



THE OLD MAN and the river

ONCE THREATENED BY DAMS, ALBANIA'S VJOSA RIVER HAS BEEN PRESERVED AS A FREE-FLOWING ECOSYSTEM OFFERING OUTDOOR ADVENTURE – AND DELICIOUS LOCAL PRODUCE

BY SUZANNE MORPHET

LOUNGING ON HIS SIDE, the old man stretches his elongated marble limbs that so resemble the waves of the Vjosa, just as the river itself stretches across southwestern Albania. Discovered by archeologists in the ancient city of Apollonia in the third century BC, the time-weathered statue is said to personify the river, which at that time flowed past the city.

Beginning in the Pindus mountains of northern Greece, where it's called the Aoös, the Vjosa flows northwest for 272 kilometres before reaching the Adriatic Sea near the resort city of Vlorë.

The river is a chameleon, turning from brilliant turquoise to chocolate brown within a few hours of rainfall. Its personality changes too. In the upper reaches, the Vjosa is known for narrow canyons and frothy, fast-flowing water. At its midsection, the river spreads out and slows down, forming complex braids and depositing white sand and gravel while meandering lazily from one side of its wide bed to the other.

But the single most significant thing about the Vjosa is that it is wild, its free-flowing ecosystem intact from source to sea — something unheard of in Europe, where most rivers were dammed, channelled and straightened decades ago. Consequently, the Vjosa supports a complex web of life. More than 1,100 species have been identified to date, with 15 on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, including the Egyptian vulture, Eurasian otter and the critically endangered European eel.

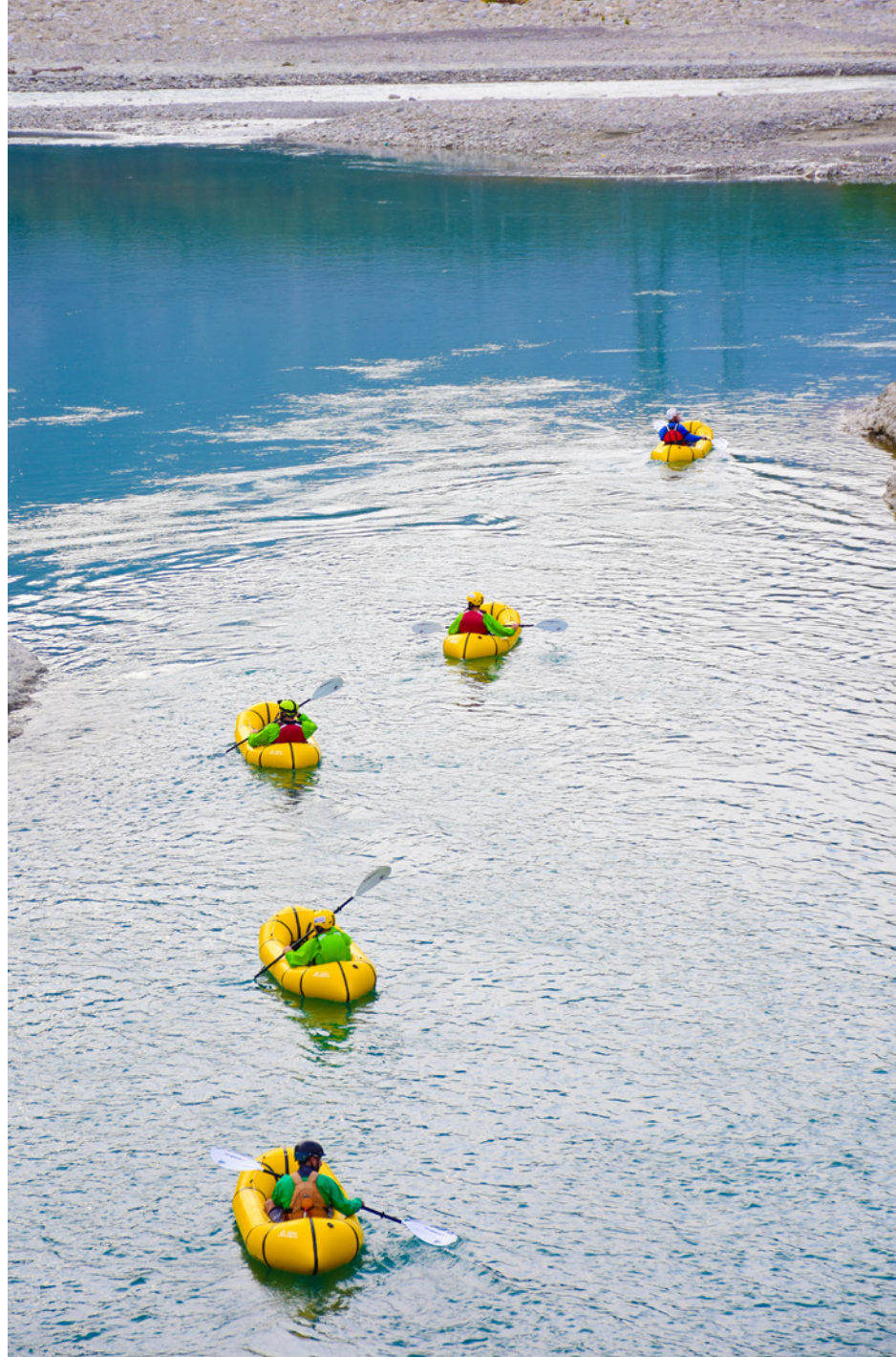
IN A TINY MOUNTAIN VILLAGE high above a tributary of the Vjosa River, I bite into a vibrant orange persimmon. Just picked from a tree laden with ripe fruit, it's sweet and refreshing with a hint of cinnamon spiciness.

It's evening, and as the sun drops behind the mountain top, a bright half-moon rises, illuminating the patio of Murat Keraj, a sculptor, farmer and folklorist — and one of the many people behind the creation of the new Vjosa Wild River National Park. Keraj has invited me to his home to learn about the park and what it means for people in Zhulat, a village of 200. As he talks, he showers me with the hospitality for which Albanians are famous.

First, Keraj presents us with small saucers of honey, to be savoured by the spoonful, courtesy of the bees from his 200 hives. The bees feed primarily on rosemary, imparting the honey with an exquisite, slightly floral essence. “The whole mountain becomes white like snow when it blossoms,” he tells me.

Next, he brings out a bottle of red wine he makes from a sweet and fragrant black grape known here as American. There's also a bottle of raki, the twice-distilled fruit brandy that no home in this Balkan country is without.

Such delicacies shouldn't be taken for granted. They're a product, either directly or indirectly, of the Vjosa River. In a region where summer temperatures routinely hit 45 C, villagers depend on the natural flow of the river to sustain them and their 4,000 cows, sheep and goats, as well as their beehives and crops. It therefore comes as no surprise that citizens were fearful when in 2015 the government announced plans to build six power generating dams on the Kardhiq, a major tributary of the Vjosa. “It was a terrible idea,” Keraj says. “Water is life in my village.”



Keraj reached out to EcoAlbania for support. The environmental NGO, headed by executive director Olsi Nika, worked alongside a wider international campaign to make the Vjosa a national park. “It is so important in terms of cultural heritage, in terms of the people and the way they live, and also biodiversity,” says Olsi, “To preserve nature, not in bits and pieces, but as a functioning ecosystem.”

Dams were no new foe to the Vjosa and its tributaries. Back in the early aughts, the Albanian government proposed building as many as 45 dams

throughout the river system, sparking a decade-long international campaign to “Save the Blue Heart of Europe.” In 2016, a flotilla of kayakers from Europe and the U.S. paddled the Vjosa, then marched with their kayaks to the prime minister's office in Tirana, the country's capital, demanding a park, not dams.

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The Vjosa is at its wildest in spring. Local operators like Vjosa Explorer offer thrill-seekers the chance to raft Class III rapids and brave near-metre high waves. In return, adventure tourism provides jobs for locals who would otherwise leave in search of work.

The years of campaigning finally yielded results. On March 15, 2023, Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama announced the formation of Vjosa Wild River National Park, at last protecting the Vjosa and four major tributaries — the Drino, Kardhiq, Bënça and Shushica — covering 12,727 hectares.

Between sips of wine and raki, Keraj plays the longare — a double-sided flute that both his father and uncle make from local wood. As his fingers move swiftly over the holes and the music flows, Olsi explains why it was so important to protect the river's tributaries, not just the Vjosa itself. Then, in that self-deprecating way that is a hallmark of the people in this country, he adds, “It's interesting that this model comes from Albania. Yeah, the small, poor, corrupted country.” That model — the protection of the entire flow of the Vjosa River and its tributaries — is a first of its kind for Europe and positions the oft-overlooked Balkan nation at the forefront of river protection.

The soft gurgle of the Kardhiq far below accompanies us as we leave his house late that evening, the icy mountain runoff making its way to meet the Vjosa. The Active Albania guide hosting my upcoming week of exploring has big plans for the days ahead. “Now,” says Bled (who prefers to go by his first name only), “we go upstream.”



“THE COMMUNISTS could have done a better job,” mutters Bled sarcastically while looking over a narrow section of turquoise river studded with white boulders. A large hydro power line built by the former Communist dictatorship of Enver Hoxha mars what would have been a picture-perfect scene. Nonetheless, the Vjosa remains alluringly beautiful. Green fields trim turquoise water

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with mountains rising on either side. Small towns such as the city of Përmet dot the river, their waterside cafés serving coffee and gliko, a sweet preserve typically made with fruit, though here this speciality is made using unripened walnuts and syrup flavoured with geranium flowers. We

spend the night just 35 kilometres from the Greek border in the village of Leusë, whose St. Mary's Church dazzles visitors with rich frescoes painted more than 200 years ago.

Even before Vjosa Wild River National Park was announced, Përmet was the recreational centre of the region and popular with international visitors. The next day, we raft a section of narrow river replete with twists and turns. In spring, this would be an adrenaline-filled ride with Class III rapids and near-metre high waves. By October, water levels drop and the current is gentle enough in most places that you can safely take your eyes off the river to look for wild figs growing along the riverbank or follow the sound of the sheeps' bells as the animals graze nonchalantly above it.

Still, there are thrills to be had. We stop at the halfway point of our two-hour adventure to climb a rocky outcropping and jump eight metres into the clear water below. IrmaTako, owner of rafting operator Vjosa Explorer, is waiting on the opposite shore with fresh fruit and tea that she makes from linden,



Known as the Aoös in Greece, the Vjosa enters Albania in its mountainous southwestern region (OPPOSITE). Numerous bridges on the river and its tributaries hint at bygone eras. Brataj Bridge (LEFT), a 16th-century Venetian-style structure on the Shushica River, has long outlived the Ottoman era from which it hails.

ironwort, sage and other wildflowers and herbs gathered in the mountains. Tako founded the company after a wave of emigration saw the region lose many of its young people to places like England, Germany, France and Italy. Keen to create jobs and give locals a reason to stay, she now employs a group of 10 to 12 young men who have no plans to leave the valley that raised them.

This is a valley layered with history and culture. Take a bike ride through town on what's called the old Italian road, laid by Italian troops with plans to invade Greece during the Second World War, and these layers start to reveal themselves. Their abandoned barracks are still here, too, one with a quote from Mussolini stencilled on an inside wall commending the Italian infantry for their heroism. "A decisive element of battles and war," reads Bled, straining to make out the weathered print. "Today like yesterday, tomorrow like today and always. Something like that."

Nearby, another historic building offers insight into Albania's chaotic past. For five days in May 1944, Communist leaders gathered here for a "national liberation congress."

"This region was a bit of a stronghold for the Communist lads," explains Bled, as he examines old black and

white photos of comrades, both men and women. "It was very much a power struggle. This congress wants to grab power basically, under instructions from the Yugoslav Communists. It wasn't exactly liberation." Exuberant Communist slogans such as "Long live the Red Army, the greatest guarantee for the full elimination of fascism" decorate the inside walls. Bled struggles with the irony, given that Hoxha went on to become a cruel dictator who kept Albanians in a state of isolated terror until his death in 1985.

Spend any amount of time in Albania, and you'll come across reminders

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of this tumultuous period, including roadside monuments with the communist red star and sculptures of smiling soldiers with raised guns. And some of the roughly 175,000 cement bunkers built by the paranoid Hoxha to protect people from a perceived foreign threat can still be found in even the remotest valleys.

While mulling over this recent history, we come across a marker

that has survived seven centuries — a footbridge for people and livestock dating from before the Ottoman Empire. It's a reminder that this fertile valley has been farmed and grazed for thousands of years, settled first by the Illyrians, later coming under the rule of Ancient Greece, Rome and the Ottoman Empire.

Returning to Përmet, we stop at Ferma Sali, a honey farm overlooking the Vjosa, where owner Flora Sali is bottling the last of her summer's production. The sheer scale of the biodiversity fed by this river is beginning to reveal itself in the

bounty of unique products available to eat and drink. As if to emphasize this point, Sali brings out her speciality — a heavenly honey made from the bedunica flower, which grows in the mountains of southern Albania only at an altitude above 3,300 metres. Locals prize it as both food and medicine,

often adding it to mountain tea in winter to prevent or clear coughs and colds. But even though it's highly valued, few families produce this particular honey anymore because the flowers are so hard to reach. This led to the flower's recent inclusion in the Ark of Taste, an online catalogue created by the Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity to recognize food products the world is at risk of losing.

Local products (OPPOSITE) like persimmons, raki and trahana – a nourishing fermented mixture of grain and dairy – are enjoyed in villages all along the Vjosa and its tributaries (БОПТОМ). Many local inhabitants (BELOW and RIGHT) are aging, yet still work the fields for income, sustained by the waters of the Vjosa.



Next, Sali brings out a bottle of her family's version of raki — this one made with mulberries. Bled sips the fiery spirit and cracks open walnuts with his bare hands while watching the Vjosa flow silently past. The walnuts Sali serves come from her birth village of Gostivisht, in the mountains, where she takes her bees to feed on the bedunica flowers and where she hopes to one day open a guest home.

Perched on a hillside above the Drino River — the largest tributary of the Vjosa — Gjirokaster is bursting with culture. It's where the Albanian National Folk Festival is held every few years, with people coming from around the country to perform traditional music, including polyphonic singing, a voice technique recognized by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Gjirokaster is also known as the City of Stone, its historic centre a UNESCO world heritage site recognized for its outstanding 17th-century two-storey houses. Is

this cultural richness another benefit owed to the natural abundance these waterways provide? After all, with healthy rivers come healthy flora and fauna, which in turn allow people to create stable settlements and ultimately thrive. When people thrive, art blossoms.

Not all villages in the area have prospered, however. Lekdush, high in the mountainous Kurvelesh region near the source of two major tributaries of the Vjosa, is an isolated village that suffers economic hardship and migration. In 2021, the government built a highway to make it easier for both locals and tourists to reach it. That night, we fall asleep in cosy, straw huts meant to resemble traditional shepherd's quarters. The owner of Lekdush Camping, Kreshnik Shehu, who got the idea for the simple huts during the COVID pandemic, is hoping tourism will be a way forward.

For breakfast, we devour a steamy bowl of grains that have been

fermented with sheep's milk for seven days. The dish is reminiscent of oatmeal porridge, but with a stronger flavour and even heartier. "Without it, we don't go out of the house," says Shehu. Bellies full, we're guided by Shehu on a hike to Peshtura waterfall, which rushes over a cliff then tumbles in a sequence of stunning drops before disappearing into the steep canyon. The spot was virtually unknown a few years ago, but with the new road and, now, the park, that's already begun to change.

Our journey eventually leads to Vjosa's large delta, where Albanian Ornithological Society biologist Erald Xeka is waiting patiently with a spotting scope atop a tripod. "We call it [the] highway of birds," he says, walking along a raised path between salt pans where dozens of flamingoes keep busy stirring up shrimp on the bottom. Though human-made, the pans provide an important salty habitat for some water birds. Along with

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brackish lagoons, forests and sand dunes, the 20,000-hectare delta acts as a stopover for birds migrating from northern Europe and back. Despite its ecological importance, the delta isn't included in the new park, and an airport is now under construction. We watch half a dozen Dalmatian pelicans, a bird especially vulnerable to this development, lift off, their large bodies carried by long wings.

Leaving the river delta, we stop for lunch and wine tasting at Kantina Balaj before arriving at our final destination, the ancient city of Apollonia that was once the Vjosa's end point. "This is older than Rome," says Bled, as we stroll through the minimally excavated ruins of what was once one of the most important cities of the ancient Mediterranean. It was here,

in the city's famous Academy, that Gaius Octavius was studying when he learned that his great-uncle, Julius Caesar, had been murdered, laying the groundwork for him to become Rome's first emperor.

The once mighty city owed its glory to the Vjosa, before an earthquake in AD 234 caused the river to change course, leaving Apollonia to crumble and fade into antiquity. But long before anyone thought of protecting rivers or granting them legal personhood, the Vjosa was revered, personified and mythologized.

Like ancient Apollonia, modern Albania still owes a great deal to this river running through it. And if the old man could see himself today, still flowing wild and free, he'd surely be pleased. 🌿

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