

North Macedonia

North Macedonia is the most southern country of the former Yugoslavia. It's bounded by Serbia and Kosovo to the north, Bulgaria to the east, Greece to the south and Albania to the west. It has no access to the sea.



After independence in 1991, Greece forbade to use the name « Macedonia », so that for many years the country has been called « FYROM » (Former Yugoslav(ian) Republic Of Macedonia). At the same time Greece also prevented the FYROM from joining the European Union, since the membership requires the approval of all the members. Both questions were simultaneously solved in 2018 by the Treaty of Prespa. A national referendum endorsed (91%) the new official name (« Republic of North Macedonia »), together with the accession to the EU and NATO. Since 2020, the EU is negotiating with North Macedonia and Albania to determine the conditions of the accession.

The country is as large as Albania or Belgium (25,000km²) and its population is more than 2 million inhabitants.

Geography of North Macedonia

The country is crossed by the Vardar, river that rises in the west, near Gostivar, before flowing northeastward to Skopje, the capital city, and then through the whole country from NW to SE. Then it crosses the border with Greece, where it's called « Axios », and finally it empties into the Aegean Sea, just to the west of Thessaloniki.

The Vardar separates the country in two from west to east. On the physical map below, we can see to the west of the river a string of mountain ranges, that begins in the NW with the Šar Mountains (Šar planina) straddling North Macedonia and Albania. To visit them we can climb the BIG Prevallë/Prevalac and Brezovicë/Brezovica Ski Resort in Kosovo or Ljuboten in this Challenge.



Brezovicë/Brezovica in Kosovo



Ljuboten in North Macedonia

Along the Albanian border, the Šar Mountains are prolonged to the south by the Korab Mts. (shared highest point at 2764m), and Jablanica (2257m), to the NW of Struga. We'll come close to the first in Strezimir (MKN004) and to the second in the homonymous Jablanica (MKN017). Between the two mounts, we cross the Mavrovo National Park.

Going eastward, we face a second fold: the West Vardar and Pelagonia Mountain Range (Pelagonia is the region located in the south-west, with the cities of Prilep, Bitola and Resen on the map below).



From north to south:

The Suva Gora and the Jacupica Mts. (aka Mokra Mts.7), among which the sublime Solunska glava (2540m), that requires a MTB. In the challenge, we see it very well from Papradište (MKN048, 987m).



In the centre, from west to east (see the map):

Stogovo (2273m). We approach it in Novak (MKN016).

Buševa planina (1791m), the mountain near Kruševo and MKN022 Krst Xristov (« the Holy Cross »).

Babuna (1384m). The BIG (MKN036) with the same name is at 1088m.



The Holy Cross near Kruševo



Babuna

In the south:

-Plaçenska planina (Stalev kamen, 1999m).

-Galičica (Bajrače, 1802m on the map). The road to MKN030 is 1600m high.

-Baba. The highest point (Pelister, 2601m) is only accessible by MTB, but we can visit its sides in Pelister (MKN033, 1436m) and Nižepole (MKN034, 1493m) Ski Centres.

-Selečka planina (Visoka, 1472m and not 1742 like on the map). MKN039-Pisokal lies at its bottom.



Mont Pelister



Galičica

A little to the SE, the Crna Reka (« Black river ») and the Vardar surround the Kozjak (1814m) and the Kožuf (2171m) Mts. We can climb the second up to the ski resort (MKN050, 1729m).

To the east of the Vardar, the map shows 6 ranges :

-Crna Gora (highest point: Ramno, 1651m), to the north of Skopje. We almost reach it at MKN041.

-Osogovska planina (Carev vrv, 2085m and Ruen at the Bulgarian border, 2252m).

-Plačkovica (Lisec, 1754m). Kozbunar (MKN066) 1440m is a nice stop-off point.

-Konečka planina (Vučjak, 1158m). Visible in the climb to Leskovica (MKN067, 742m).

-Ogražden (Ograždenets, 1744m). Near Suvi Laki (MKN070, 1183m).

-Belasica (Tumba, 1880m, near the tripoint MKN-Bulgaria-Greece).



Crna Gora – Ramno



Tourism in North Macedonia

The country has 3 national parks all located in the west and south-west. The largest is Mavrovo. We've selected 7 climbs in it, among them Mavrovo itself (MKN010), that allows to reach the lake, to ride along it and to climb to the observation point. From Gostivar, the climb is 32km long for a 1150m elevation gain.

-The track to Strezimir (MKN004) helps to approach Korab at the Albanian border.

-In the western valley, we find a few perched villages. We took two of them: Vidušë (MKN009) for its 17 hairpins and Skudrinje (MKN013) for its 11 hairpins and its high intensity (3,3km-292m). The Orthodox Bigorski Monastery (MKN011) is located there as well.

-Lazaropole (MKN015) is a mountain village (1300m high) and a real haven of peace.

-To end the visit of the NP, we've been seduced by the little Sveti Spas Church in Selce (MKN014) and by its unexpected final steep section.



The Mavrovo Lake in the NP



The Bigorski Monastery

Galičica is the second NP (picture below to the left). It makes the connection between the Lakes Ohrid and Prespa. We'll discover it thanks to the 850m elevation gain of MKN030 (both sides) and Velestovo (MKN029).



Pelister is the third NP (picture above to the right), it's situated more to the east, between the Lake Prespa and the city of Bitola. There we took the Pelister (MKN033) and Nižepole (MKN034) Ski Centres.

The World Heritage sites

One site is in our list: the Ohrid Region. We can visit it from the city of Ohrid itself (from the Samuel's Fortress, MKN028), from Velestovo (MKN029, 4km at 9%) and Galičica (MKN030) already mentioned. The road from Struga to Albania gives a fourth opportunity, its top lies beyond the border (ALB051 Qafa e Thanës).



The Lake Ohrid from the fortress



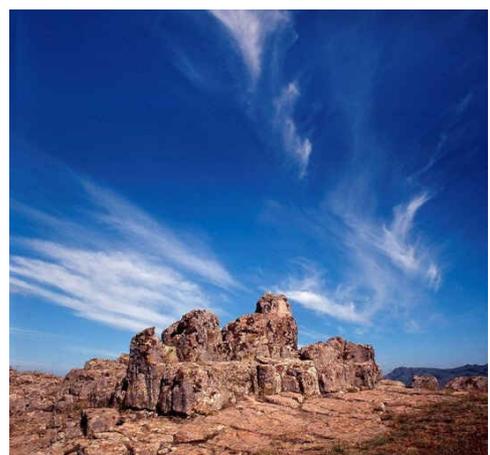
and from Velestovo

From the UNESCO Tentative List we've selected the Kurbinovo Monastery (MKN031), the Markovi kuli (« Marko's Towers », MKN038) above Prilep and the Kokino Archaeological Site (MKN053).

The Church of St. George in Kurbinovo is protected for its Byzantine frescoes. The Markovi kuli are the ruins of a medieval castle built on a rocky spur and Kokino is a big rock (« Tatitchev kamen »), that would have been used as astronomical observatory or as sacred mountain in the Bronze Age.



Markovi kuli above the Prilep Plateau



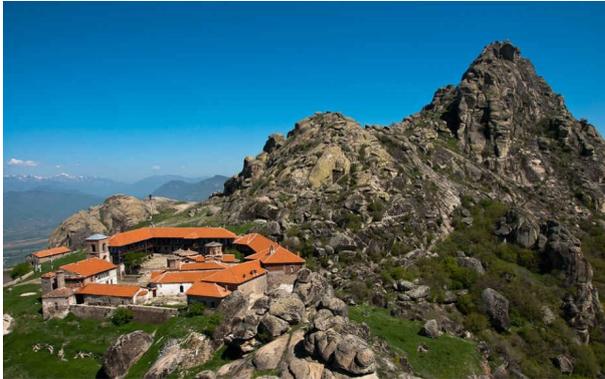
Kokino

The cultural heritage

Orthodox monasteries are many. The most impressive of the ten is Treskavec (MKN037), with its winding road on the hillside, the monastery clung to its rock and very respectable data (7,4km-580m and 689 europoints). Zrze (MKN021) is shorter, but more intense (2,9km-263m and 305pts). Varovište-Osogovo (MKN055) is also in the Top3 of the monasteries (5,6km-435m and 466pts).

With regard to panoramas, Slivnica (MKN032) and Krklino (MKN035) are really worth seeing. The first is near Kurbinovo above the Lake Prespa and the second towers above Bitola.

The other 5 are Bigorski Manastir (MKN011, already mentioned), Gorni Manastirec (018), Žurče (024), Slepče (025) and Lesново (059).



Treskavec



Krklino

Two monumental crosses

The 66m high Millennium Cross (043) was built above Skopje to celebrate the 2,000 years of Christianity. The one near Kruševo (022) is half the size, 33 like Christ's age.

2 fortresses: Kalaja e Sellcës (002) and Ohrid (028).

1 archaeological site: Bargala (065), ancient Byzantine city.



The Millennium Cross (043)



Bargala (065)

3 memorials:

Near Kruševo, Mečkin Kamen (« Bear Stone », 023) commemorates a local uprising against the Ottoman Empire in 1903.

Zebnjak (052) celebrates the Serbian victory over the Ottoman army in Kumanovo in the first Balkan War in 1912.

The memorial park in Smilevo (026) was built in honour of Dame Gruev, one of the founders of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization against the Ottoman Empire and born in the village.

The natural heritage

Besides the 3 NP and the Lakes Ohrid and Prespa, the challenge also visits the Lake Kozjak. It's a 32km long dam lake on the Treska River. Its southern side can be visited in Kolomot (008). On the northern side, the top of the 045 is an exceptional viewpoint.



Aerial picture of the Lake Kozjak

A few waterfalls: Ravna Reka (068) and Kolešino (072).

Krstec Tepe (007) is a summit located in the Jasen Protected Area, at the end of a very nice mid mountain road (11km-800m and 734pts).

A wind farm above Bogdanci (075), near the border with Greece.



Road to Krstec Tepe



Bogdanci Wind Park

Where to go skiing in North Macedonia?

Above Tetovo (Popova Šapka, BIG), in Kruševo (022 Krst Xristov and 023 Mečkin Kamen), above Bitola (033 Pelister and 034 Nižepole), in Kočani (060 Ponikva) and in Kožuf (050).

Sport in North Macedonia

In europoints

The Top 3 is made of Kožuf (1200pts), Ramno (1108) and Ponikva (1022). Then Suvi Laki (1004), Popova Šapka (979), Mavrovsko Ezero (906), Golak (868) and Ljuboten (833).



The road to Kožuf



Ponikva

Bombs

Viduše is the best (36), then the Manastir Treskavec (33), Kalište and Golak (31), Jablanica and Ljuboten (30), the Kalaja e Sellcës, Ramno, Varovište-Osogovo Manastir and Velestovo (29), and the Zrze Monastery (28).



View to Delčevo from Golak



Zrze on its rocky spur

Elevation gains (higher than 900m)

Kožuf has the best elevation gain (1548m). Then, Ponikva (1284), Ramno (1277), the BIG Popova Šapka (1244), Mavrovsko Ezero (1151), Kaluzliska (1064), Suvi Laki (955) and Golak (903).



Popova Šapka



The road to Sumi Laki

Distance (longer than 20km)

Always Kožuf (34km), Mavrovsko Ezero (33), Ravna Reka (29), Babuna (27), Mrežičko (26), Ramno (23), Suvi Laki and Belanovce (21), and Ponikva (20).



Ravna Reka clearing

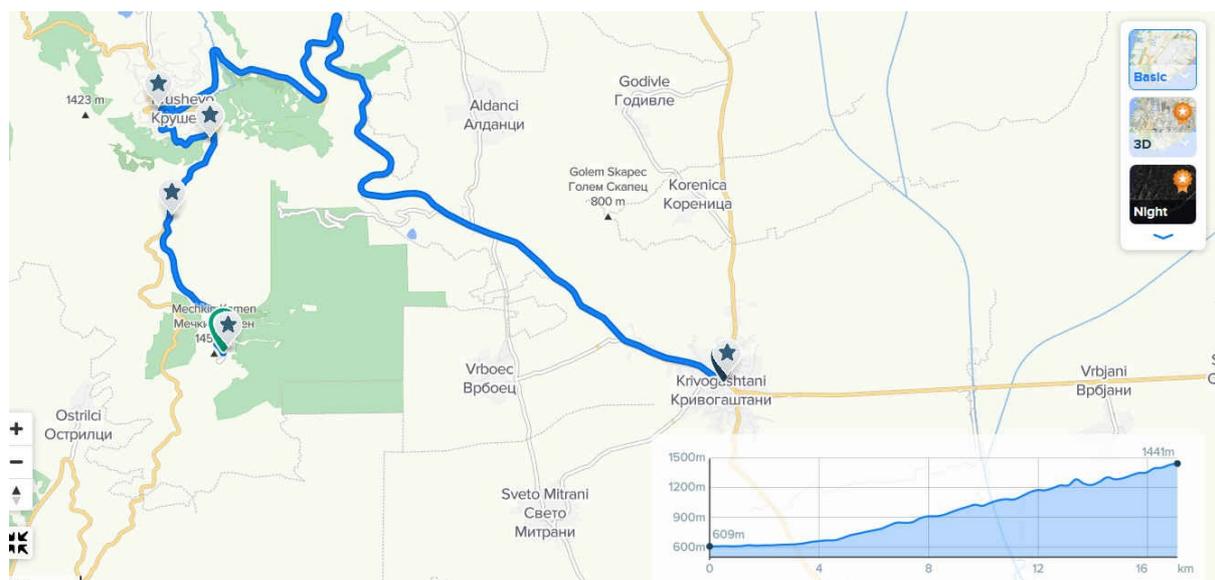


Mrežičko

The media climbs

A National Hill Climb Championship takes place annually. From 2012 to 2017, it has been organized in Kruševo, with the finish line at Mečkin Kamen (023), like in 2012, or at the Holy Assumption Church near the Holy Cross (022), like in 2014.

From 2019 to 2021, the race moved to Bitola, with the top at Nižepole (034).



The program in 2012: Krivogaštani-Kruševo-Mečkin Kamen



The finish line at Holy Assumption



Toward Nižepole

A few speed hill climbs are organized in North Macedonia:

The road to Kruševo interests all the climbers, by car and by bike, and Mečkin Kamen in particular.

<http://www.rallycross-photo.com/heuvelklm2/championships/macedonia/krusevo/>



The road to Ponikva Ski Centre (MKN060) is the scene of the Kočani Hill Climb:

<http://www.rallycross-photo.com/heuvelklm2/championships/macedonia/ponikva-kocani/>

Above Skopje, the Mount Vodno (Millennium Cross, MKN043), due to its location, is necessarily a very popular destination for outdoor activities around the capital city.

By road bike: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E9E3YdVbel>

By MTB, especially downhill: <https://www.mtbproject.com/directory/8023976/vodno-mountain>

By car: <http://www.rallycross-photo.com/heuvelklm2/championships/macedonia/vodno/>



The mount Vodno by MTB