

border zone:

AROUND LAKE PRESPA



by Christopher Deliso

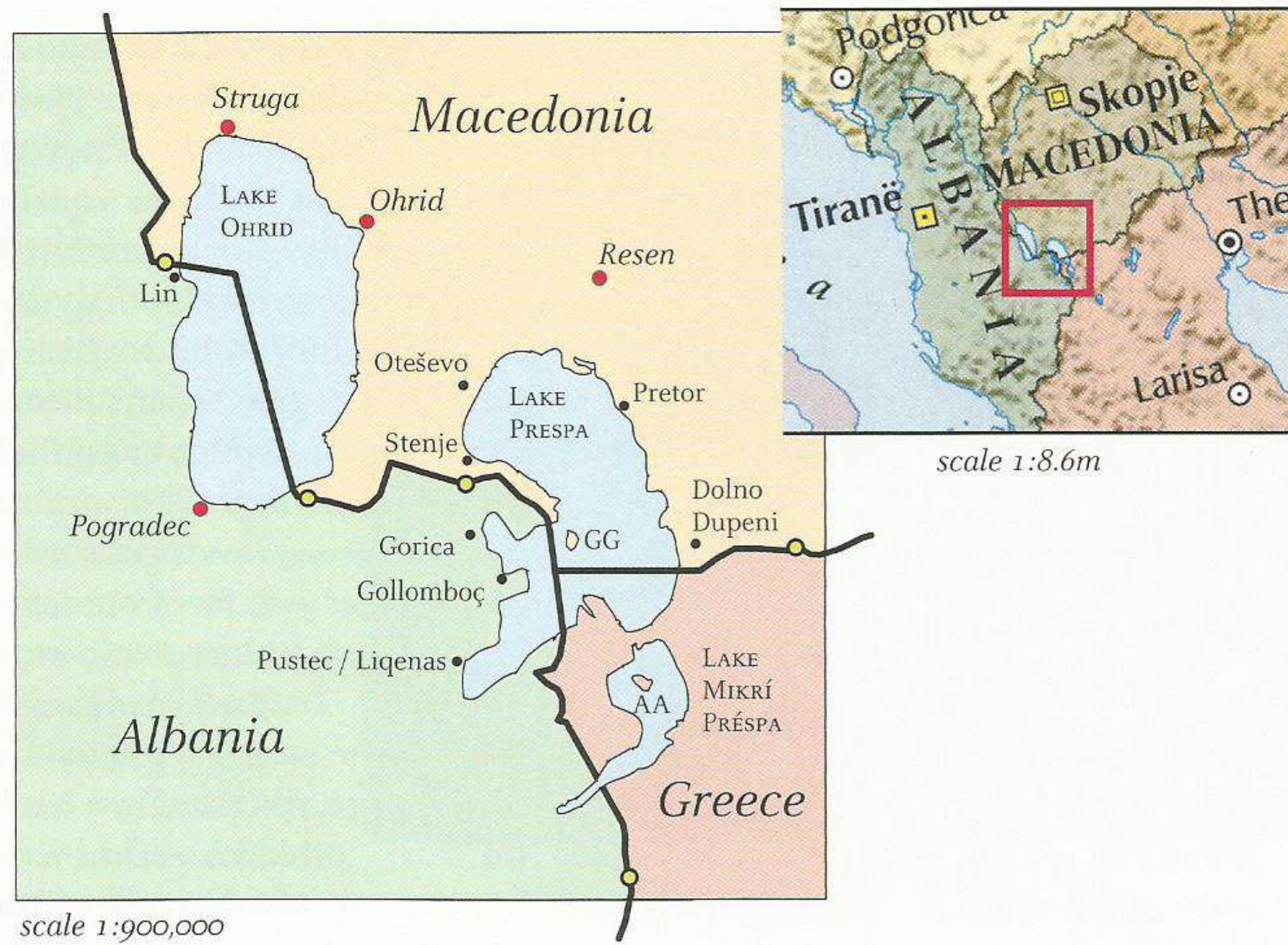
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Lake Prespa, a shallow lake shared by three countries in the southwestern corner of the Balkans, remains a mystery to many who visit the region. Lake Ohrid hogs the limelight, and it attracts many visitors. Few venture south to Lake Prespa and the Greek border region. However, with new tourism initiatives and growing cross border cooperation between Macedonia, Albania and Greece, Prespa's hour has come. Travellers who take the time to explore Lake Prespa will find a region of sublime natural beauty, a wealth of wildlife and a very rich and complex history — the remains of which are all around in traditional stone houses, Byzantine churches, castle ruins and more. Chris Deliso, who lives and works in Macedonia, has been to the shores of Lake Prespa.

Kiril Jonovski phoned a month or two back to say we had been in his dream. The octogenarian historian and lifelong Prespa resident had entertained us one evening last summer in his garden in Pretor, a Macedonian lakeshore village that claims, as the name suggests, a Roman lineage. Kiril's two books about the lake document its history, its flora and fauna, its people and their notable achievements and customs. Many of the pictures we saw were in black-and-white, while most of Kiril's stories were in full colour.

The tale we really liked involved a mon-goose. In 1967, while presiding over a preservation society dedicated to the lake's bizarre island of Golem Grad (literally, 'big city' in

the Lake Prespa region straddles three countries: Macedonia, Greece and Albania. Border crossing posts are shown by a light green circle at the appropriate points on the international frontier. For more information on border crossings, see the box on page 5. Place names mentioned in the text are generally shown on the map (GG = Golem Grad; AA = Áyios Ahíllios).



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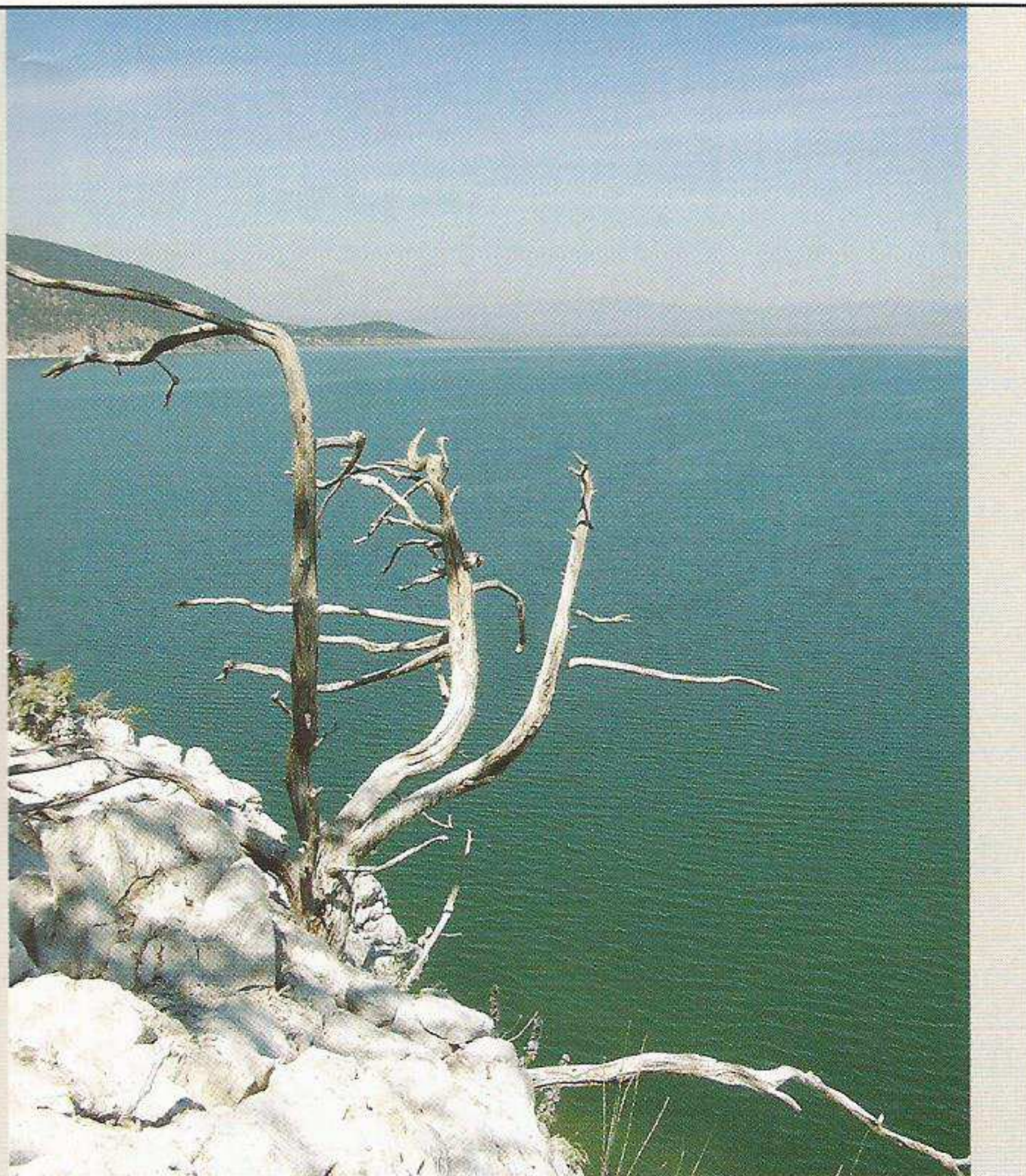
Macedonian), Kiril had decided to bring over two of these agile predators from the Croatian island of Mljet. There, in the Adriatic sunshine, the imported Indian mongoose had proved its mettle in policing and devouring Mljet's unusually rampant snake population.

Forty years ago, when Kiril's mongooses arrived at Lake Prespa, the Yugoslav portion of

the lakeshore was a popular holiday spot. Each season brought school trips, and tens of thousands of Prespa regulars, mainly workers in the collectives. And lots of ordinary Macedonian holidaymakers too. Kiril's old photos, depicting water skiers, bathers and visiting Soviet biology students prowling the thickets in short skirts, all captured a past now totally lost. Along the road running above the beach, ragged pasted handbills advertised the concerts of yesteryear; forlorn amidst bramble lay the dilapidated communist-era bungalows and residence blocks where the party stalwarts, sentenced to a few weeks of leisure, enjoyed Prespa sunshine.

The snakes of Golem Grad were a nuisance, though most were not poisonous. For a time, the mongoose solution appeared to be working. However, "they didn't survive the cold of winter," lamented Kiril "and the snakes have had the run of the place ever since."

The kindly historian promised to take us to Golem Grad just as soon as the weather warmed up again. But before that came the dream, when Kiril envisaged that we were already on our way to the island. Kiril guided my wife and I, in his dream, to a place on the island that had long



OPPOSITE: Pretor's long and sandy beach was popular with Yugoslav tourists — and may soon attract a new generation of foreign guests; LEFT: stark and compelling, Golem Grad is an island like no other (photos by Christopher Deliso)

been special for him. Perhaps it was some grotto, some site of ancient spirituality; after all, the island was scattered with the ruins of churches. Nowadays uninhabited, people from the Macedonian villages around the lake used to take their

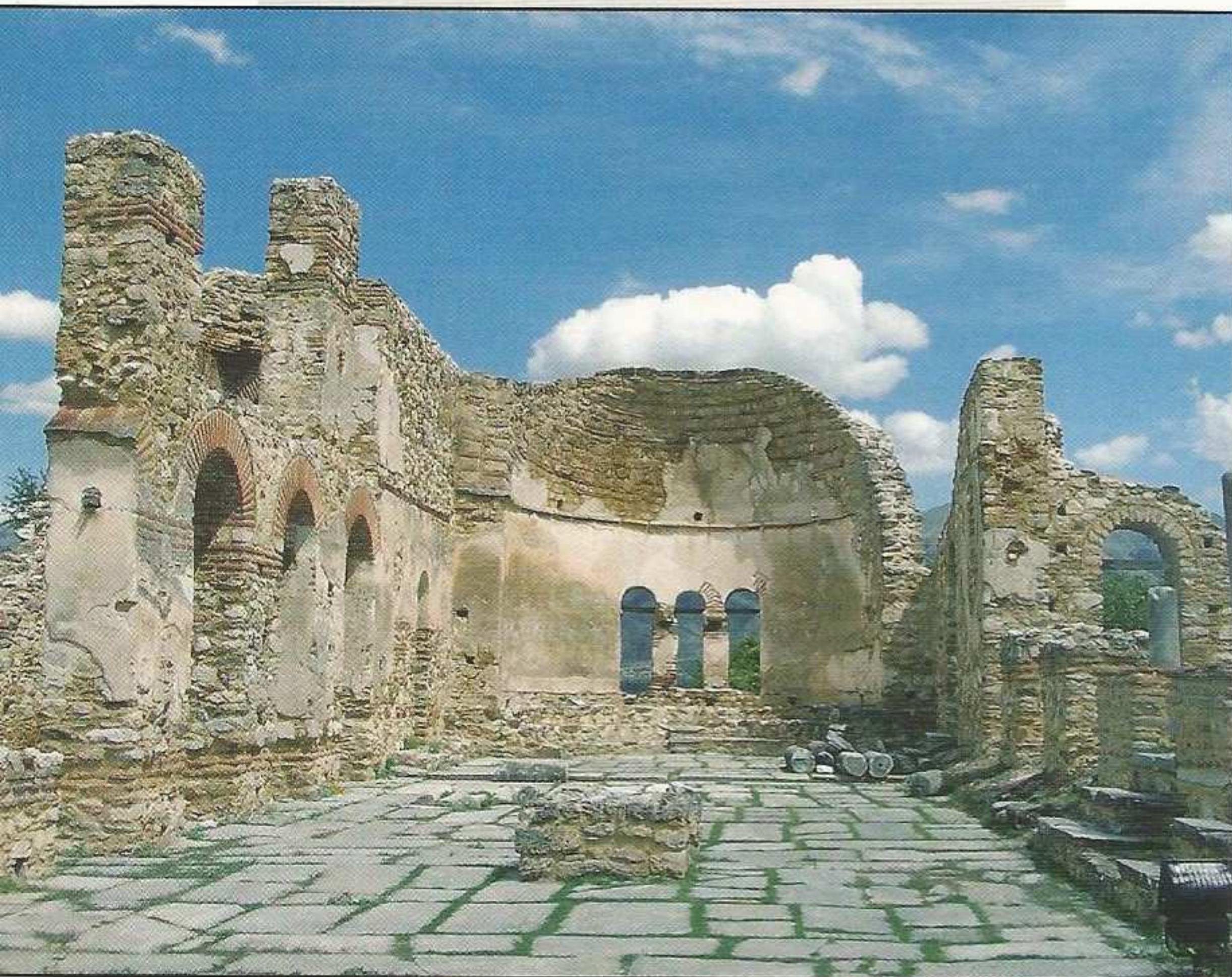
The knotted and bulbous weeds grow ever bigger each year and pull at your feet from somewhere down in the brackish, mineral-rich waters.

domesticated animals out to Golem Grad, where they would run wild. For Kiril, the island of snakes seemed to have some sort of romantic appeal. Kiril remarked that my wife bore an uncanny resemblance to a long-lost lover, a

Hungarian woman who had died in Canada two years ago. Perhaps it was never really us in his dream at all.

We had run across Kiril during a two-week circumnavigation of the Prespa lakes. We traced a meandering route through the lakelands of old Macedonia: a cultural region that now finds itself uncomfortably split between three countries: Greece, Albania and the Republic of Macedonia. Our route took us up mountains, through

the majestic ruins of the tenth-century basilica on Áyios Ahílios, in the lesser Lake Prespa, tell of the island's former importance as a religious centre (photo by Christopher Deliso)



reedy flatlands and across the lakes. These are ancient waters: more than three million years old, some say. Prespa is an elevated, tectonic lake that feeds the equally ancient and larger Lake Ohrid to the northwest through a network of underground springs that lie under Mount Galičica. Unlike Ohrid, which is very deep and very clear, its green shafts of sunlight penetrating far into the depths, Prespa is animal and thick and not indifferent to your fate. The knotted and bulbous weeds grow ever bigger each year and pull at your feet from somewhere down in the brackish, mineral-rich waters. It is as if, deep in its soul, the lake yearns to pull you down into it, to entangle you in its peculiar immortality. Prespa resonates to a hapless history with too many turbulent events. Even today there are echoes of ill-fated tribes, shadows of the chronic fault line of multiple modern wars, and an intangible uncertainty that shrouds its shores. Bisected by borders, Prespa defiantly rejects all notions of neat political order.

Prespa has a smaller sibling, divided from the main lake by a flat soft stretch of land, clumped thickly with reeds and much visited by wintering birds: pelicans, ducks, grebes and geese. The smaller lake is almost completely in Greek territory, save for a tiny southwestern sliver that spills over into Albania. But the name 'Prespa' is commonly used to refer to both lakes, large and small. The name? Who knows. There is a tale that it dates back to the winter of 927 when Byzantine chroniclers reported that the winter was exceptionally snowy and cold. Under such conditions, both lakes could have appeared as one; an archaic Slavic word, 'Prespa' means 'snowy deposits.'

The lesser Lake Prespa also has an island, Áyios Ahílios (St. Achilles), from where the tenth-century Tsar Samuel presided over local affairs. Bulgarians and Macedonians argue over the good tsar's proper identity; prudent modern historians caution against retrospective identity claims coloured by modern notions of ethnic nationalism. The Greek government has cleverly connected Áyios Ahílios to the mainland by a long wooden pontoon bridge, and just as cleverly connected it to

Greek culture by hosting an annual summer festival week of music and arts, specifically to bring visitors to this forgotten corner of northern Greece.

Indeed, were Greece not so enviably blessed with countless islands and generous coasts, Prespa would surely be a prime destination; yet here, where there are just so many other distractions, it takes a robust display of organised Hellenism to bring in the masses, and that even for only a few days. That brief summer festival apart, the Greek shores of Prespa remain remote and tranquil, and full of surprises. There are the crumbling ancient basilica walls of *Áyios Ahílios*, rock-painted frescoes at *Psarádhes* (accessible by boat), good-natured local hospitality and the generous thick fillets of fresh carp. Prespa soothes. Even though many of the old stone houses lie in crumbling despair, populated mostly by elderly people, or have been

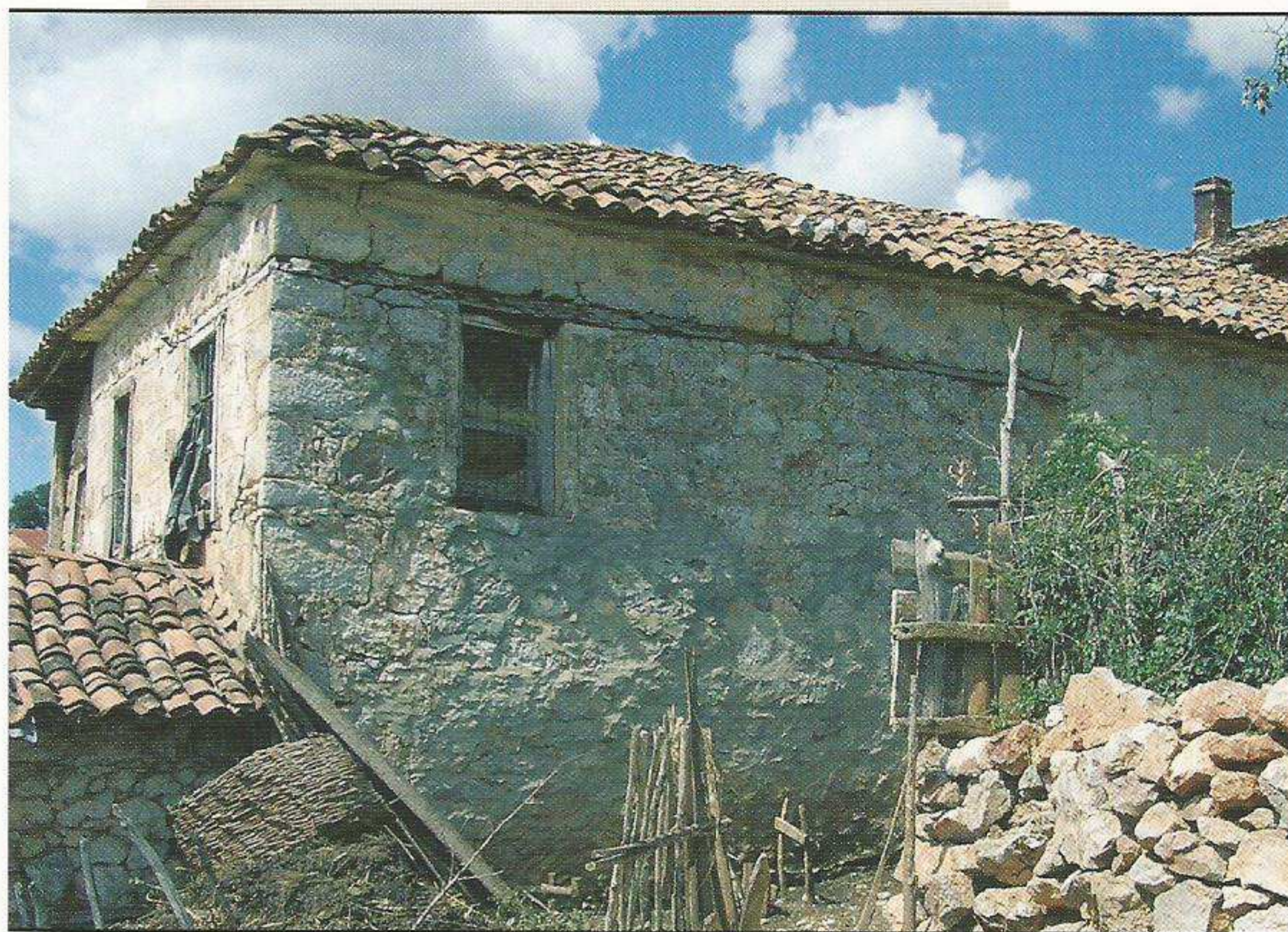
Visits to the Prespa region require careful planning, for border stations are few and far between. The five frontier points mentioned below are all shown on the map on page 3. Note that there is no frontier crossing point between Macedonia and Greece in the vicinity of the lakes. The nearest regular frontier post is thirty kilometres away to the east at *Medžitlija* on the E65 Bitola to *Flórina* highway.

Travellers wanting to cross from Macedonia to Albania or vice versa will find better provision. There is a minor border crossing at *Stenje* on the west side of Prespa. The road quality is very poor on the Albanian side. And there are two further border posts on Lake Ohrid: one at *Kafasan* on the main road that skirts the west side of the lake, and another at *Sveti Naum* near the monastery at the southeast corner of Lake Ohrid.

From Greece to Albania, the only border crossing point in the region is that on the minor road west of *Krystalopigi* (Greece), some way south of Prespa.

The nearest railheads are at *Bitola* (Macedonia), *Flórina* (Greece) and *Pogradec* (Albania). In all three cases, the train stations are about forty kilometres from the nearest points on the Prespa lakes. The nearest airports with regular scheduled flights are *Ohrid* (Macedonia) and *Kastoriá* (Greece).

visiting Prespa

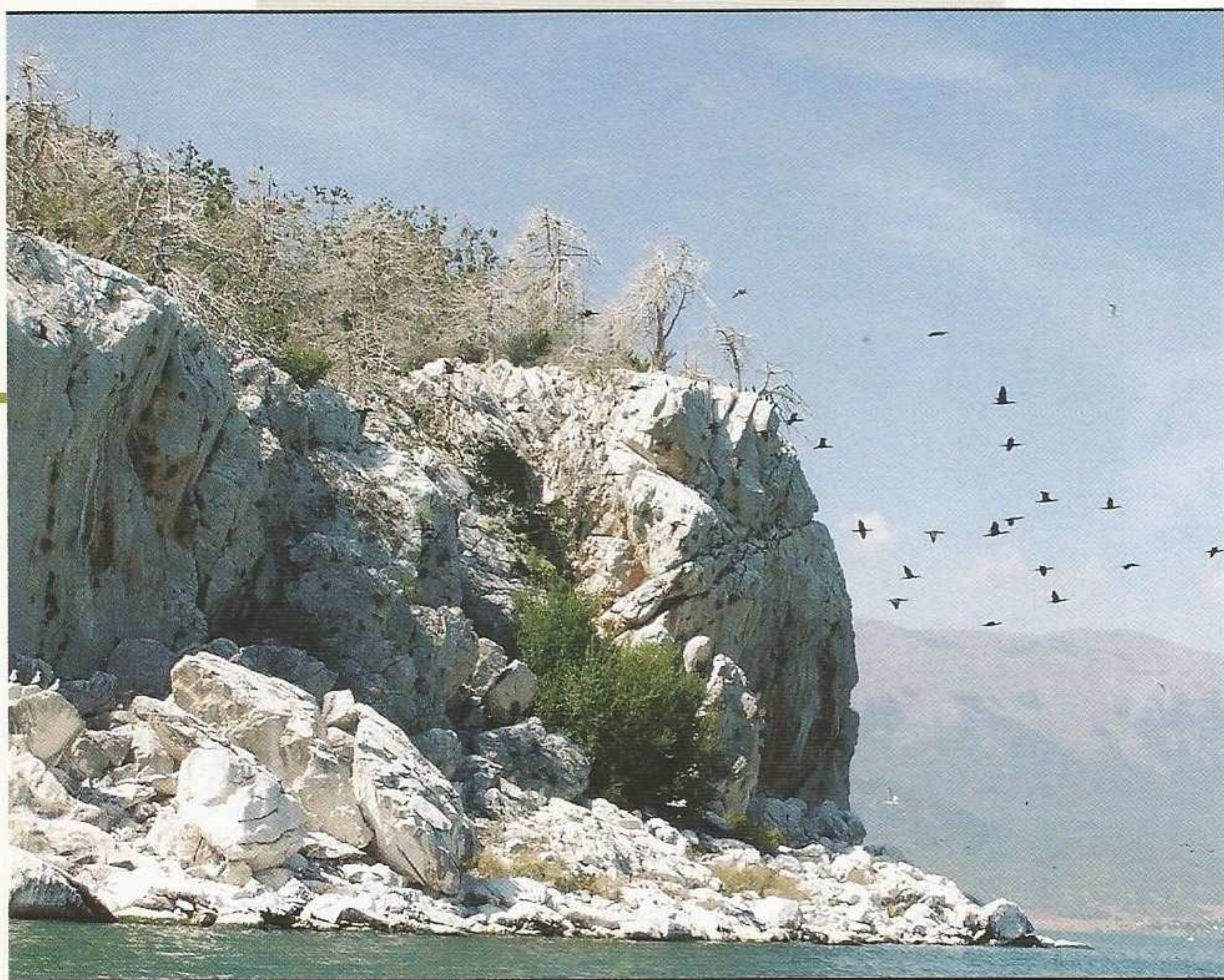


a crumbling traditional Macedonian house in Pustec/Liqenas, on the southwestern shore of Prespa in Albania (photo by Christopher Deliso)

abandoned altogether, the Greek side of Prespa has something decorous about it, some gentility, like an artifact in an antique shop that cannot escape the occasional dusting.

Pustec is another story. Along with a dozen other predominantly ethnic Macedonian villages that hug the Albanian side of Prespa, these western shores of the lake languished in utter isolation during Enver Hoxha's regime in Albania. Everywhere, there are those little concrete bunkers that blemish the Albanian landscape. Through neglect Pustec (Liqenas in Albanian) had been immaculately preserved, with its stone houses, their roofs a mixture of thatch and wood. The village's bonneted widows are weighed down by bundles of sticks and old men in worn suit-coats still ride sidesaddle on donkeys. "It is like Greece eighty years ago," marvelled my Greek friend George, who accompanied me to the Albanian parts of Prespa. An amiable old man sitting on a stone wall with arms in the crook of his shepherd stick, *Apostol*, volunteered some history: "The name 'Pustec' in Macedonian means an empty place, something worthless."

But Pustec was not doing as badly as all that. Little boys were playing football in the dust. All around the place bristled with youngsters. Few villages on the Macedonian shores of the lake could boast such youthful vitality.



flocks of lake birds swoop down from their protected dominion, the white cliffs of Golem Grad (photo by Christopher Deliso)

Pustec is changing. The township is now officially bilingual, and the Macedonian flag now flies next to the Albanian one on the municipal building. Two years ago, a political party of ethnic Macedonians from Prespa was formed. Little

The cliffs and trees were stark white and naked, from the birds that ruled there, and around the corner white cubes of rock rose out of the blue water in jagged piles like in a Surrealist painting.

Then there was the magic spot on the beach, beyond the willows, where the mobile phone signal suddenly changed from the Albanian to the Macedonian operator, even though the border was not so close. And in the village discotheque (an empty room bisected by what looked like a Bavarian beer-hall bench) the beer was Skopsko,

by little, Pustec and its sister villages are being drawn out of their splendid isolation.

Yet Pustec still has plenty of eccentricities, such as the hotel by the lake, where no one was in charge to let us in. An empty foyer and glimpses of a lavish wedding reception in the halls beyond.

imported from Macedonia, and you could pay in Macedonian denars with the change in Albanian leks. Macedonian pop and Serbian turbofolk blared, and slowly the boys, seated on one side of the room, gravitated to its centre. Eventually the girls followed, and finally they danced. It was like anywhere else on a Saturday night except it was Pustec: cut off, thrown away but loveable.

If we had continued north on rough roads past Gollomboç and Gorica, we could have reached the Macedonian border at Stenje. But we went the long way, through Pogradec, and around the west side of Lake Ohrid. When fate brought me back to Prespa some days later it was with my wife and two-year-old son on the minibus to Resen, the provincial capital famed for its apples, and then on to Dolno

Dupeni, a sparse clean village far on the southeastern side of the lake, near the Greek border.

There, the Macedonian border policeman clanging along in his truck chided us for trying to walk back from the beach at dusk — “don’t you know this is the hour when the bear and the wolf come down from the mountain to drink?” — and I was left with the strange and vertiginous feeling of being at the end of the world. The border with Greece has been closed since the nineteen sixties. The policeman told us, though, that it might be re-opened; it is one of the many well-meaning regional integration projects that might end with yet another Greek casino being built across the border in Macedonia, as have long appeared at spots away to the east.

Stenje lay distant, on the opposite shore, and we made it around the lake in good time after passing through Pretor midway to meet the historian Kiril. Stenje is also right by a border, the Albanian one, and it gave a similar sense of finality, though not the tranquil and well-washed one of Dolno Dupeni. It was more chaotic and there was far more down and feathers floating on the water, which was so dark and thick that you could see the bubbles clustering for a long time in the path from which you had swum, like the dust of a comet across the night sky.

In the end, it was not Kiril who took us to Golem Grad. It was the Marlboro Man instead. His niece and her friend from Portugal came along too. The Marlboro Man was a fisherman from Stenje, cigarette dangling unmistakably under a white cowboy hat. He had previously been employed at a hotel in nearby Oteševo that had burned down. A Portuguese company would rebuild it bigger and better, they said. The Marlboro Man had been adamant that we must set off from Stenje early in the morning to keep the weather on our side and in time we would see he was right.

The sky was vast and clear and the lake placid, great flocks of orange-billed pelicans and cormorants greeting us along the way. Eventually the island came into view. Golem Grad sat like a sullen cake you would not want to eat, squinting in the haze of the sunshine against the water. There was something deeply disconcerting about it. It might have been real. Or not! Reality blurs into dreams in Prespa. The cliffs and trees which slowly grew closer were stark white and naked, from the birds that ruled there, and around the corner white cubes of rock rose out of the blue water in jagged piles like in a Surrealist painting.

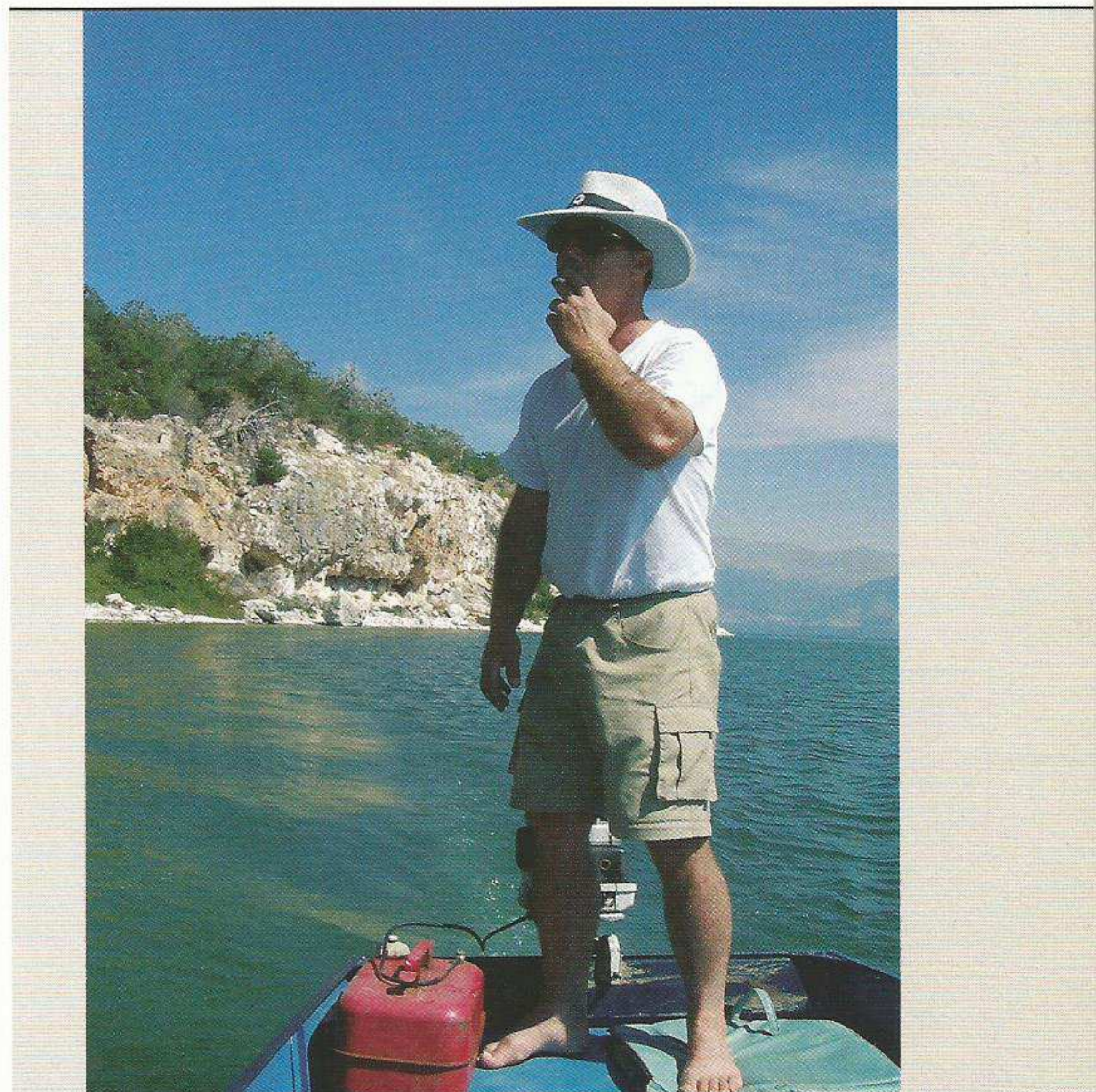
When we landed, and leapt onto the soft shore, there was a great whooshing sound from the undergrowth, hundreds of escaping invisible snakes. Golem Grad is a protected haven for the creatures, placed under the jurisdiction of the mainland national park of Mt. Galičica on the lake's western shore. The island's most celebrated resident, the foja (Greek Juniper) tree is a rarity in the Balkans, more often found in Iran and the Caucasus. How it got to this isolated island in Macedonia remains a mystery. Some of these gnarled, almost mummified trees with the soft mossy green branches are believed to be over three hundred years old.

We found the foja trees after crossing through a thick dark forest which the sun could not penetrate. I was told to step carefully on the rock and branches under which the island's only poisonous snakes hid. On Golem Grad's northern rim, against the sharp edges of cliffrock

high above the water, the foja stuck out in crazy angles. The contrast of brittle mossy branches, white rock and blue water was breathtaking, almost like some Cycladic island but far more exotic.

Discarded snakeskins and skeletons of small fish dotted the forest floor amidst disintegrating logs and flowers as we clambered down to the church. It was the only one of several ruins to remain with a roof, and it made for a welcome respite from the summer heat. But I was disappointed not to have seen any of the famous snakes. In the end, however, just before we were to re-board the caique, there was one: wrapped inside a green tree, a thick green snake, almost indistinguishable and dead still. It more than made up for the all-around curious absence of visible reptiles. "They are much more common in spring," said the Marlboro Man's niece. "In fact, the last time we came here, in April or May, we decided not to get out of the boat because you could see so many of them, slithering all over the rocks at the water's edge!"

I appreciated my luck even more the next morning. Dark clouds had rolled in overnight and now I understood why the Marlboro Man



RIGHT: *takin' it slow* — the Marlboro Man steers a course for Golem Grad (photo by Christopher Deliso)



finally a snake! One of Golem Grad's permanent residents (photo by Christopher Deliso)

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had insisted on going out early. No-one would be heading over to the island for at least two or three days now. Something had stirred up the soul of the lake. I did not know what. But the waves were huge whitecaps and came from many directions, lashing the shore in thick muddy mouthfuls. I went with my son to watch the waves pound the sand. My wife had to stay behind because she was wearing all red and the bull grazing on the beach stared at her ominously. But he left us alone, and we watched the waves, particularly mesmerizing for a two-year-old. On the beach there was an empty boat, a blue and white skiff. My son had sat in it a couple of days before and I pointed it out to him. He remembered the boat and it made him happy to see it again. ■

Christopher Deliso is an American travel writer and journalist living in Macedonia. His book 'Hidden Macedonia: The Mystic Lakes of Ohrid and Prespa' will be published by Haus Publishing in July 2007. Chris directs balkanalysis, an authoritative source of news and comment on southeast Europe (www.balkananalysis.com). He can be contacted at cdeliso@balkananalysis.com.

For another article on this region, see hidden europe 6 (January 2006), with a feature on Lin on the west side of Lake Ohrid.

It was almost a hundred years ago that an area of land was set aside on the border between Norway and Sweden with the explicit purpose of marking the spirit of peace that obtained between the two countries. In the mid nineteen-twenties Poland and Czechoslovakia, having then just settled a border dispute, signed the Kraków Protocol which provided for the setting up of joint conservation zones along their mutual frontier. The cross-border national parks in the Tatra and Krkonoše Mountains are a legacy of that early initiative. Nowadays transboundary peace parks and conservation areas are popping up in many parts of the world.

Proposals for such an entity in the Prespa region (see preceding feature) have thus far come to nothing, though in northern Albania and adjacent regions of Kosovo and Montenegro, plans for a Balkans Peace Park are well advanced (see www.balkanspeacepark.org). The management of wildlife and landscape resources in cross-border contexts often calls for special arrangements. Sadly, Lake Prespa suffers from the absence of a coherent trinational approach to its management. These things are not easy, especially where a history of mistrust exists between countries that share a common border.

Even mutual friends sometimes have real difficulties in sorting out transnational conservation issues. Although Germany and Luxembourg signed the Clervaux Treaty in 1964 for a joint border park, much of what was agreed has yet to be implemented. On the Poland – Belarus border there has been talk of creating a joint park in an environmentally sensitive area that is home to important herds of European bison. Presently conservation areas on each side of the border are managed as separate entities. A start perhaps, but the two metre high fence that marks the entire border bisects the area. There are no plans to remove the fence. Creating international peace parks, it seems, is an art that demands not just environmental understanding but also a hefty dose of political acumen. ■