mavrovo National Park – Pelister National Park

04.00 is about the right time in wildlife circles to get up and prepare for wildlife observation. (Most of the wild animals feed during the night and go back to their habitats at dawn break). Before leaving the lodge we'll have a hot tea, coffee and soup. We'll also take packed food to have later for breakfast.

05.00 Departure for bear viewing trek led by Mavrovo National Park Rangers. After up to an hour 4x4 driving to the location, we take a two-hour guided hike, stalking and tracking traces, into the most densely populated 'bear areas' in the park. We will look for evidence of the bears, tracks and scat and also to see the entrance to the winter hibernation caves. With luck we may be able to see some of the bears as the sun rises. Breakfast will be provided at the end of the hike. Following breakfast we drive back to the lodge.

10.00 Arrival at the mountain lodge. Time for refreshment, rest and packing. Before leaving, the group will have brief farewell meeting with the rangers and the guides, to exchange impressions, comment and evaluate their experiences from the tour.

**) During the meeting, our staff will put the luggage in the mini van, to be ready to go.*

11.30 Check out and departure towards Pelister National Park. After about 2,5 hours drive we'll reach our accommodation at Brajcino village.



14.00 Welcome meeting with the Park Rangers at the village taverna, following a traditional Macedonian slow food lunch. Our host will explain the way of preparing and enjoying domestic organic food and drinks. Also, we'll learn about the traditional use of the forestry products and herbs to prepare homemade tea, sweets and traditional medicine.

15.00 Check in the private guesthouses. The accommodation is not luxury, but clean and well maintained, with joint toilets/showers. Time to refresh and relax for a couple of hours before we depart for the night bear-viewing expedition.

17.00 Our bear watch expedition starts at 17.00h so that we can hike about 1,5 hour out to the viewing hide before sunset, keeping noise to a minimum and hopefully keeping downwind of our destination.

**) If the weather is inclement the group will initially be transported by 4x4 (20-30'), but close to the hide will leave the vehicles and continue on foot (15-20'), hoping that any rain will mask our noise and scent.*

The sun sets at 19.30h at the beginning of May, we aim to be safely ensconced in our hides before 19.00h. Conditions are pretty basic in the hides (as you will be among the first adventurers to work with the Rangers), but warm and dry. We can provide sleeping bags (but it is better to bring your own), hot drinks and snacks are provided as we wait quietly for the bears, deer, boar or wolf (and who knows if we are really lucky a Lynx!) to come in and feed. Once in the hide we will maintain a silent vigil (with hot drinks and snacks) until midnight, our best chance to see the Dinaric Pindus Brown Bear in the wild.

24.00 On this expedition, we stay until Midnight before the rangers come in a 4x 4 to drive us back. After approximately 30 minutes we'll arrive at the village, where a hot soup and tea will be served before going to bed.

**) It is possible to depart the hide earlier, if we are lucky to see some wild animals and everybody is satisfied.*

***) Guests can also stay until the morning at the hide, increasing their chances to spot wild animals at dawn break, when usually bears walk back to their habitats.*



Day 4: 09.05.2016 Pelister National Park – Bitola – Ohrid

09.00 Breakfast and check out the guesthouses. Time for individual exploring and meeting the locals before leaving.

10.00 Depart Brajcino and drive 30-40', to the Eastern slopes of Pelister NP. Visit of the Park's Information center followed by a welcome meeting with the park management and brief introduction and orientation presentation.

11.30 Join the park rangers on an easy, up to 2 hours hike, introducing the main attributes of mount Pelister: The so called "stone rivers" (remains from the glacier period), the alpine vegetation and the rare prehistoric type of pine, Pinus Peuce (Molika). At the end of the hike guests will participate in seasonal conservation activities with the park's rare fauna.

14.00 After a short (15') drive we arrive at the mountain village of Dihovo. Lunch is held at Villa Dihovo, including plenty of fresh salad and fruits, choice of homemade dishes and local specialties, like Vlach pie (Vlashka Pita) and Yogurt. Also tasting of homemade beer, wine and rakija (brandy). Following lunch we'll take a recreational walk around the village, to visit the local beekeeper's plant and hear about the ways to protect bee baskets from bear strikes.

16.00 Drive to Bitola (15'), the second largest town in Macedonia. Once a significant center on the Via Ignacia road, Bitola later became the diplomatic and cultural center of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans. Guided walking tour at the old town core, evoking romantic reflections of past times: the Consuls, the bohemians and serenades... Having a coffee on Sirok Sokak Street is more than a century long tradition, so we'll have a short break before we go on. Depart to Ohrid and drive around on hour to our destination.

18.00 Our tour ends at 18.00h, by dropping you at your hotel in Ohrid.

***) Secret/surprise highlight:** A visit of the archaeological site of *Heraclea Lyncestis*, founded by King Philip of Macedon in IV cent. BC, as a regional seat of Pelagonia district. Now displaying mostly Roman/early Christian remains, with theatre, monumental fountain, and early churches with colorful floor mosaics. The most beautiful one is also the most mysterious. It contains compositions of local plants and animals, with symbolical meaning (among them is the earliest image of the mountain Lynx!). Our task will be to solve this ancient mystery, before leaving. The site curator will help us...

Total duration of the Adventure

4 days / 3 nights

Starting location, date and time

Skopje Airport, 06.05.2016, flight arrival times will vary

Ending location, date and time

Hotel in Ohrid, 09.05.2016, 18:00 h

Minimum / maximum number of pax

- Minimum 4 pax
- Maximum 12 pax

Difficulty rating

Easy / Moderate

Cost per Guest

486 EUR / 516 USD

What is included in the price

- Accommodation: 1 overnights at a hotel in Skopje, 1 overnight at a Mountain lodge in Mavrovo NP and 1 overnight at private guesthouses in Pelister NP
- Full board: 3 x breakfast, 3 x dinner and 3 x lunch
- Water, soft drinks and refreshments
- Transfers by mini-van and/or 4x4 vehicles
- Guided sightseeing tours in Skopje and Bitola
- Guide services and escort by licensed mountain guides
- Park Rangers escort and guiding
- Contribution for the Parks for using their resources and facilities
- Equipment needed for the conservation operations and park jobs

What is not included

- Personal gear and equipment
- Alcoholic drinks, unless they are served by the hosts for degustation
- Non mentioned services or activities, personal expenses and tips

Guides:

- 1) **Mavrovo NP: Mr Fejsel Idrizi**, UIMLA licensed mountain guide (English speaking)
- 2) **Pelister NP: Mr Jonche Ilievski**, UIMLA licensed mountain guide (English speaking)



PA-Bear Watch Macedonia

