



Research on the CB location

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Abstract

The study of the tourist attraction locations, common heritage and tradition in the targeted area of the cross – border region of the Nišava, Pčinja, Kyustendil and Pernik districts is based on the research results obtained through the data analysis and the work on the field. The data analysis is conducted using the accurate information and indicators. The study is based on interviews of 32 people and touristic subjects while some of the resources are also the websites of cross-border locations. Through comparative method of samples the study identifies the main contributors to destination attractiveness along with similarities. This research examines the influence of tourist attractions and people related factors on the attractiveness of a tourism destination of the four districts. The research also explores destination support services and other relevant characteristics. Population-related factors and destination attractions are found to be the most important determinants of the attractiveness. Another important determinant are the destination support facilities and services.

Introduction

The cross-border region of the four researched districts: Nišava, Pčinja, Kyustendil and Pernik has been firmly connected over the years through diversity and similarities in terms of natural features, but also population, culture, customs and traditions. This has contributed to the formation of the unique tourist attraction locations which have been formed for centuries and today are at different stages of development.

Well-established tourism policy, based on the importance of natural and anthropogenic values of the districts, provides an opportunity for the tourism industry to improve as much as possible tourist traffic and contribute to the further popularization of tourism in this area which is why the Tourism Development Strategy is important. This strategy should provide increased competitiveness of the tourism industry, the foreign exchange inflow from tourism, growth of domestic tourist traffic, and growth of employment through tourism. With these basic economic goals, it is expected to initiate the development of a positive image in the tourism market, to provide long-term protection of natural and cultural resources in the function of tourism, to improve the quality of life with the help of tourism. Tourist development of the cross-border region, largely depends on adequate marketing and development of commercial tourism and recreational demand, as well as raising the competitiveness of the types of tourism provided by this region.

The following *methods* were used in the research: comparison method, descriptive method, statistical method, analysis and synthesis method.



Physical- geographical, administrative and tourism characteristics of the districts

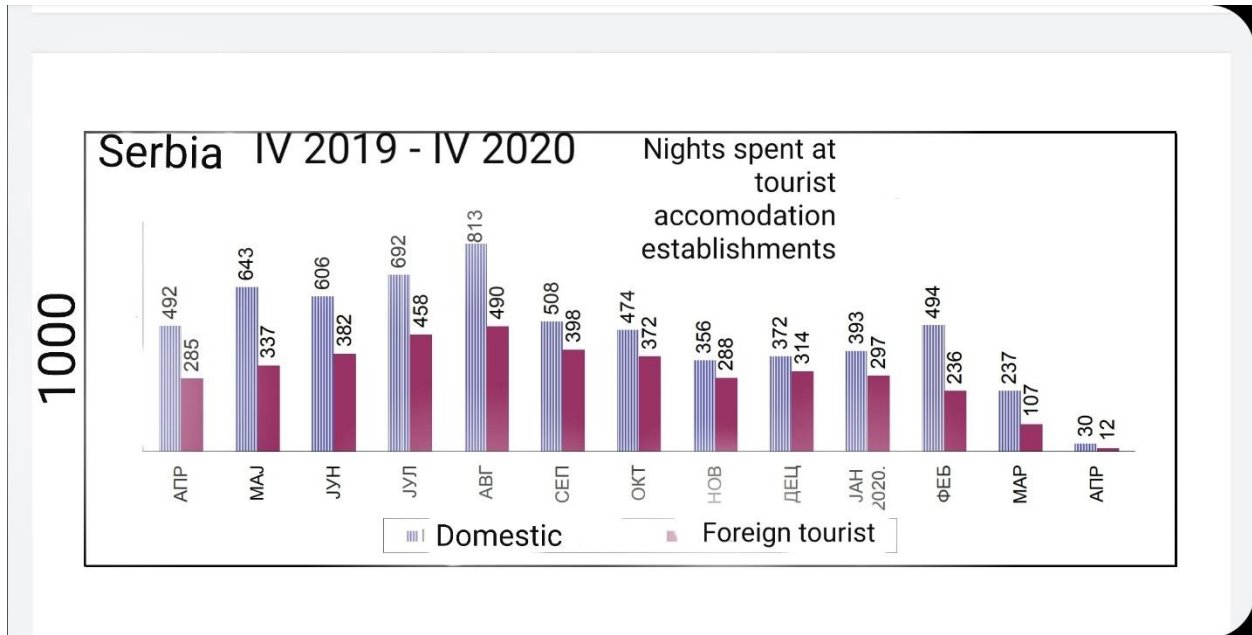
The physical-geographical characteristics of the cross-border region are geographically dominated by the Balkan mountain range (the Balkan Peninsula was named after this mountain range; in Serbian Стара планина, meaning "Old Mountain") which is a mountain range that runs 557 km from the Vrška Chuka Peak on the border between Bulgaria and Serbia eastward through central Bulgaria to the Black Sea. The Black Sea and the Aegean Sea drainage basins are separated by this mountain range. The temperate continental and mountain climate in all four regions, as well as soil and vegetation types are compatible and with many similar features.

The targeted districts are located on both, east and west sides of the Balkan mountain range, in the surrounding karst region characterized by the limestone. Common geographical roots and characteristics of the ground created an excellent basis for the integration of the people from Serbia and Bulgaria in four districts. Throughout long historical periods, the area along the border on both sides belonged to both Bulgaria and Serbia, therefore the entire cross-border regions population was exposed to the same influences. This contributed to building a strong connection among people which is today present in everyday life aspects, tradition, language and heritage. The tourism offer is not entirely developed and it has a great potential in terms of exploitation of the common interests and heritage of the cross-border districts inhabitants as well as emphasizing the unique natural beauty and ethnographic treasures of the region.

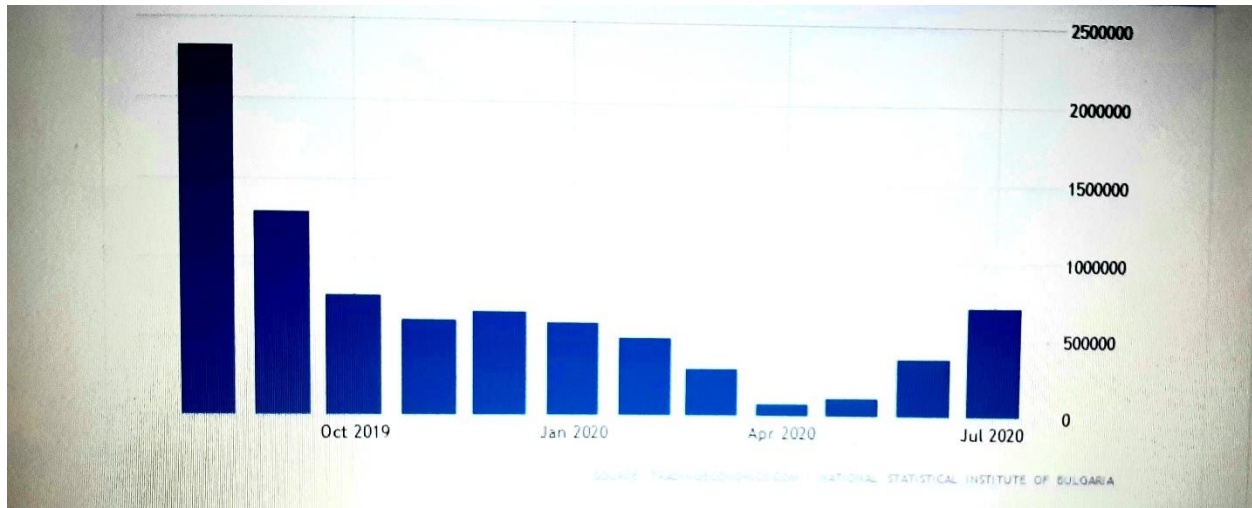
The types of tourism to be developed in the cross-border region are certainly, ecological and heritage tourism, followed by other interesting niche tourism examples. The region could also support the mass tourism with some investments in infrastructure.

The current pandemics of the COVID -19 in 2020 has changed the number of stays and general touristic patterns in the region which is illustrated for both countries:





<https://www.stat.gov.rs/en-US/oblasti/ugostiteljstvo-i-turizam>



<https://tradingeconomics.com/bulgaria/tourist-arrivals>



Nišava district

The Nišava district consists of 6 municipalities Aleksinac, Svrljig, Merošina, Ražanj, Doljevac, Gadžin Han and the city of Niš, which is divided into 5 municipalities. Niška Banja is one of the touristic municipalities of the city of Niš, located at the bottom of Suva Planina and only a few kilometers away from Niš. According to the last official census conducted in 2011, the Nišava district has 376, 319 inhabitants, mostly of Serbian nationality.

Nišava district is located in the zone of temperate-continental climate (hot summers and moderately cold winters), which favors the development of tourism. This area is characterized by rich geomorphological diversity (mountains, plains, gorges, canyons, sinkholes etc.). The territory of the Nišava district is rich in recognizable natural resources and beauties, which are suitable for the development of various types of tourism. Most touristic routes in this region lead from the city of Niš to Niška Banja and the tourist sites along the motoway around the mountain Suva Planina. The routes can be expanded towards the other municipalities with minor investments in the marketing, since they already have a functional infrastructure.

Nišava district has an extremely diverse and rich tourist offer characterized by interesting destinations, historical monuments, archeological sites, monasteries, spas, caves, original customs, and many other values which make this region one of the richest in Serbia. The suitable traffic and geographical position with access to Corridor 10 is the main factor for the development of mountain, spa, city, transit, excursion, rural and other forms of tourism and recreation. As shown in the Table 1, from the official information of the Ministry of Trade, Tourism, and Telecommunications of Serbia and as confirmed during the research on the field, Nišava district has got diverse and well equipped accommodation hotel facilities.

Object	Location	Category	Number of Apartments	Number of Rooms	Number of Beds
Garni Hotel "Lotos"	18 000 Niš	*	0	12	24
Garni Hotel "Boutique 25H"	18 000 Niš	*	0	7	13
Garni Hotel "Svrljižanka"	18 000 Niš	**	3	6	13
Garni Hotel "Laguna Lux"	18 000 Niš	**	1	10	18
Garni Hotel "Sole"	18 000 Niš	***	0	11	15
Garni Hotel "Panorama Lux"	18 000 Niš	***	2	6	16
Garni Hotel "Crystal Ice"	18 000 Niš	***	0	55	97
Garni Hotel "018 In"	18 000 Niš	***	2	8	22
Garni Hotel "Eter"	18 000 Niš	***	0	19	33
Garni Hotel "Consul"	18 000 Niš	***	0	12	13
Garni Hotel "Uni Elita Lux"	18 000 Niš	***	1	21	43
Garni Hotel "Zen"	18 000 Niš	****	0	12	15
Garni Hotel "Art Loft"	18 000 Niš	****	0	14	20



Hotel "Zeleni Vir"	18 000 Niš	**	0	32	42
Hotel "Lion Reborn"	18 000 Niš	**	0	17	27
Hotel "The Regent Club"	18 000 Niš	***	3	8	16
Hotel "Vidikovac"	18 000 Niš	***	21	59	144
Hotel "Ideo Lux"	18 000 Niš	***	2	14	26
Hotel "Aleksandar"	18 000 Niš	***	2	52	67
Hotel "Tami Residence" with dep. "Tami Residence"	18 000 Niš	****	3	67	114
Hotel "My Place"	18 000 Niš	****	6	24	42
Hotel "New City"	18 000 Niš	****	2	65	104
Hotel "Bosphorus"	18 220 Aleksinac	****	10	80	155
Hotel "Crystal Light"	18 000 Niš	****	0	34	45
Hotel "Niški Cvet"	18 000 Niš	****	3	21	41
Hotel "Constantinus Palace"	18 000 Niš	****	3	39	66
Congress hotel "Nais"	18 000 Niš	****	9	80	141
Hotel "Ambasador"	18 000 Niš	*****	11	58	116
Total			81	843	1488

Table 1. Hotels in Nišava district

Other types of private accommodation and hostels, as confirmed during the research on the field, are numerous and easily accessible. Nevertheless, various natural and anthropogenic potentials of the Nišava administrative district, given the potential, are not sufficiently developed, due to the lack of infrastructure and promotion.

Improving those natural potentials and using them in the best way for the purpose of further development of the tourism would be the most important task.

Tourism development of Nišava administrative district is planned and implemented by the district Tourism Organizations.

List of the tourist organization in Nišava district

Tourism Organization of Niš

Tourism Organization of Aleksinac

Tourism Organization of Doljevac

Tourism Organization of Ražanj

Tourism Organization of Gadžin Han

The Center for Tourism, Culture and Sport of Svrljig is mostly in charge of the tourism attractions and activities in the municipality of Svrljig.



Pčinja district

The district is located in the southern part of Serbia, bordering the disputed territory of Kosovo, along with Bulgaria and North Macedonia. Its administrative center is the city of Vranje. According to the 2011 census, the district has a population of 159,081.

River valley Pčinja includes the Pčinja river bed and sides along with Mountains of Kozjak and Starac with many historical cultural monuments. This is one of the cleanest rivers in Serbia. The climate is temperate continental and even transformed mediterranean in the valley of the South Morava river. The Pčinja district is, however, intensively losing human capital and a large portion of its local community is marked by high poverty and the lowest incomes in the country. Therefore, development opportunities should be urgently applied in attempt to increase the economic development through the abundant forest and other natural resources, such as thermal springs and other geological features. Another effort should be made to prevent local population emigration. The cities and gravitational point areas such as the regional centers of Niš, Prishtina, Skopje and Sofia create both good potential and also a threat offering the perspective for quick emigration despite the bad local infrastructure in Pčinja district. Vranje is the economic, political and cultural center of the Pčinja District. It is also the only city with the hotels registered on the official website of the Ministry of Trade, Tourism, and Telecommunications of Serbia, as given in the Table 2.

Object	Location	Category	Number of Apartments	Number of Rooms	Number of Beds
Garni Hotel "M"	17 500 Vranje	**	0	14	36
Hotel "Simpo – Pržar"	17 500 Vranje	***	2	18	30
Total			2	32	66

Table 2 Hotels in Pčinja district

The Pčinja district also consists of Bosilegrad, Bujanovac, Vladičin Han, Preševo, Surdulica, Trgovište municipalities. The tourism organizations in the mentioned settlements plan and organize the touristic activities in the district



List of the tourist organization in Pčinja district

Tourism Organization of Vranje

Tourism Organization of Surdulica

Tourism Organization of Bujanovac

Tourism Organization of Vladičin Han

Tourism Organization of Trgovište

The noticeable deficiency in trained tourism and hospitality workers, tourism management plans and strategies led to problems regarding district's tourism development. The main tourist routes are very diffused and rather short. They are narrowed to the main highway and connect the city of Vranje with the Vlasina lake and sometimes extend to the border with North Macedonia and the border crossing near the monastery of Saint Prohor Pčinjski.

Kyustendil district

The administrative center of the district is the town of Kyustendil situated in its southwestern part. The northern and western parts of the territory form the "Kyustendilsko kraishte" (Kyustendil Cornerland) include parts of the cross-border Milevska, Chudinska, Zemenska and — to the east — Konyavska mountains. The region features diverse surface relief — fertile valleys and canyons, separated by mountains and it is divided in two under-districts: Kyustendil in west and Dupnitsa in east. In Dupnitsa region there are geographic areas of Gorno pole (Upper field), Dolno pole (Lower field), and the area Razmetanitsa. Geologically, this region abounds with granites, clays, fossils, and different ores (polymetal ores, in Osogovo, brown coals in the Bobov dol mines), but it is still, however, the most famous for its numerous mineral water springs: hot mineral water springs in Sapareva banya, Kyustendil, the villages of Nevestino and Chetirtsi.

For the most part, the climate is continental, but at higher altitudes it transforms into mountain climate. The main drainage river is Struma. Soil composition is most favorable for the traditionally developed fruit-growing.

The region of Kyustendil includes nine municipalities with 182 settlements with the population of 163,889. Some of the main transport and tourism routes pass through Kyustendil: from Serbia on the Niš-Bosilegrad-Kyustendil highway; from North Macedonia on the Skopje-Sofia high-way and through Dupnitsa and Kyustendil passes the oldest commercial road that has linked Constantinople and the Adriatic Sea. Kyustendil has preserved its historical, ecological, but also cultural heritage. Today, most of the tourist accommodation objects of the district are located in Kyustendil, as seen in the Table 3 from the Ministry of Tourism of Bulgaria.



Object	Location	Category	Number of rooms	Number of Beds
Guest Rooms VALENTINO	Kyustendil	1	4	8
Guest Rooms STAI ZA GOSTI "ELENITE"	Zhilentsi	1	5	10
Guest Rooms HOSTEL SONATA	Kyustendil	2	5	10
Guest Rooms SALMINA 1	Kyustendil	2	5	12
Guest Rooms STAI ZA GOSTI "FULL ROOMS"	Kyustendil	2	2	4
Guest House KASHTA ZA GOSTI "NADEZHDA"	Ranentsi	1	2	6
Guest House KASHTA ZA GOSTI "IRIS"	Kyustendil	1	2	4
Guest House "VILA PANORAMA"	Blatets	1	6	12
Guest House STAI ZA GOSTI "EVROPA"	Kyustendil	1	5	10
Guest House KASHTA ZA GOSTI ADVENTURE HOUSE	Kyustendil	1	2	5
Guest House KASHTA ZA GOSTI "POLSKA SKAKAVITSA"	Kyustendil	1	4	10
Guest House RAYCHEVATA KASHTA	Kyustendil	1	5	12
Guest House FOLIS	Kyustendil	1	2	4
Guest House KASHTA ZA GOSTI "TIHIYA KAT"	Kyustendil	2	10	19
Guest House KASHTA ZA GOSTI "PAUTALIYA"	Kyustendil	2	3	6
Guest House KASHTA ZA GOSTI KRIS	Kyustendil	2	4	6
Guest House KASHTA ZA GOSTI "HISARLAKA"	Kyustendil	2	2	4
Guest House KASHTA ZA GOSTI SELENA SPA HOUSE	Gorna Brestnitsa	2	6	12
Guest House KASHTA ZA GOSTI KRISIELI	Kyustendil	2	4	8
Guest House KASHTA ZA GOSTI TERMA ASKLEPIY	Kyustendil	2	5	11
Guest House KASHTA ZA GOSTI STARATA CHERESHA	Kyustendil	2	4	8
Guest House KASHTA ZA GOSTI "BALGARIYA"	Kyustendil	2	8	12
Guest House KASHTA ZA GOSTI "TSARVENA YABALKA"	Tsarvena Yabalka	2	4	9
Guest House LISETS	Gorna Brestnitsa	2	5	12
Guest House KASHTA ZA GOSTI ROZOVATA KASHTA	Kyustendil	3	5	10
Guest House KASHTA ZA GOSTI "CHERVENATA KASHTA"	Kyustendil	3	4	6
Guest House KASHTA ZA GOSTI "LONDONY"	Kyustendil	3	6	12
Guest House "CHESHMETO"	Kyustendil	3	5	10
Guest House KASHTA ZA GOSTI "OSOGOVETS"	Prekolnitsa	3	6	18
Guest House KASHTA ZA GOSTI TRI BUKI	Savoyski	3	6	16
Guest house KASHTA ZA GOSTI LOVNA REZIDENTSIYA - BOR	Prekolnitsa	3	10	22
Guest Rooms "AHAT"	Kyustendil	3	5	10
Rest Homes POCHIVNA STANTSIYA PVTS - BDZH	Kyustendil	2	27	58
Rest Homes POCHIVNA STANTSIYA "PAUTALIYA"	Kyustendil	2	26	70



Guest Apartments APARTAMENTI ZA GOSTI "FAMILIYA"	Kyustendil	1	16	46
Guest Apartments APARTAMENT ZA GOSTI RING	Kyustendil	2	5	10
Guest Apartments "MEZONET 169"	Kyustendil	3	4	6
Guest Apartments APARTAMENT ZA GOSTI "SAGITTARIUS"	Kyustendil	3	2	4
Guest apartments APARTAMENT ZA GOSTI DO BANYATA	Kyustendil	3	3	6
Motel "BELIYAT KAMAK"	Kyustendil	1	5	14
Hotel VELBAZHD	Kyustendil	1	30	46
Hotel "RUEN"	Novo Selo	2	37	71
Hotel STRIMON GARDEN MEDICAL SPA	Kyustendil	5	71	124
Family Hotel SEMEEN HOTEL LAVEGA	Kyustendil	2	13	25
Family Hotel SEMEEN HOTEL CASINO RING	Kyustendil	2	10	30
Family Hotel SEMEEN HOTEL "SVETI NIKOLA"	Bogoslov	3	8	16
Family Hotel SEMEEN HOTEL TRI BUKI	Savoyski	3	27	64
Family Hotel SEMEEN HOTEL CASINO RING	Kyustendil	2	10	30
Family Hotel SEMEEN HOTEL "RAMIRA"	Kyustendil	3	20	44
Family Hotel SEMEEN HOTEL LAZUR 2	Kyustendil	3	12	14
Family Hotel SEMEEN HOTEL LAZUR 1	Kyustendil	3	6	7
Family Hotel SEMEEN HOTEL "PARADISE"	Zhilentsi	3	11	27
Bungalows BUNGALA YUG OYL	Lozno	2	8	16
Tourist Hut OSOGOVO	Bogoslov	2	1	35
Total			503	1001

Table 3 Accommodation in Kyustendil district

The plan is to transform and develop this Bulgarian center through the development of cultural tourism, and modern resort centers by the hot water springs.

Today, Kyustendil has 31 officially listed tourist attraction and two associations in charge of the district tourism

List of the tourist organization in Kyustendil district

Sdruzhenie „Turisticheskoto druzhestvo Osogovo“ Kyustendil

Sdruzhenie „Turisticheskoto druzhestvo – Ravni chal“ Kyustendil



Pernik district

The district of Pernik is located near the geographical center of the Balkan Peninsula. According to the 2011 census, Pernik district had a population of 133,750. The district's main city is Pernik, and other municipalities are Breznik, Kovachevtsi, Zemen, Tran, and Radomir.

The rivers of Struma and Erma run through this district that lies in the valley of Pernik, Radomir and Breznik and includes parts of the mountains of Verila, Vitosha and Visikar. The mineral springs near the towns of Breznik and Rudartzi are just one part of the numerous mineral resources. The rich deposits of coal, ores, clays and limestone represent the basis of the development of industry as the main economy sector of the district.

According to the official registry of Bulgarian Ministry of Tourism and as confirmed on the field during the research activities, the district has different types of accommodation for the tourists.

Object	Location	Category	Number of rooms	Number of Beds
Guest Rooms STAYA ZA GOSTI	Divotino	1	1	4
Guest House KASHTA ZA GOSTI	Bosnek	1	7	18
Guest House KASHTA ZA GOSTI	Bosnek	1	2	4
Guest House KASHTA ZA GOSTI	Yardzhilovtsi	1	5	10
Guest House KASHTA ZA GOSTI "RAYLOVO"	Luylin	1	4	8
Rest Homes POCHIVNA STANTSIYA	Rudartsi	2	24	42
Motel MOTEL "RIS"	Pernik	1	13	31
Hotel ELIT	Pernik	3	44	88
Hotel STRUMA	Pernik	3	58	102
Hotel VILA MAGUS	Kladnitsa	4	28	62
Total			186	369

Table 4. Accommodation in Pernik district

The rivers, their gorges, mountains, the cliffs of Zemen, the longest cave in Bulgaria and other natural landmarks represent a great potential for the development of ecotourism. A prerequisite for the development of the cultural tourism in this region are its preserved fortresses and ancient settlements, as well as medieval churches. Those attractions should receive more visitors given the appropriate marketing that should change the trajectory of the existing tourist routes which are mostly related to the mineral springs and the city of Pernik. Today, Pernik has 13 important officially registered tourist attractions and two tourist organizations.

List of the tourist organization in Pernik district

Sdruzhenie „Dom na turista - Vasil Apostolov“ Pernik

Sdruzhenie „Turistichesko druzhestvo - Krakra Pernishki“ Pernik



The tourist attraction locations, tradition and legends of the Nišava district

The natural resources of the city of Niš and its surroundings favor the development of tourism and sports and are of great importance for the further development of the city. There are numerous tourist attractions in the Nišava district which already create a strong potential for the development of the tourist offer in the district.

The city of **Niš** is the largest city of the district and also the most visited city with 135000 tourists in 2019. It is the city with the biggest number of hotels and numerous tourist attractions. A legend about the creation of the city is about a brother and a sister named Niša and Vida. Their homeland was the whole country from the Morava to the Danube river. The two of them divided their homeland: Niša took Nišava and Pomoravlje, and Vida took the land to the Danube. Niša built the city of Niš on the Nišava river, between Gorica and Vinik, and Vida built Vidin on the Danube. But the brother and sister quarrelled over where the border between their two countries should be. In order to avoid a quarrel, they agreed as follows: that each of the two of them builds a railway from their city to the city of the other, and go the same way at a certain day and hour so they could place the border at the point where they meet. Strangely, they did not keep the agreement. Brother Niša, instead of iron, chose stone and paved the road from his city of Niš to Gramada with stone, and sister Vida shod horses with iron, and then came to Gramada on horses. And so, they made a border of their states on Gramada; and as a sign of the border, they made a large hill of stones which stood until 1876

Niška Banja is a town in the municipality of Niška Banja in the city area Niš in the Nišava district. Niška Banja belongs to the II group of the most developed spas in Serbia. This spa center and its thermal and mineral springs are located at the slopes of Koritnik, on the southeastern edge of the Niš Basin. An old legend about Niška Banja says that "during Ottoman occupation of Serbia a horse that belonged to Pasha fell ill in Niš, so he gave it to the resident from the vicinity of Banja to take care of it. The horse drank water from the spring of the spa and lay in its mud and soon recovered. " And that is how the Turks understood the benefits of Niška Banja and its water.

There are several important gorges and springs in Niška Banja municipality.

The Sićevo gorge near Niška Banja represents the 17 kilometers long valley-gorge around the river Nišava, with frequent changes in the direction of the river flow and low waterfalls. There are more than 30 remains of churches and monasteries of the exceptional historical values in the gorge surroundings. Due to its natural values, the Sićevo gorge has been declared a Park of nature. Five kilometers from the village of Sićevo, on the road Niš-Sofia, there is a Hotel "Sićevo" with 72 beds, surrounded by sports fields for basketball, volleyball, handball and football, ideal for



organizing sports camps. The attractive gorge of the river Nišava is an ideal space for kayaking, therefore numerous international competitions have been held here so far.

Suva Banja is located 300 meters east of the Main Spring. The water temperature varies between 12 ° C and 37 ° C, and on average gives 14 to 42 liter of water per second. It belongs to radioactive homeotherms whose radioactivity is moving between 5.96 and 6.75 Mach units. Radioactivity is highest at maximum water temperature of Suva Banja.

School fountain is one of the most radioactive springs whose name comes from the very location where it is based. On numerous analyses, it has been determined that the radioactivity of this source is between 36.36 and 54.70 Mach units. The water temperature of the School Fountain is 17-19 ° C, while the flow rate is 2.5 liters per second. According to the balneological classification, School fountain belongs to hypothermal, with a significant content of calcium, magnesium, hydrocarbons, aluminum oxides, iron oxides and silicon dioxide. It is used to treat spa guests. There are plans to renovate the school fountain .

The main spring (Glavno Vrelo) The main spring is located at the foot of Koritnik, just above the spa park and springs on the place above which pool number 4 was built. This spring is one of the most abundant sources of thermal-mineral water in Serbia. On average, the flow rate of this source is 50 liters per second. The average temperature of the source is between 38.2 ° C and 38.5°C. The main spring, after balneological classification, belongs to the radioactive homeotherms. The radioactivity of this water is 10.53 to 13.40 Mach units. Water from the Main Spring is supplied to the main bathroom with two pools located in the center of the spa.

Jelašnica Gorge is a nature park located about 15km from Niška Banja, near the Village Jelašnica. This gorge is carved by the Jelašnica river that flows through it. And at the foot of the Suva planina mountain. The special reserve "Jelashnička klisura" is located in the southwestern part of Suva planina on the local road Niš - Gornja Studena. The road from Gornja Mala, part of Jelašnica, to the top of the gorge is marked with mountaineering signs. The Mining Colony is located in the village, because of the bituminous coal mine nearby, which had been operating since 1920 until 1967. There were also single rooms and family sections in the colony. Čira's train was transporting coal from Jelašnica to Niška Banja and a tram went from Niška Banja to Niš. Sićevo, the nearby village, has the church of St. Elijah, which is dedicated to the holy prophet Elijah and built in the 19th century. Within the gorge there are 4 natural windows in the rock – “prozorci”, of which one is the window of St. Elijah (Sveti Ilija). Next to the window, on the eastern part of the gorge, is Carevo korito, a trough carved at the top of a cliff. They call the trough "imperial" because they believe in the legend that says that it was carved by Emperor Constantine. The locals prayed to God on the top of the cliff and Constantine wanted to see why they were gathering at that very place. Delighted by the view from there, he ordered a place to rest and carved a trough in the rock. According to the legend told by Jelašnica residents, the emperor Constantine came to the top of the cliff by stepping over the canvas that was stretched from one side of the gorge to the other. There is a legend that Emperor crossed the canvas from the western to the eastern part of the gorge towards the Emperor's trough over about 3 km of length, starting from Jelašnica and through the valley. When Constantine would returned from Constantinople, the Emperor always bathed in that trough with healing water from a nearby spring in order to reach the city of Niš clean and well rested.



In the gorge of Jelašnica there was the monastery of St. Archangel Michael, which is thought to have been built in the Middle Ages in a hollow in the rock. There was a path to the monastery, but in time it has collapsed, after which it was demolished, so now there are a few traces of the past. There were over 15 monasteries in the Jelašnica and Sićevo gorges. The places where monasteries and water sources existed were successfully found. The monastery in the gorge was a monastery dedicated to St. Petka. Jovan Cvijić, the most famous Serbian geographer visited the Jelašnica gorge in 1892. He included two photographs from the gorge in his most important work "Balkan Peninsula" that was first printed in French in 1912, and only later was translated into Serbian.

"**Banja Topilo**" is one of the tourist potentials of the district, with very high quality geothermal springs, located 25 km from Nis in the valley of the Toponička river. Warm, mineral water of 34°C springs from about 18 springs. Water is used in therapeutic purposes and helps in the treatment of rheumatic diseases and diseases of the nervous system. Spa Topilo does not have a sufficiently built infrastructure and significant investments are needed.

Mountains

Mountain - hills area of Kalafat with the highest peak of 837 meters. The mountain is suitable for a handful of adventures because it abounds in a series of speleological objects or caves and pits so there are both horizontal and vertical entrances. One of them is the **Samar cave**, which is located on the mountain Kalafat. The cave is located at 25km from the city of Niš, and is very accessible. The entrance to the cave is at the end of the village of Kopajkošara, where the stream Sudvik comes out on the surface. Samar Cave is a cave that is special in many ways. Serbian researcher, speleologist, enthusiast, Milutin Veljković, broke the world record in 1972 and entered the Guinness Book of Records, spending 464 days inside this cave. "Under the Stone Sky" is a book written by Milutin about his days in the cave.

The cave even has several pits, and they are on the side where the stream starts to sink. At the end of the cave there is a large *prerast* – natural stone bridge, unique because there are so few of them in the whole of Serbia. Southeast Serbia is known for its karst terrain. All different forms of the stalagmites, stalactites, cave draperies and travertine tubs are present in the cave. There are both a dry and a wet part in the cave.

It is interesting to mention the name of the nearby village **Kopajkošara**. Before entering the cave, at the turn from the main road, the village is not visible at all. Sometimes in the Middle Ages, someone from this village shouted "run away, people, dig up(kopaj) the baskets (košara) the Turks are coming", which resulted in the village's name.



Popšica Cave and Samar Cave are little known and valuable, but if they were arranged they would be of great importance for tourism. It is necessary to make certain investments for the sake of arranging the road and the area around the cave, in order to start its tourist exploitation.

Suva planina ("Dry Mountain") is located 15 km east of Niš and it represents a separate geological and climate region in the southeastern part of Serbia. The highest peaks of Suva planina are: Trem (1,810m), Sokolov kamen, Mosor and others. Suva planina used to be called Kunovica, and it was named after the Kun tree, which prevailed on the mountain. Today's name Suva planina came from the fact that the water sources do not exist at high altitudes. The water from the top goes through the cave channels and springs arriving to the foot of the mountain, where there are various springs such as: Vitansko vrelo, Krupajsko vrelo, Krupničko vrelo... Water from these springs is very useful for the surrounding population. The first spring for Niš was in Gornja Studena, and later it was included in a water supply system that is still functional. **Bojana's waters**, a picnic area on the slopes of Suva planina, 25 km from the city, has a 900m long ski slope, with an altitude difference of 320m, with a ski lift. The track is suitable for slalom competitions. On Suva planina (Bojana's waters) there is a mountain lodge "Studenac" with accommodation capacity of over 50 beds, authentic restaurant with fireplace and trout ponds.

Jastrebac is a mountain that consists of two massifs, Veliki and Mali Jastrebac. The mountain is located in the area between Niš, Aleksinac, Kruševac, Blace and Prokuplje. Excursion site "Jastrebac" is located at the altitude of 480m and it has good accommodation facilities. The artificial lake allows swimming in the summer months, and in winter guests have at their disposal a ski lift with a ski slope of 300m. The mountain resort welcomes hunters who can hunt deer, wild boar and roe deer. Within the hunting ground "Veliki Jastrebac" there is a picnic area with a lake and catering facilities, hunting lodge and other hunting-technical facilities, which satisfy hunting tourism standards. [The legend about the gold mines on Jastrebac dates back to the Turks, since it is believed that "gold-bearing" streams, left from ancient exploitation, flowed through the mountain. Somewhat younger legends say that Jastrebac is a mountain of dragons, which "gave birth" to Miloš Obilić, despot Stefan Lazarević and many other historical and mythical heroes. The phenomenon of the dragon origin of the mountain is also described in the folk song "Carica Milica i Zmaj od Jastrepca".](#)

Babička gora is a mountain in southeastern Serbia, limited by faults towards Barbeška, Zaplanjska and Leskovačka valley. It spreads only in a small northeastern and northern part over the territory of Zaplanje. At the foot many villages lie in the mountains, which provides good opportunities for the development of rural tourism.

Seličevica is separated from the east of Suva planina by the Kutina river, and on the south side it is separated from Babička gora by the Niš basin extension. The villages interesting for tourism are located at the foot of Seličevica and they are named Dukat, Gornji Barbeš, Grkinja and part of Tasković.



Lakes and caves

Lake Bovan is located on the Sokobanjska Moravica river near Aleksinac. The lake is located on the regional road Aleksinac-Sokobanja-Knjaževac. The proximity of spa resorts and the mountainous environment make Lake Bovan a real treasure of Aleksinac's tourist offer. In addition to swimming and sport fishing, some types of nautical spots can also be practiced on the lake, such as sailing. The lake is visited by the 60 000 people in season. The shores are full of gravel with just few sandy beaches on the southern side. All sport fishing or purpose fishing is regulated and it is impossible without a proper permit. [There is a legend about the lake that many residents know.](#) When the lake was to be built and the terrain was flooded with water, the construction crew ordered the people to move out from the valley. The whole village that lied in the gorge was moved out and their houses left to be demolished by the incoming tidal wave. Everybody moved except an old woman who refused to abandon her home.

When a worker there told her she will die if she stays, she said she will gladly lose her life and she cursed the lake to demand lives every year. Nobody took her curse seriously, but later on, the curse caught with them. Year after year, the workers started dying, their families turned poor, cattle ill, women infertile. Every year, a new reckless driver breaks through the fence with his car and falls into the lake, swimmers get caught by the cold stream of the river beneath and sink to the bottom.

The local people believe that the curse lives on and they even knowingly avoid going to the lake until they hear that someone has died which would mean that they can feel safe since the lake has taken its victim.

Krajkovačko Lake is an artificial accumulation created in 1986 by the construction of a dam on the Krajkovačka river, left tributary of the South Morava. This lake surroundings are known for their mushrooms boletus, golden chanterelle. In addition to the lake, a well-known place is the cabin of Nikodije Stojanović Tatko where the partisan commander and the partisans killed each other to prevent being captured by the enemy. Then towards Mali Jastrebac there is a church of St. Vrač who is the historical pearl of this region. The lake is located on the southwest of the slopes of the mountain Mali Jastrebac, about 2.5 km northwest of the village of Krajkovac, in municipality of Merošina. The visitors are attracted by the pleasant temperature of the water that is around during the summer 20 ° C degrees, shade created by oak forest, clean air and clean water. This lake is also suitable for fishermen because it is rich in carp.



Cerje cave, is located 14km from Niš. In their underground halls hides an unusual treasure. The city of Niš proudly carries the name "the city of fairies" or related forms that mean nymphs from a spring. The described interpretation has gained a great popularity, and nymphs or fairies are becoming a symbol of the city on the Nišava. Who were the fairies from Nis (Naissus, Nisos)? Slovenian legends do not tell us much about it. However, in ancient Greek legends, a legendary place of almost the same name, Niša, appears. The legendary Niša was inhabited by nymphs called Nišijade, who are known to have been the nannies of the minor god Dionysus. It is believed that the Greeks tried to explain the foreign name of the imported deity Dionysus to them with the legend of Niš. Interpreting that this name means God from Niš, they set out in search of the place of his origin. The myth about the Cerje cave also says that the God of wine, Dionysus was hiding from the jealous wife Hera in this cave.

Okruglica is a tourist resort 9km southeast of Svrljig. This locality is closest to completing all the obligatory factors for tourist independence, in addition of picturesque landscape motifs, there is also the river Svrljički Timok, a spring, a hotel and a camp. **Banjica** beach is a green oasis in a stone gorge whose beauty was appreciated and the Romans proving the excavations of the baths. Banjica has preserved traces of the medieval Serbian culture in the form of the remains of several churches and tombs.

Svrljig gorge is a special attraction in a fairly large length, from the village Niševac to Rgošta. The Svrljig Timok and the railway run along its entire length carved in stone, with over 30 bridges and tunnels is an attractive sight for visitors. The Svrljig mountains nearby and their surroundings are famous for Belmuž, a traditional shepherd dish made of unripe cheese. The belmuž is a dish of the unique heritage in eastern Serbia. It is prepared traditionally by melting crushed cheese on a light fire until it becomes almost liquid and then by adding corn flour. Belmuž is also part of ritual practice on May 6th during the day of St George (Đurđevdan) in the towns and regions of Svrljig and Niš.

Prekonoška cave is located in the southern part of the Svrljig mountains, 5 km south from Svrljig. The cave is well known, and its exploitation depends on its final arranged which began several years ago but has not yet been completed. The cave, which was the habitat of prehistoric man and a cave bear, is a valuable tourist treasure, appreciated by many famous geographers and by King Milan as well.



Cultural landmarks

Niš Fortress, located on the banks of the Nišava River, in the city center, is one of the most preserved buildings of Turkish military architecture in the Central Balkans. It is built on an area of over 22 hectares, with ramparts that are 2100 meters long and 8m high walls. In addition to well-preserved massive stone walls and gate, in the Fortress there are numerous remains of the turbulent history of Niš: one of the oldest remains is a collection of tombstones (Lapidarium, I - IV century), Hamam, the Turkish bath which is the oldest preserved building from the period of Turkish rule in the area of Niš, the Bali Beg Mosque, the Monument to Prince Milan Obrenović and to the liberators of Nis (1878).

Ćele Kula is the only monument in the world created as a consequence of the great battle of Čegar. This terrible monument was built on the way to Constantinople as a warning to those who revolt against the Turkish Empire. On all four sides of the tower there are a total of 56 rows, in each 17 skulls in a row, which totaled 952 Serbian soldiers' skulls. Over time, most of the skull disappeared or were damaged, so that today only 58 skulls remain in the tower. In 1938 a chapel was built which protected Ćele Kula from further decay.

The archeological site of **Mediana** is located on the former Roman road "Via Militaris ", today's E-80 (Niš-Sofia). On an area of 40 hectares, there are many remains of a granary, craft center, villa, spa, as well as a villa with a peristyle decorated with rich floor mosaics. In the museum building, one can see some of the stone sculptures, objects that were used for everyday use (bowls, jugs, lamps ...), as well as the remains of lead pipes from which Niška Banja delivered hot, healing water. Part of Roman stone sculptures –Roman deities portraits, jewelry, coins and other useful objects found in Mediana can also be seen in the Archaeological Hall of the National Museum in Niš.

On the hill **Čegar**, near Niš, at the place where the famous battle from the First Serbian Uprising took place, there is a monument erected in memory of the brave soldiers and their commander Stevan Sindjelic, who died at this place. Today's tower-shaped monument - which symbolizes a military fortification, was erected on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the liberation of Niš, a it was discovered on June 1, 1927.

The Red Cross concentration camp is one of the few preserved fascist camps in Europe. One of the facts that sets this camp apart from the others is that on February 12, 1942, a mass escape of detainees was carried out from this camp. 12. February 1967, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the escape of the detainees, the area of the camp is turned into the Memorial Museum "February 12"



The town of **Koprijan**, today's Kurvin grad or Korvin grad, is one of the significant monuments Serbian medieval history and culture. As a medieval fortress, it is in a group the most significant artistic monuments of secular architecture from the last decades of the 14th and first half of the 15th century. These are the only remains of a medieval city in the territory of the today's municipality of Doljevac, and therefore should be used for tourism valorization. There are good access roads. Regarding the activation of the city of Koprijan for tourist purposes and its valorization the site regulation has been conducted, followed by the construction of access road with parking spaces, construction of pedestrian and a trim trail as well as a lookout point in the immediate vicinity of the walls from which a remarkable view of the Morava valley and the whole area extends. **It is believed that the vulgar name of the city "Kurvingrad" was given after the immoral wealthy lady who lived in this city. According to the legend, this wealthy empress, seduced a priest or a monk from the monastery on the neighboring hill, the monastery of St. John.**

To make it easier for them to meet, she ordered the canvas to be stretched from the city to the church when she was crossing. According to local legends, this immoral lady went every night stepping on the cloth to pray in the monastery. As she did it at night, the locals doubted her good intentions and the stories about her not going to pray but to secretly meet the monk started circulating in the old city. According to the residents, she seduced the monk and this forbidden love actually transformed the name of the city, which is still called "Kurvingrad"- the town of the immoral woman.

Among the cultural and historical monuments of an older date, it is important to mention the **monastery St. Roman** from the IX century, which is located at the end of the road leading from Ražanj to Kruševac, on the right coast of South Morava. It belongs to the group of monasteries that were built before the Nemanjić dynasty. Then we should mention the church of St. Peter and Paul in the village of Grabovo, and the church in Ražanj " Temple of the prophet Elijah " which was erected in 1840

Monastery of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul in the village of Grabovo near Ražanj, as said by one of its nuns during the collection of data on the field for the purpose of this research, dates from the 14th century. It existed before the Battle of Kosovo. It was a male monastery, monks lived there. Orlović Pavle is the founder of the monastery, that is, the Duke of Crep, famous in the Serbian folk songs as Orlović Pavle. **On the famous painting, Kosovka devojka hives water to a hero which is said to be him.** He was a flag bearer in the Emperor's Lazar army. Before the Battle of Kosovo, nobles from the court from Kruševac came to Bukovik to hunt. The monastery is located at the foot of Mount Bukovik and Mount Ozren. Ozren and Soko Banja are 5km far, so the air is exceptional. Nobles came to these parts to hunt, the hunt lasted for months. There was water there and it is assumed that thanks to that water and flatter terrain they built the boarding house, a hunting lodge to have a place to stay during the hunt. After that right away, a church was built. Afterwards, monks lived there. The church was twice destroyed and burned by the Turks. It was last burned in the 16th, 17th century and then it was rebuilt under the leadership of Karadjordje, leader of the first Serbian uprising.



The remains of the **old town of Svrljig** are located on a huge rock halfway between Niševac and Palilula. Today, only the walls and the remains of the tower on the plateau can be seen, he presents a picnic area with extraordinary views of the surroundings.

The **monastery of St. Archangel** was built in the time of the Nemanjić dynasty, in a gentle green bay near the village Popšica. It has long been the focus of the religion and next to the monastery there is an old school where the documents on the cultural circumstances of Serbia in the 19th century are kept.

Among the monuments on the territory of the municipality of Gadžin Han, the old church that should be mentioned is **Holy Ascension in Veliki Krčimir**, which is a cultural monument of great importance, a church **St. Nicholas in Donje Dragovlje**, which is a cultural monument, the **Church of the Holy Assumption of the Virgin in Grkinja** and the church of **St. Elijah in Jagličje**, which are also cultural monuments of a great local and regional importance.

The main bearer of all cultural events in the area of the municipality of Gadžin Han is the Branko Miljković Library. It was created on 30.05.2006. by merging the Municipal library "Branko Miljković" and House of Culture "Branko Miljković" Gadžin Han.

Ražanj pottery (crepuljarstvo) in the 19th century. In the village of Rujište, men traditionally made pottery, but today women are also becoming involved in this craft. In 2019, Ražanj pottery was included in the National Register of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Serbia. Crepulja is one of the oldest forms of kitchen ceramics, a shallow circular shape in which bread was baked on the hearth. It got its name from the fact that it is made of baked soil similar to tiles (*crep* in Serbian). Together with the pot, it is the oldest and most common human heritage to be used as a kitchen ceramics, in various dimensions and in several variants, since the upper Neolithic. According to some ethnologists, it is believed that the Slavs brought the pottery to the Balkan Peninsula from their homeland. The conclusion is based on the name of the Slavic origin, which appears in several variants, such as crepulja, crepnja, crepna, cherepnja, podnica. The name is very similar in Bulgaria which allows this term to be classified as a common heritage. This is the youngest and at the same time the most widespread craft, ceramic production, originated in the village of Rujište near Ražanj.

However, the historical fact is that the pottery was used even in the younger Neolithic in the area of the Balkan Peninsula and beyond. Having passed through all epochs (including the Middle Ages) in an almost unchanged form, the pottery has reached our days with the same functional characteristics, which calls into question the credibility of the allegations of some ethnologists that the pottery is of Slavic origin. The making of tiles is a characteristic of the Balkan Peninsula, especially its eastern and partly central part. Until the middle of the 20th century, pots were an indispensable part of the kitchen inventory, especially in the rural areas of the mountain areas of Romania, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Greece, Albania, Montenegro and Serbia. As a craft activity, the making of pottery in the village of Rujište near Ražanj was conceived much later than the



appearance of the first pottery in the Ražanj area and dates from the 19th century, when many other old crafts developed in the Principality of Serbia.

Men traditionally make pottery in the village of Rujište. Ražanj tiles are made in three sizes, with or without a hole in the middle. The bread is baked in pots with a hole, and many different dishes are prepared in pots without a hole.

The tourist attraction locations, tradition and legends of the Pčinja district

Natural tourist attractions

Mount Dukat is located at 1400 meters above sea level, and its highest peak - Crnook, is 1881 meters high. Summers are cool, and winters are strong, long and extremely cold. In the western part of the Dukat mountain, there is a village of the same name, which today has barely 400 inhabitants, mostly old people. The road that passes through this village, and which has the status of a regional road, is not even paved. Thus, it often happens that the bus that comes to this village only once a week, does not drive at all in winter. The fact that the two poorest municipalities in Serbia, Bosilegrad and Trgovište, meet on Dukat, testifies to how ironic the name of this mountain seems because it represents the *golden coin*. The low incomes have deeply affected the development of tourism which requires more investments, especially in infrastructure.

Mountain Kukavica is a jewel of the south of Serbia, a mountain of peace and tranquility, without any factories or other pollutants in the vicinity of 30 km. Nature lovers consider its air the purest in the country, because once people visit Kukavica and inhale the air filled with the scent of conifers, oak, beech and many medical herbs, they gladly return again. Mount Kukavica stretches on the territory of Vladičin Han, Leskovac and Vranje, between the Vranje and Leskovac valleys, Grdelica gorge and the valley of the river Veternica.

The legend of the name Kukavica refers to the period of the Battle of Kosovo. [As the legend goes, this mountain was one of the gathering places for Serbian fighters before the Battle of Kosovo in 1389. Since many of them were killed in the Battle of Kosovo, many women, mothers, sisters and wives became grieved by this event, their reaction was crying, whining \(in Serbian “kukanje”\) hence the name of the mountain Kukavica.](#)

The highest peak, Vlajna (1,441 m) is located in the municipality of Vladičin Han. The most important meteorological station for the south of Serbia is located there, as well as military facilities, yet the great touristic potential is not exploited. The mountain stays out of the main touristic routes and the hotel Vlajna is losing its importance, so people mostly stay in Leskovac if they decide to visit the mountain. As a harmonious ecosystem of numerous flora and fauna, with



watercourses among which over 50 sources are of drinking water, Kukavica is one of the most important tourist potentials of the Vladičin Han municipality.

Kukavica is covered with dense forest, predominantly deciduous (beech and oak) and to a lesser extent coniferous. Deciduous vegetation is natural, while conifers are artificially forested. The most famous is the golden beech, which is part of the nature reserve of the same name and is one of the highest quality wood of this species in Serbia. Enjoying the beauties of the mountain is complemented by other plant species such as wild raspberries, blackberries, mushrooms, medicinal and spice herbs, potato-goljak (indigenous species with a high content of nutrients). Kukavica is a habitat of many animal species, of which wild boar, fox, roe deer and wolf, but also pheasant, wild pigeon, rabbit, squirrel, badger. The presence of the mentioned animals offers opportunities for hunting tourism.

Damjanik Waterfall is located about 30 kilometers from Vranje on the road to Besna Kobila. The waterfall is reached by following markers along the path from the main road, towards the village of Nesvrta. The total length of the trail is 12 kilometers in both directions.

Borino brdo, 690 meters above sea level, is located northwest of Vranje. This area used to be without trees, completely bare, so it was called Golič. After the First World War, the hill was forested with pine forests. It is now named Borino brdo after the most famous Vranje resident, Borisav Stanković, the writer. Borino brdo is one of the most attractive picnic areas since it is located only 2.5 kilometers from the city center. It is very visited, especially in summer due to proximity of the city of Vranje.

Vranje Ravine is 45 km long and 6 km wide and it starts with the Grdelica Gorge, in the far south of Serbia, embracing two spas and many important and valuable geographical features that represent tourist attractions. **The canyon of the Vranjska river** is located near Vranje, in the rocks between the mountains Pljačkovica and Krstilovica. There is a walking path through the canyon, from the municipal building to the foot of the medieval fortress Markovo kale. Thanks to the work of the mountaineering club Železničar, in 2006 a hiking trail was arranged so it is easily accessible.

Bujanovačka Spa is located 3 km south-east of Bujanovac, 370 km away from Belgrade – just next to the Belgrade-Skoplje-Thessalonica-Athens highway. The springs of this spa are of only 395 m of altitude, at the foot of Mount Rakovac, so it had got the name of *Rakovačka Spa* for a long time before. The waters of Bujanovačka Spa belong to the category of carbon-acidic hypothermal waters (43°C). They are used as therapeutic means by bathing in pools or bath tubs or by spraying, while the healing bathing mud (peloid) is also applied.

This water, similar by its contents to that of Vranjska spa, is used in curing rheumatic and gynecological diseases.



In the time of Turkish rule, the spa was called *Karaman (Black Mud) Spa* and *Buffalo Spa*. It is now ranked among the youngest spas in Serbia. Namely, it was not before the sixties of the 20th century that detailed tests of its curative capabilities were conducted. Today, there is a hotel and an Institute for prevention, curing and rehabilitation of disabilities - Bujanovačka Spa.

The spa has a tradition of curing a variety of illnesses, owing it to its medical expert staff and equipment enabling application of the most up-to-date treatments. This medical institution uses in curing its patients not only the thermo-mineral waters, but also the curative bathing mud and natural gas -carbon dioxide.

The natural health resort of **Vranjska Spa** is situated at 12 km north-east of Vranje, 360 km away from Belgrade, and only 5 km far from Belgrade-Athens highway. Vranjska Spa, set at the altitude of 420 m, is encompassed by the following mountains: Besna Kobila (1922 m), Patarica (1806 m) and Srpska Čuka (1415 m), the wooded slopes of which shield it from strong and cold winds, providing for the moderate-continental climate to prevail.

Even the prehistoric man used to bathe in the hot springs at the banks of River Banjštica that runs through Vranjska Spa and people had continually been attracted by the magical power of the thermo-mineral waters of this Spa, including Dardanes, Thracians, Illyrics, Celts, Romans, Byzantines. Although Vranjska Spa was known as a curative place in the time of Serbian medieval state, it reached the peak of its reputation in the course of Turkish rule over these areas.

Bulino Lake - is located on the mountain Kukavica at the foot of the volcanic cone Oblik, in the area of the village Belanovce. [According to legend, there is a hidden treasure in the lake to this day. Namely, at the time of the withdrawal of an Ottoman caravan, which was made up of Turks, their wives "bullas" and loads of gold, people were walking through this area. As they crossed this lake, the entire caravan sank, as if in quicksand.](#) Today, "Bulino Lake" is overgrown with grass, which grows only on a swampy ground.

Standing on the surface of this lake, when there is a formed mud crust, you can feel the movement of water below the surface.

Jovac lakes form a group of six lakes and swampy areas formed on the former Jovac landslide. Namely, on the night between February 17 and 18, 1977, a sliding mass of 150 million m³, set off from the surrounding volcanic cones Grot and Oblik. Lakes Žilevje, Rusimovo, Crkveno, Malo and Živkovo lakes were formed within the sliding mass. Great Jovac lake was created by creation of the natural dam on the Jovačka river by a landslide.



Jovac lakes are a rare genetic type of lakes, which is why they are included in the list of the Geoheritage Inventory of Serbia from 2005.

This area is characterized by a particularly significant finding of a strictly protected species of long-legged beetle (*Trirurus karelinii*) and marsh turtle (*emysorbicularis*), i.e. 12 species of fish in lakes and the Jovačka river.

Vlasina lake, the most visited lake in Pčinja district of Serbia, with its remarkable floating peat islands, is the perfect location for peaceful holiday. Floating peat islands on the water surface with color changing from light gray to dark blue offer a unique experience. This rarity of nature can be seen on Vlasina Lake, the highest and the biggest artificial lake in Serbia, known for its crystal clear water reflecting the surrounding forests and mountains. Peat floating islands, this miraculous natural phenomenon, unique in the world, is another decoration of Vlasina and another reason for tourists to visit the beauty of the region. Floating islands were formed by raising the water level, when filling the lake, when peat up to one meter thick rises from the bottom. They are the product of centuries of decay of peat mosses. Reportedly, there is only one other similar lake in Sweden in the world. At high water levels, these islands are lifted from the bottom and they swim freely on the lake, depending on the intensity and direction of the wind. Peat galleys are a unique phenomenon and a trademark of this lake.

The lake was created by waters of two incoming rivers, the Vlasina and the Vrla river, and its beauty was mentioned for the first time in the 18th century. Significant cultural and historical landmarks can also be seen around the lake. Before the construction of the lake, there was a swampy terrain on that place, which was an imitation of an endless lush meadow in which Vlasina horses, cattle, sheep, and even the enemy army disappeared. Thus, [in the First World War, an entire Bulgarian cavalry regiment disappeared in the mud in the Vlasina mud \(now a lake\)](#). Such a mystical disappearance of the army and cattle in Vlasina mud (*tresava*) was the reason for the creation of the legend of an unusual giant water monster. The myth of that unusual water (lake) monster, which "rang" after the construction of the earth dam in 1954, says that the lake was ruled by a monster that looked like a giant horse. It was rumored that the phenomenal water monster lived there for centuries, so it was added that it wandered from another planet, or God sent it to punish those who hid from him. However, it was mostly believed that it was some giant proto-animal. It was proved that this ghost has the magical power to quickly pick up the cattle that graze around the lake, eat it, so it satisfies hunger and rests at the bottom of the lake for a few days. The story of this lake monster remained just a story. During the field collection of the data, we came across the name of **Drosera or drozera** (*Rosulja*) an insectivorous plant from the region of Pčinja district. The upper part of each leaf of this plant is easily covered with hair-like growths that release a sweet liquid that is attractive to insects. This liquid looks like dewdrops that sparkle when the sun's rays fall on them, which is why the plant was named "*Rosulja*" (*dewdrop* in Serbian). As soon as an insect touches a single hairy growth, all the other hairy growths begin to bend towards the center of the leaf, folding around the insect until the flower completely covers it. The liquid that the plant secretes soaks the insect and immediately begins digestion. After two days, the insect is digested, the hairy tentacles open again and are ready to wait for a new victim.



Cultural monuments and landmarks

Vranje is the seat of Pčinja District and as such is a major center for cultural events in the district. The most notable annual events are: Borina nedelja, Stari dani, Dani karanfila (in Vranjska Banja)... Vranje lies close to Besna Kobila mountain and Vranjska Banja, two locations with high potential which are currently underdeveloped. The largest hotels are Hotel "Royal Putnik" and "Hotel Vranje", located near the center. The city has numerous traditional Serbian cuisine as well as international cuisine restaurants, monuments and many other landmarks, but the development of tourism would require further investments in accommodation.

There are many legends related to the city of Vranje. Legends are related to objects that make up the cultural heritage of the city. In Vranje, you don't have to inquire about the culture, it will find you as soon as you walk the streets that irresistibly evoke the memory of the old times. Staro Vranje disappeared, but the spirit of it managed to survive up to the modern times.

Legend of the name "Vranje"

First of all, there is a legend about the name of the city of Vranje, which says that in ancient times Vranje was called Golubinje, after its ruler, Duke Golubić. After the fall of Vranje in the hands of the Ottomans during the time of Duke Golubić, who died in the Battle of Kosovo, Duke's wife, named Vrana, was in charge of the city. While the wife was the new ruler, Golubinje was named after Vrana -Vranje.

There were many words during the research on the field about the traditional **urban songs from Vranje** which have first been practiced in the second half of the 19th century. There are several versions of those songs, A Capella, in vocal and instrumental arrangements, but they all have some things in common: the metro-rhythmic pattern, the rubato rhythm, the subtle voice of the singer and subtle ornaments in their melody line. Some songs are inspired by a specific place, events and people in the city of Vranje.

Old Turkish bath, built at the end of the 17th century in the style of Balkan-Oriental architecture of that time. It is built of hewn stone and brick, and its interior consists of a locker room, a bathing place - Halvata and a water tank - Hazne. People were lying on the terrace - a heated raised stone floor, where steam was breaking through, so that the bathing would end in kurnas - cabins, which were closed with pistons - large towels. On the roof covered with shingles, there are 5 domes with glass oculus through which the interior space was illuminated. [According to the legend, during the construction of the Hamam \(Amama\), sand and egg mortar was used as a binding material for stone and brick.](#) The field research results informed that the building was renovated with conservation and restoration works in 1956, 1983 and 2002 as part of a revitalization project for the needs of the Archaeological Gallery of the National Museum in Vranje.



The legend of the yellow flower

A legend about yellow flowers relates to the World War I period when French soldiers addressed a local elder woman in French. She was watering the flowers and she didn't hear or understand well. The soldiers greeted her by saying "Bonjour" in French. She thought they said Božur (peony), which is Serbian name for a red flower, so she corrected them that her flowers were not peony, but yellow flowers. That is why the yellow color is symbolic for Vranje.

The legend of the Cross Mosque

There is also a well-known legend about the Cross Mosque, which tells that the Turks built a minaret on the foundations the christian church they destroyed, but unexplained forces kept demolishing that minaret until the Turks put a cross on top of it. After the liberation of the city from the Turks, all the mosques in the city were demolished, and on the foundations of the old, destroyed church, a new church dedicated to the saint - Venerable Martyr's Paraskeva, was built. Today, this small and single-nave church is the smallest in Serbia.

Markovo kale

It is one of the oldest monuments of history and culture in this area. It represents the remains of a medieval fortress, on ancient foundations. It is about 4 km away from the city of Vranje, on a protruding ridge along the road that connects Vranje with the Leskovac valley. It is assumed that it was built by the Byzantine emperor Justinian I in the 6th century.

According to folklore, it was the city of the Serbian hero Marko Kraljević. In the south and east side, the fortress is protected by massive ramparts, and in the west there is a steep cliff. Remains of a sacral building, built of hewn stone, were discovered in the central part of the lower plateau. Its base is in the shape of a cross, it is assumed that it was built in the 12th century. When Marko Kraljević had to retreat before the Turkish supremacy, he was with his horse Šarac, who left a hoof print in the east, where Marko allegedly cried because he felt defeated and hence the name of the mountain massif Pljačkovica (plač- cry). Then to the west, where there was a building with a base in the shape of a cross, the entire mountain was given name Krstilovica (a cross – *krst* in Serbian). Throughout their rule, the Turks used the fortress as a fortification which was inhabited by about 30 people.

Mačkova česma (Cat's fountain)

It is located in the valley of the Vranjska river, under the Bujkovski bridge. This whole part of the city was named after the fountain. As the legend goes the fountain was built by a Turk in order to atone for the sins of the death of Dimana, the unfortunate Serbian mother, whose three sons were killed by the Turks. Dimana stayed with her cat to wait for the day of judgment. In great sorrow, one day she pulled out a gold coin, which she intended for her daughter-in-law, the wife of her firstborn son. As she knew that day will never come, she put gold coin around the cat's neck. The cat was killed by a Turk because of the gold coin, and at that point Dimana died of grief.



Derenka fountain is located in the Upper Bazaar. It is not known when exactly it was erected. As the legend goes: "Once upon a time, near the Cross Mosque, in a small house with a shady garden, lived a black beauty, a kara-girl, as the Turks called her. Every morning she went to a deep well, from which water was extracted with the help of a pitcher. She was spotted by the Turk Đerdelez, who was called Đero out of mercy. "I am Đera, and she will be Đerenka!" - said Đerdjelez, meaning that he wanted to make the beautiful girl his wife. One day, while the girl was returning home carrying jugs of water, Đera snuck in and grabbed her around the waist. The girl twisted, and ran away. The disappointed man stood motionless, listening to the soft rustling of the running girl's clothes' fabric, while water was leaking from the broken jug. After that, Đerdelez left Vranje, and the legend of his love for a beautiful girl remained. The Turks built the fountain in the memory of unrequited love at the spring where the girl dropped the jugs of water when Đera met her.

The white bridge of Vranje Beautiful Aisha was the daughter of the rich and powerful Selim-beg. According to legend Aisha, a beautiful Turkish woman fell in love with Stojan, a poor Serbian shepherd and she wanted to go to the mountains with him. Stojan did not remain indifferent either. They began to meet secretly near Vranjska river. Stories of forbidden love started in the bazaar. The word about the love of a young Turkish woman and a Serbian young man reached the ears of a powerful Turk Selim-beg. One day, Selim-beg followed his daughter... He had a rifle in his hand. He found her with Stojan by the river and aimed his rifle at the young man, but the bullet hit his daughter, who covered the young man with her body in her attempt to protect him. The second bullet hit its target. The last wish of the dying Aisha was to have a bridge built on that place, from the money planned for her marriage.

The father respected the request of his only daughter. In 1844, he built a bridge called the White Bridge. The bridge was built in 1844, it connected the left and right bank of the Vranjska River. It's called white because it is built in white marble, and there is a plate of the so-called tarih on it which is written in Turkish and in Arabic - *Cursed be the one who separates the lovers.*

Below this text is the text in Arabic:

"O Guardian, the owner of this goodness and beauty, Hanuma Aisha, is building this bridge so that God will forgive her all her sins and the sins of her parents."

This is how Vranje remembered the event.

Today, more and more tourists from all over the world come to visit the White Bridge: lovers catch water under the bridge with which they spray their clothes to protect their love from evil forces. On Valentine's Day, a large number of young, in love and married couples cross the bridge twice: they say that the White Bridge has a strange effect, inexplicable to this day.



The Devil's Stone is only two kilometers away from Trgovište. It is not easy to reach the stone since the road winds along the canyon of the river Pčinja. And then, at an altitude of 800 meters, near the village of Donja Trnica- a museum under the open sky emerges. Houses made of stone, mud and wicker, a dozen stone piles fifty meters high and a church. Nobody lives there, nobody gets married in the church, and all because of the legend that it is a cursed place and, as people from this area say, "the devil's work".

Devil's stone is a natural phenomenon caused by rock erosion. The timid river Pčinja used to cut the rock a long time ago and carved it through large stone pillars, of which three heights stand out, between 50 and 60 meters. That is why the place used to be called Prosečnik (*the cut* in Serbian). It seems beautiful and simply unreal, as from some bygone times.

On one of these imposing pyramids stands the Church of the Most Holy Mother of God or once known as the Church in Prosečnik. This is what gives this natural wonder a special flair. The temple was built at the end of the 14th century by the Serbian lord Dejan Markovic with the blessing of Tsar Dušan, whose sister Teodora, Dejan was married to.

The inhabitants of Gornja Pčinja recount one legend, according to which the devils intended to reverse the course of Pčinja to flow towards Bulgaria, so they tried to connect the banks of this river. The local people tore whole rocks from the surrounding hills, but failed to tame the moody river. Seeing that even they were helpless, and they were running out of stones, they headed towards Kosovsko Pomoravlje, to the Končulj gorge. And that's where they came across the biggest rock. They turned it backwards and returned to try to conquer nature once again. Along the way, they often stopped and rested, because the rock was too heavy for the tired people. When they reached the village of Klinovac in the morning, fearing that people would reveal their intentions, they threw a rock next to a mill. That is how, according to one legend, the Devil's Stone was created.

Another legend tells that the people of Pčinja were trying build a church by the river for years, but everything that they would build during the day, the devils would take away during the night and leave on the Devil's Stone. This is how the church was built on the 60-meter-high hill itself.

And the people of Pčinja also have an explanation for the fact that no one gets married in the church.

In ancient times, a boy and a girl from Donja Trnica fell in love, and their parents, did not approve or wanted to give a blessing to their love. The young man was the only son from the best house in the village, and the girl was a beauty like no other in the whole area, but very poor. Despite the anger of the parents, the two young people decided to make their love official. The parents had nowhere to go, so they decided to organize the wedding as it should be. The wedding took place in the already mentioned church on Devil's Stone. When they came out of the church, the bride and groom rode, as usual, decorated horses. However, his horse, frightened by the shouts and whistles of the bride and groom's entourage, rushed towards the abyss and fell, together with the groom on his back. Seeing that, the bride jumped off her horse, ran towards the cliff and jumped without thinking. So the joy instantly turned into sorrow.



Since then, the people of Pčinja claim, no one has been married in this church, nor has any child been baptized. Due to its great importance, the church is now under state protection. Despite the legends and stories about how this place was haunted, the belief that staying in this church cures infertility has spread among the people.

However, the beauty of this place is breathtaking. And when people see all that beauty, they can't help but think that it's "the devil's work".

The lost city of Damascus. On the plateau above the Krševička River, the oldest finds date from the end of the Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age, but powerful layers with architectural remains and numerous movable finds correspond to the range from the beginning of the 4th to the first decades of the 3rd century BC. Research has shown that in the heart of the Balkans, far from then civilized world, there was an urban settlement, built on Greek models, which flourished in the time of Philip II of Macedon and Alexander the Great. The assumption is that it is the lost city of Damascus.

The monastery of Prohor Pčinjski was built by the Byzantine emperor Roman IV Diogenes in 1070. It remained within the Byzantine state until Stefan Nemanja's conquests of these areas between 1180 and 1190. Only at the end of the 12th century, under Stefan Nemanja, the monastery became part of Serbia. Saint Prohor Pčinjski is the only saint in the Serbian Orthodox Church who constantly pours holy myrrh from holy relics. Many believers come to worship the saint and see this miracle. The turbulent history of the monastery of St. Prohor Pčinjski preserves memories of miracles that, according to beliefs, happened in front of the relics of the saint. The sick were healed, the unfortunate found peace, the prayers of barren women were answered and those blessed by childbirth. Prohor Pčinjski is known to have lived at the beginning of the 11th century. As a young man, he went to the hermitage, first to the Nagorje region and then found refuge on Mount Kozjak. Legends say that he did not see a human being for more than 30 years, until he met the future Byzantine emperor Roman the Fourth Diogenes, who hunted in the forests of Kozjak.

Bistar is a small village near the border with Bulgaria. It is famous for its plums, pears, cherries and its favorable climate. St Philip's church in the village was built in the 19th century. The village has an elementary school which used to have over 500 students in the past, but today, due to the strong emigration, it only has 15 students.

The legend about the name of Bistar is connected to another nearby village - Jarešnik. The village was rich in cattle, bees, food, sheep and goats. Nevertheless, during one battle between the Turks and Serbian outlaws on the Crnook mountain one of the Turks named Kudril was wounded and transported near the village. The locals received an order to take care of the wounded's food and hygiene. A young boy from the village dared to take the knife and cut Kudril's head off. Having heard about what happened, The Turks immediately started their retaliation by burning the entire village. The village was wealthy and all the stacks of butter, honey and cheese melted and created a very thick and muddy river. The river ended in the area of today's village Bistar which is named after the fact that there was no longer mud and melted mixture on the surface. It was bright and clear which is in Serbian language – Bistar.



The tourist attraction locations, tradition and legends of the Kyustendil district

On the territory of Kyustendil there are cultural and historical layers of antiquity, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, with many discovered and preserved unique architectural and historical monuments: there are 1052 cultural monuments, most of which are concentrated in the municipality of Kyustendil.

In general, the cultural and historical material traces are located unevenly in the territory of the district. Their situation outlines the picture of traditionally sustainable historical development in several cultural zones and centers.

The cultural-historical material and spiritual traces in the Kyustendil region have been the subject of research since the end of the last and the beginning of our century. As a result, currently 1,052 single and group sites are protected with the status of “cultural monuments”. Of these, 194 are archaeological, 711 - architectural, 54 - historical and 94 are artistic. According to the approved register of cultural monuments for the district, they are categorized by their value as follows:

- Cultural monuments of world importance - 1;
- Cultural monuments of national importance - 35;
- Cultural monuments of local significance - 218;
- Cultural monuments in an ensemble - 776;
- Cultural monuments for information - 22;

The military monuments in Kyustendil district are described in the prepared district register, which includes 103 monuments / memorial plaques / on the territory of Kyustendil district.



Panagia – the tradition of the rising of the bread

During the research on the field, the practice of Panagia was introduced. Every year on the 14th of August, people in the village of Slokoshtitsa, Kyustendil district, revive the old tradition of preparing Bogoroditsa's holy bread and baking it in podnitsa. The ritual is held in the yard of the old St.Nikola church in the village, where old women and young girls bring "silent" water for the ceremonial bread making. Grandmothers show their granddaughters how to knead the dough with just water, flour and salt, of course, in silence. In the end, the young girls put a special seal, called prosphora, leave the dough to rise and bake it in podnitsa. Only the wheat flour from the new harvest can be used in the preparation of this bread, which symbolizes good health and wealth until the next year. The participants of this event and tourists are invited to try making the bread by themselves and to enter the church and light a candle in front of the miraculous icon of St.Nikola.

Kadin bridge

It is located in the center of the village of Nevestino, Kyustendil district. It was built in 1470, during the reign of Sultan Mehmed II. The bridge is about 100 meters long and about 5 meters wide. It consists of five arches, covered with large granite slabs. Its architecture is a mixture of ancient medieval and renaissance forms. The name „Kadin Bridge“ comes from the Turkish „Kadan Cuprasi“ or „Bride's Bridge“ and is associated with the legends of its construction.

According to the most popular legend, the construction of the bridge was not going very well, because everything that the masters built during the day was carried away at night by the stormy waters of the Struma river. And so, the masters decided that for its successful completion they would have to sacrifice one of their wives; to be the first one to bring them food in the morning. The Struma bride, the wife of Master Manol, came first and she was walled up in the foundations of the bridge. Hence the bridge is called „Bride“ - in Turkish – „Kadan“ The motive of sacrificing the first wife to bring the food to workers in the morning is present in Serbian heritage. It is the motive of the Serbian epic poem "Zidanje Skadra" (The Walling of the Skadar). The poem describes the building of a fortress on the Bojana river at Skadar by the Mrnjavčević brothers.

Gojko was obliged to wall up his young wife alive within the walls of the fortress as a sacrifice demanded by the mountain vila (a fairy similar to a nymph, in Slavic mythology).

According to several authors, there was a belief at this period of time that it was impossible to build a large building without a human sacrifice.

Kadin Bridge is considered to be one of the most remarkable monuments of construction in Bulgaria from XV century. The bridge offers a beautiful view of the Rila Mountains



The Rila Monastery

The Rila Monastery is one of the most important cultural monuments in Bulgaria, a symbol of the country, included in the UNESCO World Heritage List. It is located in southwestern Bulgaria, Kyustendil district, Rila municipality. It was founded in the 10th century by St. Ivan Rilski the Wonderworker.

During the years the monastery has been burned and robbed many times but in the middle of XIX century it was rebuilt. In 1983 UNESCO declared the complex as part of the world cultural heritage.

The monastery has the holy relics of the saint, the museum with all the manuscripts, old printed books, documents from the 14th century to the 19th century, many ancient objects, such as church utensils, scepters, icons, weapons, coin collection, etc.

The tomb of St. Ivan Rilski, including the church „Assumption of St. Ivan Rilski” and the fasting house St. Ivan Rilski are the part of the complex, as well as the churches „St. Luke“ and „Holy Intercession“ and the cell school.

The last Bulgarian tsar Boris III was also buried in this area.

There are a couple of small hotels and restaurants nearby where people stay the night and continue with their journey to the mountain peaks on the next day. It is also possible to find accommodation in the monastery hotel part. There is a small bakery outside the monastery walls where you can get and taste the most delicious bread made in an old-fashioned way.

For those who would like to prove to themselves that they have no sins it is recommended to go to the cave where St. Ivan Rilski lived and try to pass through the rock gate only 5km away from the monastery into the mountain.

The 7 Rila lakes

The terrain research in Bulgaria lead first to the perfect place for the mountain lovers - the magical Rila mountain with its splendid Seven Rila Lakes - a group of lakes in the Northwestern part, located stepwise between 2095 and 2535 m of altitude. They fit the pits on the slope of the mountain, and each lake is connected to another by small streams. When the water passes along these streams, small waterfalls and cascades are formed. The first three lakes - the Tear, the Eye and the Kidney - each drain into the Twin, from which the water passes successively through the Trilistnika (Trefoil), the Fish and the Lower Lake.



The name of each of the seven Rila lakes reflects some peculiarity of the respective lake. The highest lake is called the Tear because of the transparency of the water. Next is the Eye (also called the Heart), which is approximately oval in shape. It is the deepest cirque lake in Bulgaria - its depth is 37.5 m. Kidney is the lake with the steepest shores of the whole group. The fourth lake is Twin; it is the largest of the seven. Lake Trilistnika has an irregular shape and low shores. The shallowest is the Fish Lake; on its northeastern shore is the hut „Seven Lakes“. The lowest is the Lower Lake, from which the German River starts.

The legend of the seven Rila lakes tells that thousands of years ago, when there were no people on earth, two giants lived in the Rila Mountain - a man and a woman. They loved each other madly and adored the beauty and comfort of their home. Their home was so attractive, sunny, warm and cozy that it could not fail to enchant every living being, and all the elements and the whole world enjoyed their love.

Unfortunately, one day evil forces passed by their home. Seeing this beautiful place, they envied the family happiness of the giants, got angry and decided to destroy everything and erase their love forever. They began to send black clouds and devastating winds. Terrible earthquakes shook the earth.

The giant fiercely defended every blade of grass, every little stream or flower, defended his beloved and repulsed the attacks of evil forces. However, this only inflamed their great malice and cruelty and they decided to finish their hellish work. In a heavy battle, the young giant was killed. Satisfied with their victory, the evil forces left, leaving behind broken rocks, ruined valleys, and a grief-stricken giant woman. The young widow's grief was so great that her tears flowed incessantly and ran down the ridges straight into the valleys. They poured and gathered in the ravines as they formed clear lakes of astonishing purity.

When tourists climb, just before the Lake Kidney, they can see a huge rock in the direction of the Lake Tear. The shape of the rock resembles the figures of a man and a woman of enormous size. According to legend, these are the two lovers who will stay forever to keep their beautiful home. The place has a lot of energy and mystery. In the 3rd week of August each year, followers of the White Brotherhood from all over the world gather here and play special dance called Panevritmia. This is the favorable time to witness and participate in this ritual. There is a good asphalt road to the lift which can take tourists to the Lowest lake and the hut there. But there is also an option of taking the path for 3 hours. The area is a part of the National Nature park Rila and is a protected zone with good infrastructure and numerous visitors every year.



Kyustendil

Kyustendil is a town, close to the borders of Serbia and North Macedonia, just about one and a half hour from Sofia. It has a rich history with traces of inhabitants since the Iron Age.

The town is situated in the southern part of the Kyustendil Valley along the banks of the Struma river, characterized by the mediterranean climate with continental influence – summers are hot and long, winters are short and cool, spring comes early and stays steady after the first days of March and the autumn is long, warm and sunny. This defines the area as an excellent place for spa and rehabilitation treatment which strongly affects the global tourist representation and the tourist routes in the district. The town of Kyustendil is rich in spa waters famous for their quality to cure or heal a number of diseases – the most famous place is the Cifte Spa Bath in the very center which works all the year round and every day. It has the outdoor and indoor pools, and various individual spa rooms. In the town there are also a couple of state and private rehabilitation centers that combine the spa waters and the clean, fresh air.

Hisarlaka medieval fortress, lying atop a hill overlooking the town is perfect for a walk along the Trail of health in the forest there. Visitors also enjoy the 10th century Church of St George in the Kolusha neighborhood, and one of the largest Churches in Bulgaria - Saint Menas, built in 1859.

The area of Kyustendil is very clean – one of the reasons there are a lot of orchards, vegetable gardens and bee hives. The two major celebrations in Kyustendil are the **First Spring** in the end of March when locals elect the Spring Queen, and in September when the Fertility/Harvest celebration takes place with participants from all over the region and their production. **The Cherry Festival**, taking place in June, when the cherries are ripe, is a very popular local event, featuring exhibitions of various sorts of cherries, cherry artwork, cherry rakia, folklore songs and dances and a concert.

Sapareva banya

Sapareva Banya is an important place for the spa lovers for its incredible geyser which is the only one in Europe and one of the hottest in the world with its 103 degrees. It erupts every 5-6 minutes. The municipality has captured the water and has established an effective central heating system for all municipal buildings, including the school and kindergarten. The height of its water column is 18 m and springs from a depth of 75 m providing a remarkable view. There are a lot of spa centers around – from the state rehabilitation center to the small family hotels – of course, all with the local mineral water which offers release for many pains and diseases.

The town is an excellent exit point to go and see many places in proximity –the Rila mountain, the Rila amusement park in Dupnitsa, the medieval fortress of Tsari Mali Grad, the Shepard's Waterfall (also called Goritsa) in the village of Ovcharts, Kadin bridge in Nevestino, Kyustendil, etc.



The common heritage between Serbia and Bulgaria is reflected in many legends about the tragic love stories that took place during the Turkish reign. The legend of the Goritsa waterfall is one of them: Once upon a time, during the Turkish reign in Bulgaria, in the village of Ovchartsı there lived the beautiful maiden Goritsa and her beloved man Jovitsa. They were very much in love with each other. However the local bey (Turkish governor) also fell in love with Goritsa and ordered his servants to bring her to him. Goritsa ran to the mountain where Jovitsa was a shepherd. The Turks almost got her when she decided to jump off the rocks and into the abyss. The river followed her and created the waterfall.

The pyramids of Stob

This natural phenomenon still requires promotion in order to increase the visibility for the potential visitors. The infrastructure and accessibility is sufficient to enable a good quality access to this tourist attraction, but it requires a more intensive tourist promotion. There is a second “new” trail starting from the village center for people with disabilities. In the end of it there is a pavilion where visitors can sit and have a rest while enjoying the view of the pyramids. After half an hour along the path from the entrance tourists see the breathtaking view – the pyramids! Some of them are sharp and needle-shaped, but most of them are pyramidal or conical and end with a “stone” hat, which gives them the shape of slender mushrooms.

On the northern slope of the ridge the pyramids are well defined, but are relatively few in number and are separated in one group. The most numerous are the pyramids on the southern slope. They are large, majestic with rich colors from light yellow to dark brown and red. Their picturesque compositions bear different names given to them by local people - the Towers, the Hammers, the Samodiv Chimneys, the Gathers, the Brothers and others. The most famous group called the Matchmakers is associated with an ancient legend. Once upon a time, a long time ago, the Matchmakers went to the village of Stob to take a local girl as a bride. As was the custom, the bride was veiled and no one knew if she was beautiful or ugly. On the way back, the Matchmakers sang a song together in which they asked the wind to blow and lift the bride’s veil so that they could see her at least for a while. The wind heard their demand, and it blew hard and lifted the bride’s veil. At that moment everyone was amazed by the unseen beauty of the girl. The godfather, seeing the fabulous beauty, could not help but bend down from the horse to kiss her. At that moment, the matchmakers froze, horrified by the shame the godfather would do. They all turned into pyramids and stayed trapped in this place forever.



The tourist attraction locations, tradition and legends of the Pernik district

The town of Pernik is the administrative center of Pernik district. Its ancient history began eight millennia ago. For about 7 centuries Pernik has been mentioned as a small village, with the main livelihood of its population - mainly agriculture and livestock. By Decree № 402 of June 26, 1929, Pernik was declared a city. Pernik grew as an industrial center of national importance with well-developed metallurgy, mechanical engineering, energy. Today it is a city with declining industrial functions which reflects on many other aspects, especially on the tertiary sector activities.

The herbal treasure and traditions

The cross-border area is quite rich in herbal plants and the group of herb lovers is not a small one. Association AKSELS from Pernik pays special attention to the herbal knowledge – how to recognize, collect, dry, store and use local herbs. There are special workshops in the mountains on how to pick the plants and save their habitat for the next year. The kids learn how to make their own tea-bags to take home. In May people can participate in the practical workshops how to prepare traditional elder tree syrup and the magical immune stimulation honey from dandelion blossoms.

The most knowledgeable ones who earn the trust of the team, may as well hear the secret recipe to prepare a special herbal love potion – something which used to be passed in the family only from grandmothers to the granddaughters. The major events that can be visited are the Herbs march in September in Luilin mountain, and the Herbs Festival in the village of Mladen, which takes place every second year. All events are organized in full respect of the protected plants and their habitats, so they represent the form of ecotourism.

Common interests are shown in the Serbian cross-border part in a form of the festival that has been organized several times in Niš, Serbia and it is known as the International Festival of Tea, Aromatic, Medicinal and Spicy Herbs, from February to March. In addition to teas, spices and tea blends, the Festival also exhibits various cosmetic products based on herbs and ecological products for home hygiene, honey products with herbs and mushrooms. Bulgarian representatives participate in the festival regularly and exchange their knowledge and experience with herbs. With stronger marketing and promotion the festival could gather more participants and become the most important event of the kind in the Balkans.



Meshtitsa is a good place for ornithologists and bird watchers. Natura 2000 is a network of core breeding and resting sites for rare and endangered species, and some rare natural habitat types which are protected in their own right. It stretches across all 27 EU countries, both on land and at sea. The aim of the network is to ensure the long-term survival of Europe's most valuable and threatened species and habitats, listed under both the Birds Directive and the Habitats Directive.

The protected area "Meshtitsa" is part of this European network and falls into the territory between the villages of Raduy, Babitsa and Sopitsa in Pernik district and Zlatitsa in Sofia district, where the white stork and red-backed shrike nest. In order to protect the homes of these birds, the local bee-keepers also have their valuable contribution with more than 20 apiaries. People are honored to have a published Bee-keeping Practical Guide Book by one of the members of the bee-keepers association – eng.Georgi Rusimov.

Pre-historic artefacts

The area of Tatómir is located between the Ralevska river and the Krivopadinska river. Through the work on the field, the information has been found that in the mid-1980s local people came across prehistoric artefacts and in 1988 experts from the Regional Museum of History in Pernik dated them as of 5-6 thousand years BC. The finds included parts of different pots, idols and tools and now are kept in the Pernik Museum.

The legend about Krali Marko's stone

In the end of the village of Meshtitsa, right on the highest point, called Meló (the rock area) there was a stone, quite different from the local stones, with a square form and 3 pits in the form of 3 giant fingers holding it – this is Markov kamik (Krali Marko's stone). It protects the village from evil and brings health and wealth to its people. About 15 years ago a group of men took it and threw it in the river to prove it is just a stone. But in 2012 a major earthquake occurred exactly in Meshtitsa, caused a lot of damage and changed the underground water flows. Now there are plans to take the stone back to the top of the hill – Meló with a special ceremony. [There is a legend that the older residents in the village often tell. It is very similar to the legend of the Pčinja district about Markovo Kale. The motives of the kings and protectors related to the legends in stones which symbolize resilience and strength are common in both countries. We can see the similarity in names of the hero –Krali Marko and Kraljević Marko and the horse, too – Šarac – Sharkolia.](#)

One day Krali Marko was riding through the forest. The forest was very sad and Marko asked why it was like that. The forest told him that the day before the Turks passed through and they had three chains with slaved people. Marko became very angry. He jumped onto the back of his horse Sharkolia and raced through the forest to catch the group of Turks. Soon he saw them and kindly asked the black Arab to free the slaves. As the Arab refused to do it, Marko became furious and took an enormous stone from the ground. He threw it so high that it flew over 9 mountains and 9 villages and fell on the hill above the village of Meshtitsa. The Arab got scared and let the slaves go. Since that day the stone has become protects the village and people.



Folklore costumes show and culinary contest

July 12 each year is the day of the village which Pernik inhabitants call Sobóro. All the people have their relatives from other places and celebrate their reunion. In the village center there are various cultural attractions with music and songs. But the most interesting of them are the traditional costumes defile and the culinary contest Petrovsko pile (Peter's chicken). All participants must be from the village. There is a special section for old and traditional recipes. After the jury has announced the awarded participants, there is an exhibition where visitors can taste the meals and support the jury's decision. The official program finishes with a joint traditional dances.

The church of St Petar and Pavel

Boyka Mileva from Association "Future for Meshtitsa" described the church in Meshitsa that is 140 years old with authentic frescoes and old icons. It was fully renovated after the damage made by the earthquake in 2012. It is named after the two saints Petar and Pavel. Each Saturday it is open for the local people and during the major holy celebrations it is full with young and old men, women and children. The tradition to bring freshly baked bread or cakes to the church for good health is still practiced.

The same tradition exists in Serbian part of the cross-border where people in most villages but also in the cities like Niš and Vranje, bring food, wine and cakes to the church for most of the religious holidays.

Surva

Surva (or Surova) is a traditional ritual of chasing the evil spirits away from the homes. It is held only in the villages in Pernik district on the night of 13 to 14 January and the whole day of 14th. Originally only bachelor men could take part in the ritual, forming a group of survakari with some obligatory characters – a voivoda (leader), a bride and a groom, a priest, a bear and others. Each village has a group and there is a severe competition. On January 13th in the evening, in some villages there is a huge bonfire where the local group and representatives of the nearby village groups compete in jumping over the fire in full armament – masks, costumes, and above all – huge and heavy bells! The lights, the fire, the noise and the atmosphere create an incredible scene.

Early in the morning, before the dawn, the whole group gathers and visits every household in the village – they dance and bless the family, and in return they are given presents by the oldest person in the family – the home-made rakia, apples, traditional bread (kravai), honey, sweets or money (in case they have nothing else to offer). When the last house has been visited, all participants have a party with the gifts in the village center.



Nowadays the tradition has changed and young unmarried women participate in the process, of course, masked accordingly. If a resident happens to pass through a village on that day by car and come across the survakari group, he or she may be stopped by them and kindly asked to “pay a tax” to get their blessing. The culmination of these celebrations is SURVA – the international festival and competition of masquerade games in Pernik, which takes place at the last Friday to Sunday of January. It has over 5,000 participants and 100,000 visitors. That is why Pernik is a part of the association of European carnival cities, and SURVA tradition is part of the UNESCO list of world heritage.

The similarity in the heritage and traditions between Bulgarian and Serbian part of the cross-border region is clear if the Surva tradition of jumping over the bonfire is compared to the same ritual that occurs in the villages of Doljevac municipality in the Nišava district during the celebration of Poblade.

The Underground Museum of Mining in Pernik

This Museum is located in the first mine in Pernik which opened in 1891. In the venue there are real objects from the work of the miners from the opening to the closure of the mine for a whole century. In 30 different sections tourists can observe and follow the development of the technologies used in the mining over the years with original tools and instruments, used by the workers and laboratories, as well as the different layers of the ground and the soil. One can learn amazing facts about Right in front of the main entrance and see an old stoned tree, called the tree of happiness, aged about 50 million years. [There is a legend that says if someone touches the tree and makes a wish, it will come true very soon.](#) The tour starts every hour and takes about 30 minutes. The guides use Bulgarian, English and Russian language. It is not allowed to take pictures inside. In Europe there are only 2 museums of this kind – one in Pernik, and the other is in Manchester, UK.

Trun

Mariyana, a local resident, introduced the region of Trun. Located 81 km away from the capital and only 18 km from the Serbian border, Trun is a good destination for families with children, young people seeking adventure or just digital detox. A three star hotel the center of Trun can offer a great service, as well as several private accommodation facilities.

The tourists have the opportunity to connect with the local farmers and to be introduced to the process of producing home-made cheese, the traditional Bulgarian yoghurt and other dairy products. Close to the river streams of Erma and Yablanitsa there are tiny, natural, picturesque waterfalls and springs. Near the waterfall of Vrabcha for the adrenaline lovers there is specified zone for rock climbing. The most visited place in the province is the gorge of Erma river, a place where tourists can track how the water has made its way through the huge rocks.



Only five minutes away by car is an ancient chapel in the rocks dating back to the 6th century. As the legend goes during the Turkish slavery a fugitive saint called Saint Petka found her shelter in the chapel while running away from the Turks. She knew that they were chasing her and baked a bread for herself, but because of the fire and smoke the chasers tracked her and she had no other option but to run away again. Just before leaving she took a bit of the bread. Later when the Turks arrived and made an attempt to get a piece of the bread it turned into stone and until now it remains inside the chapel.

Village of Erul

The village of Erul is located at 1200 m above sea level in the Erul Mountain, which is located in the Pernik district. The village consists of 6 neighborhoods, each of which at a great distance from the others and located picturesquely on a different hill of the mountain. The air in the village is one of the cleanest in the whole country. The locals make a living mainly from animal husbandry and in the village there are several farms for cows, sheep, goats, rabbits, as well as several apiaries. The vegetables are also grown in the village. Guests of Erul can try authentic real and pure dairy products, honey, jam, ecologically clean tomatoes and more. The village is believed to be named after an ancient Scandinavian tribe called the Eruli or Heruli, who settled in this place in the 3rd century AD. These people settled permanently in Bulgarian lands and were mainly engaged in mining due to the presence of precious metals. This is evidenced by archaeological finds of household items that have been proven to belong to the Eruli. According to scholars, the tribe remained living here permanently and probably most of today's villagers are their descendants. This is evidenced by the appearance of the locals. Many of them are tall and slender, with fair hair and blue eyes. The village is extremely suitable for mountain, adventure and family tourism and for people with a strong interest in wildlife.

The trails in Erul are maintained by the Trun Tourist Association. A cycling route "VeloErul" has been built, which consists of several cycling segments for mountain biking with varying difficulty.

The monastery of the village "Holy Trinity" dates back 400 years and has been destroyed and rebuilt many times. In front of the temple there is an ancient Roman column, used in the past as an altar. The legend of the two ancient trees - maple and beech, which rise, intertwined branches on both sides of the door of the chapel is also interesting. It is believed that the water flowing from the monastery fountain is healing and has healed many suffering people.

From the gate of the monastery complex starts the tourist path leading to Golemi Vrah - the highest in the Erul Mountains. The marking of this trail is reflective and provides an opportunity for interesting night climbs - the first of its kind in Bulgaria. At the very top are artifacts from an ancient Roman fortress. In the Varpela area tourists can find the seven centuries old beech "The Seven Brothers" - unique in its structure and rising against the background of the famous Reef Mountain, located across the border - in Serbia. Near the village there are two caves - Mecha Dupka and Yamka. A prehistoric village was discovered in the Yamka cave.



The remains of an ancient Thracian sanctuary are located in the Sovishte area. In one of the most beautiful places in Erul a campsite that offers recreation for lovers of tents and caravans is built and it has electricity, water, food and all necessary amenities. There are also guest houses in the area around the village.

Zemen monastery

The Zemen monastery is now turned into a museum complex. It consists of two connected buildings, a small steeple and a church in the center of the large, well maintained yard.

The church is named after St. Joan Bogoslov and is the oldest preserved building in the area, which dates back to the 11th century. It presents a cross into a square shape with a dome over a high cylindrical drum. The walls are made of ashlar – travertine. The altar is made of a massive stone slab, whose floor is decorated with colorful marble and stone pieces. [People who live nearby tell that according to the legend the altar grants wishes – it only takes to put the left hand on its surface and whisper the wish.](#)

The unique frescos on the walls were painted between 11th and 14th century, and the donor portraits preserved are some of the most valuable in the country. The overall style of the paintings did not follow the traditional rules of the time and thus they can be seen nowhere else. In the church you can find also the earliest painting of St. Ivan Rilski. Now the monastery yard is often used for a venue of many wedding ceremonies because of the beautiful place and the peaceful atmosphere.

Living water near Bosnek

Not far from Pernik, in the Vitosha mountain above the village of Bosnek, there is a miraculous spring known as the Living Water. Located in the karst alley, well-marked with many information signs, in an hour and a half walk - a stone sculpture of a dragon's head awaits, from where people can drink the healing water. [The water there does not flow constantly and the legend says that if a person with bad deeds stands in front of the dragon, the water stops flowing.](#) The stone fountain is mentioned as early as the 17th century in the travelogues of the Ottoman traveler Evliya Chelebi, who called the spring the Fountain of Happiness. The spring still gathers thousands of people who believe in the power of the Living Water and its healing power. Near the stone fountain there is a small cave, whose entrance is only a meter high. In the lobby of the cave there is a stone with an icon of the Mother of God, where the visitors light a candle and leave a coin for health. The cave is also called "Living Water".

[The old people in the village know another legend which has the common motives with the Vlasina lake monster in Pčinja district- once there was a lake where a terrible water bull lived, which attacked and killed people's cattle. One day people decided to destroy the water bull, put blades on the horns of their animals and so wounded him. It entered the water of the lake and the water turned red with blood, and then disappeared. According to the legend every time the bull turns into the ground under the lake, the lake releases the water.](#)



Duhlata cave is the - longest cave in Bulgaria (17,600 m.) and 53m deep. Located in the southwestern part of Vitosha, on the right bank of the river Struma near the village Bosnek in Pernik, Pernik municipality. It is a complex multi-storey, labyrinthine system, located on 6 floors. Its name is associated with the sound that the wind makes when passing through the entrance of the cave. Duhlata is one of the most complex cave systems in Bulgaria and was created by the underground currents of the Struma River. It is a labyrinth of tunnels, galleries, underground lakes, waterfalls and sinter formations. There are 22 species of cave animals in the cave, including 6 species of bats. There is a great variety of cave formations in the cave. In 1962 it was declared a natural landmark.



Conclusion

The common heritage and tradition in the targeted area of the cross – border region is present in many aspects through the similarities in the tourist offer, interests and attractions. The accessibility and investments in the tourist attractions are not at the same level in all the regions of the cross-border targeted districts, therefore investments are required for the areas with lower incomes and higher emigration rate.

The strongest potentials are seen in the intensive cross-border cultural relations, which still have space for improvement and more successful economic valorization. Market framework for the development of the thematic heritage route in Serbia, especially if viewed in the medium and long term, can be characterized as extremely favorable.

It is especially important to point out the following:

If natural, rural and traditional heritage is properly protected and valorized by their local communities, there will be more potential for the future cooperation and general improvement of the cross-border tourism.

The acceptance of the modern management concepts will affect increase in service standards, which will be reflected in the growth of both domestic and foreign tourism in the cross-border district. The insufficient development of tourism is a consequence of unsystematic and unplanned approach to development. Planned approach to tourism development, i.e. in this context of the possible cultural-historical route with adequate marketing efforts, should contribute to these districts becoming very important in local and in the European tourism market.

The differences are not numerous, while the inhabitants of the Nišava, Pčinja, Kyustendil and Pernik districts share similar legends, words and ethymology, historical events and characters, it may easily lead towards the creation of a large joint market open for different tourism ideas and cooperation. The development of the tourism may bring more life to those regions with the strong emigration currents and it could even reverse the emigration by providing new work positions for the local inhabitants, conserving natural and cultural resources and encouraging the celebration of customs and cultural events.



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