

LAND OF THE FALLING LAKES

1 x 53'

A documentary by Michael Schlamberger

STEREO, 16:9

The falling lakes of Plitvice in Croatia, Europe's first national park, are a group of 16 crystal-clear lakes arranged in spectacular terraces and connected by countless waterfalls and rapids. As we approach this unique natural treasure, we enter genuine fairytale country. Dense beech wood frames gurgling brooks and deep blue lakes; trees cling precariously to rock shelves or stand guard by a thundering waterfall; branches reach out eerily into the spray of a cataract. This is a place where the elements blend into one another. For the falling lakes owe their very existence to a fascinating biological phenomenon. The lime in the water from the Dinaric Mountains is absorbed by moss, then the water evaporates, leaving behind a mixture of minerals and plant matter that forms travertine, a variety of limestone. In Plitvice, water literally turns to stone. Not surprisingly, the region is often referred to as "The land where stone grows".

The travertine terraces grow at a rate of half an inch to more than one inch per year, continuously creating new pools and barriers, water slides and cascades. Although the ever-changing natural history of this region of lakes is a source of considerable wonder in its own right, the political fortune of Europe's oldest national park has not lacked in drama either. As a site of military action during the Balkan war, the land of falling lakes was on the brink of destruction. The unique travertine terraces were mined, and there were repeated threats that they would be blown up. Although they ultimately escaped this fate, the fragile ecology of the ancient forest undoubtedly suffered from the presence of the troops. Thus, red deer and roe

deer are much less in evidence in Plitvice than in comparable natural habitats because the soldiers all but exterminated the existing stocks in large parts of the forest.

Not much is left now to remind us of this tragic past - the massive beech woods of Plitvice are positively teeming with life. Europe's largest brown bear population has made itself at home here. Sizeable packs of wolves and numerous lynx roam the forest around the cascades and lakes. Some of Europe's rarest species, such as the European pond turtle and the noble crawfish, which disappeared from most other areas of the continent centuries ago, happily populate the crystal-clear waters.