

Kosovo Needs Big Clean-up to Realise Tourist Potential

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Scarred by potholed roads and grim-looking towns, it's not surprising that internationals rarely visit the countryside's hidden treasures.

On the road from Pristina to Prizren, in the west of Kosovo, rays of sunshine pick out a tapestry of colours on the landscape of hills, forests and rivers.

The pristine waters of the Bistrica flowing through the mountains and the breathtaking view from the Qafa e Duhles plateau put many in mind of the gentle landscape of The Shire, from JRR Tolkien's Lord of the Rings.

Yet few of the tens of thousands of international aid and development personnel who work in Kosovo ever venture out into the countryside for rest and relaxation. And it will be many years before western tourists begin showing an interest in the region.

This is not only due to the fighting that engulfed Kosovo in 1999 between independence-seeking Albanians and their Serb rulers.

Besides the often-ugly towns in the centre and east - with their decaying communist-era architecture and dismal hotels - the public face of Kosovo is scarred by heaps of rubbish littering its streets and potholed roads.

James Pettifer, author of the Blue Guide to Albania and Kosovo, says Kosovars might reap a reward from their unexplored hills and rivers if they would just clean the place up.

"Kosovo's tourist industry has great potential for the future and even some possibilities in the present," he said.

He believes that Kosovo should make an effort to clean up its environment, put an end to fly-tipping, and follow the example of the Albanian capital Tirana, which has a programme of demolishing ugly modern buildings and a zero-tolerance stance on the dumping of rubbish.

Whether any of these proposals have much chance of being put into practice is another matter.

At the moment, Kosovo does not have a tourist ministry, or even a government department to deal with the issue.

And the rare visitors who are not part of the protectorate's military or diplomatic community have to make their own way around Kosovo, as there are no tourist information bureaux to help them.

Without help from the authorities, many enterprising locals have started up their own tourist agencies.

Prizren resident Adem Veselaj started his Shpejtimi agency some years ago to offer sightseeing tours for German soldiers serving with the NATO-led stabilisation force KFOR.

Veselaj takes his clients to natural beauty spots such as Bjeshket e Nemura, the Sharr mountains, the Rugova gorge, the Mirusha waterfalls and the Gadime caves as well as to the medieval Serbian monasteries at Decani, Gracanica and the Patriarchate in Peja (Pec).

But the lack of government assistance even in such minor tasks as providing an official tourist map means that Veselaj has not been able to expand his activities to offering trips to foreign visitors.

“I would invest something myself if there was an initiative, but nobody cares about tourism here,” Veselaj told IWPR.

However, the problems standing in the way of a Kosovo tourist industry are bigger than just a shortage of maps and information.

The high cost of air travel to Pristina and the poor standard of other transport links are off-putting, and the quality of the road network is very poor inside the protectorate. Conditions are at their worst in remote rural Kosovo - precisely those unspoilt and picturesque areas that most visitors would like to explore.

Tahir Lajci, an independent tour guide in Peja, told IWPR that these areas have a great deal to offer potential visitors and that two weeks could be spent exploring the Rugova Gorge and its mountains alone.

The Boge mountains in the western Rugova region, on the Albanian border, are well known to climbers and winter sports enthusiasts, and their custom has encouraged the establishment of a number of small private motels which charge around 20 euro per night.

But as Lajci freely admits, most of the visitors to this areas are local - old people or children who have come for health reasons and because they are already familiar with the area. For foreigners, Kosovo's wild places remain completely unexplored.

It's likely to be a long time before western tourists visit the region in any number because of the perception that it remains a dangerous place. For the moment, the priority is to get more of the international workers based in Pristina and its environs to spend time in the countryside.

Zeke Ceku, head of the Hotel and Tourism Company, noted that even if the latter is achieved, the development of a proper tourist industry will be impossible without investment, which the cash-strapped authorities may struggle to provide.

Pettifer believes that both the Pristina authorities and the international administrators are failing in their duty to protect Kosovo's past and safeguard its future.

“The preservation of Kosovo's wonderful historic buildings, particularly the Ottoman heritage in towns like Vushtri (Vucitrn) could help,” Pettifer said.

“If this was done properly and publicised well, it could help change the entire international perception of

Kosovo.”

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Location: Albania
Kosovo

Focus: Balkans: Regional Reporting & Sustainable
Training

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