



Science Vision

WILD BALKANS



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■ A film by Michael Schlamberger

Thick and primeval forests, vast spreading wetlands and deep chasms make for a wild and inaccessible land that belongs more to myth and legend than reality.

The landscape resembles scenes taken straight from Tolkien's "Lord of the Rings" rather than any land in 21st century Europe. But here there are no orcs, no elves but instead bears and wolves.

This is not the Middle Earth of fiction but Middle Europe of today - the Balkans.

The ragged contours of the land have cast deep shadows over the history of the Balkans peninsular - always caught in the middle between the opposing forces of east and west. And that bloody history has continued to the present days, almost as if history itself has conspired to conceal the land and its natural beauty and wonders.

And through the centuries it is the land itself which has burnt it's way into the soul and the spirit of its people.

WILD BALKANS is a journey of discovery deep into the heart of this unknown and guarded part of Europe, and the journey reveals some of its best kept secrets, both of the land and the people who live there.





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■ DURMITOR - THE DEEP CANYON

In the north of Montenegro lies a region called Durmitor, it sounds as if taken straight from Tolkien's Middle Earth. It's remote and almost inaccessible for humans to live there, so nature still thrives in this wilderness. Thick, dark forests cling to the mountain slopes above sheer rock walls and gorges.

Durmitor has some of the deepest gorges and chasms in the Balkans, and one - the Tara canyon - is the deepest and longest in the entire European continent. The canyon has been cut through the rock over eons by the river Tara, the deepest section is one thousand three hundred metres and the entire canyon runs for seventy eight kilometres. It's Europe's Grand canyon, and almost unknown.

Local people talk of the waters at the bottom of the canyon as being like tear drops as they are crystal clean and pure. The canyon is a part of a National Park, so is protected from development, but local authorities are looking at the possibility of allowing limited and strictly controlled eco-tourism so that outsiders will be able to wonder at the sheer majesty of this great and secret canyon.

It is hoped that the benefits from tourism will filter through to the impoverished people who still eek out an existence in Durmitor, for one thousand metres above the canyon is a desolate plateau where people do still live.





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Almost forgotten by time, we meet an elderly woman who faces a daily battle for survival. Stana Cerovic is one of the women who remained when the menfolk left to seek employment. The women were named "Virginas" but Stana says she sees more and more of the few remaining hearths being left unlit as people leave.

Everywhere she walks, she carries an old rifle as she fears the packs of wild wolves which still roams the uplands of Durmitor.



■ KOPACKI RIT - THE MYSTIC WETLANDS

In the east of Croatia and stretching out across the Pannonian lowlands lies one of Europe's most extensive and most important wetlands - Kopacki Rit. Here can be found some of the largest remaining riparian forests, which depend upon being seasonally flooded for their survival.

These wetlands seem like a paradise, where life moves gradually through the seasons - but during the Croatian war in 1991 the frontline cut through this area. Large tracts of the wetlands were heavily mined, and few people gave any thought to entering them. Most of the mines have been lifted and removed, but some still remain and are moved by floods. A zone declared safe today, could well be a death trap a month or so later. But it is one of war's great paradoxes - keep people out and nature will return.





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■ TIKVES - THE DESOLATE TABLELANDS

Situated near the border between Macedonia and Greece, the mountainous tablelands of Tikves are now the last stronghold in the Balkans for vultures, which were once found throughout the region. Normally vultures live and breed in large colonies, but their numbers have been decimated and now there are only about seventy birds left. They have suffered from toxic baits, but have been hardest hit by the lack of livestock which they depended upon. Vultures are carrion eaters, and when there was plenty of livestock there were also many which perished by falling to the deaths, providing food for the birds of prey.

But all hope is not lost, for people are now trying to help the vultures to not only survive but to increase their numbers, by leaving out food on a regular basis. One day, it is hoped, the barren uplands of Tikves will again be home to robust populations of Griffon vultures and other birds of prey.



■ SKADARSKO JEZERO - THE BIG LAKE

With fifty islands and many channels, Skadar Lake which lies between Montenegro and Albania actually resembles a vast river system than a lake. But it is the largest lake in the Balkans, almost fifty kilometres long and fifteen wide, and seasonally the water levels can fluctuate by up to five metres.





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The ruins of fortresses and monasteries stand on many of the islands, a reminder that once this was a strategic crossroads during the conflict with the Ottoman Empire.

Some of the monasteries are still inhabited, and in the fortified monastery of Kom, built in the 15th century, a solitary monk of the Orthodox Church still maintains the faith which has been a part of the building for centuries.

Every day is structured around the ancient rituals of the liturgy of the hours - eight of them a day. The monk believes that his days given up to faith and prayer may lead to a better world for all.



■ DOBRUDZA - MOSAIC OF COLOURFUL FIELDS

Set between the Danube and the Black Sea, in the north eastern tip of the Balkan Peninsular are the steppe grasslands of Dobrudza.

Fertile fields lie side by side with fallow ground, allowing for only a few subsistence farmers and wandering shepherds to live here. Yet, in this region many different ethnic peoples live side by side - there are Bulgarians, Romanians, Russians, Tatars and Armenians who have lived for centuries off and from the land, the grass steppes which seem to reach beyond the horizon have provided a meagre existence for all.





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■ DELTA DUNARII - THE SEA OF MOSQUITOES

Across Rumania and the Ukraine lies the delta of the Danube, where it flows into the Black Sea. The Delta Dunarii is Europe's most extensive wetland, and also has the world's largest reed habitat.

These wetlands are home to over a thousand different plants and over four thousand animal species. The three branches of the Danube which feed into the delta wetlands provide safety and security for many nesting waterbirds, and here can be found the largest colony of nesting pelicans outside of Africa.

These wetlands are strictly protected, especially during the nesting season for waterbirds and public access is prohibited.

But perhaps nature itself provides the best protection, the countless millions of biting mosquitoes and midges are better than any security that could be provided by humans. Yet the mosquitoes have their place in the eco system, for in nature everything has a reason. They are the base of the food chain and everything ultimately depends upon them.

In fact, humans are the rarest species in the Delta, this is the least densely populated region in Europe. Tourists only come in spring and summer, and UNESCO has declared the entire wetlands a biosphere reserve.





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And perhaps that is the great paradox of the Balkans itself. Because of the nature of its history and its geography, it has been a place where at times people have struggled for their existence but yet in many of the most remote areas it has become a refuge for wildlife in Europe.

Today it is changing, but thanks to biologists like Ales Toman who is undertaking a study to try and save the European mink, who's last stronghold may well be in the Balkans, much has remained and will stay unchanged.

Directed and mostly filmed over 120 days by Michael Schlamberger of ScienceVision filmproduction based in Styria/Austria, WILD BALKANS is an enthralling and stunning visual exploration of an area where there has been little but bad news for centuries.

The logistics proved to be difficult, in many parts of the Balkans communications are not the best, almost all of the locations were remote and the filmmakers wanted to show traditional lifestyles rather than cities.

Working closely with local people, the filmmakers found that often the way to get close to their subject was time, and often also Schnapps came to the rescue of negotiations!





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But it was worth the effort, as this film gives a unique insight into some of the different ethnic cultures which make up the peoples of the Balkan region. The Balkans have been a melting pot for many different ethnic groups, and despite historic differences most people live together peacefully.

WILD BALKANS shows the landscape and the living creatures that have lived their lives unchanged for centuries. And now that the wars have ceased, there is great hope that these last wilderness areas of Europe will continue to survive with little disturbance, and the fragile balance of nature will remain unchanged.

As well as observing the environment, WILD BALKANS is a film of great hope for the future of one of Europe's least disturbed regions.

"WILD BALKANS"

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TEAM

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WRITTEN & DIRECTED BY	Michael Schlamberger
CAMERA	Michael Schlamberger Rolando Menardi
ADDITIONAL CAMERA	Jiri Petr Thomas Emrich Gerhard Pock
EDITOR	Andrew Naylor
GRAFIC & ANIMATION	Omer Sacic
MUSIC	Andreas Fabianek
DUBBING EDITOR	Martin Rohmoser
DUBBING MIXER	Rupert Metzner
WRITERS	Jeremy Hogarth Walter Köhler
NARRATED BY	Howard Nightingall
PRODUCTION MANAGER	Anita Pfeffinger
UNIT MANAGER	Eleonora Frey
PRODUCER	Rita Schlamberger
CO-PRODUCERS	Yvonne von Zeidler Nori Udo Zimmermann
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER	Walter Köhler
HEAD OF DEPARTMENT	Gisela Hopfmüller



ScienceVision Filmproduktions GmbH

Straßengelstraße 1
8111 Judendorf Straßengel
Austria
Tel. ++43 (0) 3124 / 54 3 66
Fax ++43 (0) 3124 / 54 3 66 - 10
nature.film@sciencevision.at
www.sciencevision.at



**Science
Vision**
Filmproduktions GmbH