Belasitsa Beyond Borders
Discover Belasitsa’s Treasures
The brochure was elaborated in the frame of the project “Belasitsa Beyond Borders – Transboundary Cooperation along the Balkan Green Belt”, which was jointly implemented by Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation – Branch Belasitsa (Bulgaria), EuroNatur Foundation (Germany), Belasitsa Nature Park Directorate at the Executive Forest Agency (Bulgaria), Management Authority of Lake Kerkini (Greece) and Environmental Association Planetum (FYR Macedonia). The project was co-financed by the German Federal Environmental Foundation (Deutsche Bundesstiftung Umwelt).
Belasitsa Mountain – Spring of life in the heart of the Balkans

Belasitsa Mountain range is located in the southern part of the Balkan Peninsula shared by three countries – Bulgaria, Greece and FYR Macedonia. The special geographic location between the Mediterranean and the Continental climate zones, the steep slopes and high peaks, centuries-old forests and small but beautiful rivers make Belasitsa a hot spot of biodiversity in the heart of the Balkans. The slopes of the mountain are flanked by old growth deciduous forest dominated by beech oak and sweet chestnut and are inhabited by a rich diversity of plant and animal wildlife.

At its eastern side, Belasitsa range is surrounded by the Struma River valley which is part of the “Via Aristotelis” - an important flyway for migratory birds such as lesser spotted eagles (*Aquila pomarina*), black and white stork (*Ciconia nigra* resp. *C. ciconia*) and many more. Two beautiful lakes - Kerkini and Dojran - which attract vast numbers of waterfowl and migratory birds are situated at the foothills of the Mountain. Lake Kerkini is home for more than 300 different bird species and represents the only new expansion of the breeding range of Dalmatian Pelicans (*Pelecanus crispus*) species in the last 150 years.

The natural value of Belasitsa Mountain is well recognized and protected by the Lake Kerkini National Park (in Greece) and the Belasitsa Nature Park (in Bulgaria) as well as the Pan-European Ecological Network Natura 2000. Located in the border triangle of Bulgaria, Greece and FYR Macedonia, Belasitsa marks the end of the Balkan, resp. European, Green Belt which, along the former line of the Iron Curtain, spans 24 countries, running for about 12,500 km from the northern tip of Europe through Central Europe and on to the Black, Ionian and Adriatic Seas.

The cultural and historical heritage of Belasitsa is as matchless as that of its nature. Here, one can discover the remains of prehistoric settlements as well as archaeological and historical remains from medieval times and hear legends about epic battles, the rise and fall of two great empires. A colorful and cheery carnival has been held in Strumica for centuries in a row every year before Easter; one can admire the fire dancers in the village of Kerkini (Greece) in May or the Sweet Chestnut Festival in Bulgaria held every autumn in the village of Kolarovo celebrating the uniqueness and the beauty of the chestnut forests and local lifestyle. The festivals of Dojran Authenticity (in FYR Macedonia) and the Festival of the Fish (in Litotopos, Greece) will tempt you with many delicious local specialties.

The brochure at hand presents some of the sites in Belasitsa and provides information where to find further details about the area – there is much more to see!

Discover Belasitsa’s treasures - enjoy nature, culture, traditional cuisine and the hospitality of the locals!
Discover Belasitsa – Sites to see

**Thematic Trail: Life of the Chestnut**

Belasitsa is home of the largest sweet chestnut (Castanea sativa) forests on the Balkan Peninsula. These forests are unique with their atmosphere and rich biodiversity. The picturesque path which starts with an information board in the centre of the village of Kolarovo will lead you into the unknown and unique world of the chestnut forest full of interesting inhabitants. During the pleasant walk, you will have the opportunity to learn amusing facts about the plants and the animals dwelling in the woods. You will become aware of how the humans use the chestnut in their life and what everyone of us can do to preserve this nature gem. It is a round walk which will take you about 3 hours. The trail is marked with blue trail marking. Information boards are in Bulgarian language only; visitors from abroad can hire an English speaking guide at http://belasitsa.com/index.php?id=723&L=1.

The best time to visit the trail is in early October when the chestnut fruits are ripe and there is the Sweet Chestnut Festival in the village of Kolarovo. At the event which is usually held on the second Saturday of October the visitors can enjoy unique sweet chestnut dishes, local folklore and get a touch of the lifestyle and atmosphere of Belasitsa.

**Bulgaria**

**Kameshnishki Waterfall**

With its 21 meters, this is the highest waterfall in the Bulgarian part of Belasitsa. It is situated near Kamena Village, in the gorge of Kameshnitsa River. The waterfall is named after the river but due to its hidden location is also known as the Shy Waterfall. The narrow gorge is home to several more beautiful waterfalls found upstream.

There are two trails that lead to the waterfall. The shorter one starts from the village of Kamena and is marked with green trail marking. It takes around one hour of walking to reach the site.

The other option is following the thematic tourist trail „The Secrets of the Water“ which starts from the centre of the village of Samuilovo and reaches the waterfall in 2.5 hours.
The major historical and archaeological site at the foothills of Belasitsa Mountain is the fortress of Samuil. Its story is connected with one of the greatest battles of medieval Europe. At the beginning of the XI century, King Samuil built the fortress as a central unit in a complicated defense system against the invasion of the Byzantine Emperor Basil II. In a long and heroic battle in 1014, the Byzantine army managed to go around the fortification by climbing the slopes of Belasitsa Mountain; they won the battle and captured 14,000 Bulgarian soldiers who were cruelly blinded.

Nowadays the fortress is an open air museum which is situated at the main road between Petrich and Novo Selo (FYR Macedonia) nearby the village of Strumeshnica. Opening hours – every day from 8.00 to 16.00.

The Bulgarian part of the Mountain offers numerous other tourist sites. Among them are the Belasitsa Nature Park Visitor Centre in Kolarovo Village, various hikes to the main Mountain ridge and the highest peak Radomir (2,029 m.a.s.l.), numerous more thematic tourist trails, as well as many archaeological and cultural sites. Information about all visitor possibilities can be found at www.belasitsa.com.
Discover Belasitsa – Sites to see

Holy Sanctuary of Timios Prodormos

On the slopes of Belasitsa Mountain, just above the village of Akritochori, the picturesque Holy Sanctuary of Timios Prodormos is situated. It was built in 1981 using the architectural model of the Holy Monastery of Xenophonos of Athos and has a marvellous panoramic view over Lake Kerkini. There are 40 nuns living in the monastery and dealing with hagiography, sacerdotal needlecraft, traditional weaving and gold embroidering. The holiday of the monastery is on 29 August. The monastery is open for visitors every day; the visiting hours in the summer are from 9:30 until 13:00 and from 16:00 until 19:00 and for the period November – April, from 9:00 to 16:30.

Greece

Boat trip at Lake Kerkini

Situated at the foothills of Belasitsa Mountain, Kerkini Lake is the most amazing and easily accessible area for bird observation in Greece and probably in the whole of Europe. There are over 300 different bird species dwelling in the area. The riparian forests at the lake shore are a true nature paradise. It is the only place in Europe, where 12 different species of birds nest in a common colony on flooded trees, as well as the only area, where for the first time after 150 years the breeding range of the endangered Dalmatian pelican (*Pelecanus crispus*) has expanded.

A boat trip into the Lake will give you a chance to observe pelicans, flamingos, herons, ducks, geese and many other birds as well as to enjoy the beautiful panorama of Belasitsa Mountain. Usually the trip lasts for 1.5 hours. There are three piers where the boat or canoe trips start: Lithotopos, Kerkini and the pier of Mandraki.
Fort Roupel

Fort Roupel was built in 1914 at the eastern slopes of Belasitsa above the narrow Roupel Gorge, through which the Strymon River flows. It was part of the fortifications of the Metaxas Line in the 1930s and became famous for its defence during the German invasion of Greece in April 1941.

Today one of the fortification’s galleries is open to visitors encompassing a small museum and the visitors’ pavilion. In the gallery visitors can see dioramas, life-sized models arranged in tableaux representing the Greek troops in the Battle of the Forts. The museum is only open on the anniversary of the Battle of the Forts (6 – 9 April), but the pavilion is open throughout the year.

The Roupel fortifications are not far from the international road E79, a few kilometres away from the Greek-Bulgarian border and only 1 km away from the village of Promachonas.

The Greek part of the Mountain also offers hiking opportunities. The highest peak of Belasitsa (Radomir/Kalampaka) can be reached from the villages of Acritochori or Mandraki. There are hiking trails leading to the main ridge from the villages of Vyroneia, Ano Poroia and Neochori, too. Further information regarding Lake Kerkini National Park can be found in the Information Centre of the protected territory in the village of Kerkini. The ones interested in wildlife can visit Vyroneia’s Aquarium situated near the railway station of the settlement.
Discover Belasitsa – Sites to see

Roman Thermae at Bansko

In the village of Bansko located on the slopes of Belasitsa (12 km southeast from Strumica) one of the best preserved archaeological sites from Roman times on the Balkans is situated: the Roman Thermae. Possibly, the baths were buried under a landslide which contributed to their good preservation today. The thermae were built in the 3rd or 4th Century AD using the mineral waters of Parilo spring situated just 50 meters away. The baths consist of eleven premises with a total area of 623 m². The walls are preserved to a height of 2 to 6.7 m. The sauna with a cruciform and a semicircular arch is best preserved. In good condition is the room known as frigidarium or “cold bath”. Completely preserved are the floors made of bricks and mortar. Amazingly, all excavated pipelines would still function today!

FYR Macedonia

The access to the site is free and it can be visited anytime. The Roman Thermae is the starting point of the thematic tourist trail entitled “The Roman Road”. The tourist trail connects the villages of Bansko and Gabrovo, offering pleasant experiences and nice views along the way. In order to walk the distance in one direction the visitor will need about 1.5 hours. Information boards in English and Macedonian describe the nature and rich history of the region.
**Smolarski Waterfall**

If you would like to experience the freshness of the mountain, take the pleasant and energizing walk to Smolarski Waterfall. With a water drop of 39.5 meters, Smolarski is the highest waterfall in FYR Macedonia. The attractive nature site is situated just 1 km away from the village of Smolari. There is a comfortable trail leading to the waterfall and finishing with a picturesque bridge over Lomnica River. On the way back to the village, you can stop at the little market near the starting point of the trail where fresh vegetables, fruits, honey or souvenirs can be bought. The walk from the parking lot to the waterfall takes about 30 minutes.

**Koleshinski Waterfall**

If you are near the village of Koleshino, do not miss the opportunity to visit one of the most beautiful waterfalls in Belasitsa: Koleshinski Waterfall. It is situated on Baba River at an altitude of 610 m.a.s.l. The 16 meters high waterfall is located in a gorgeous area surrounded by vertical cliffs and huge fairytale plane trees. A narrow panoramic trail leads to the top of the falls. There are a number of benches and pavilions where the visitor can admire the beauties of Belasitsa.

The walk to the site takes 40 minutes from the parking lot just outside of the village of Koleshino. The road to the parking is duly signed and leads south from the main road Koleshino – Bansko.
Other popular tourist sites in the Macedonian part of Belasitsa include the medieval fortress Carevi kuli situated 4.5 km south from the town of Strumica, nature springs at the village Mokrino, Monospitovo swamp, Gabrovo waterfalls and others.

More information about Belasitsa

Web-portal
On the website www.belasitsa.com you can find abundant information and the latest news about Belasitsa Mountain and the region in Bulgarian and English. The website offers general information about the Mountain, specific details regarding nature, culture and history of the area, about tourism developments and useful information for visitors.

Multilingual image brochure
The ones that prefer visual impressions can take a look at our multilingual brochure presenting the nature, culture, history and people of Belasitsa Mountain at www.belasitsa.com/fileadmin/content/documents/tourism/brochure_s.pdf

Ecotourism services and products
The catalogue covers all three countries of Belasitsa and is meant to inform visitors of the Belasitsa region about available accommodation, places to eat and tourist attractions in the area. Furthermore, it gives information regarding specific features and services offered at each location at www.belasitsa.com/fileadmin/content/documents/tourism/Catalogue_of_ecotourism_Belasitsa_Region_s.pdf

Information about the protected areas Lake Kerkini National Park in Greece and Belasitsa Nature Park in Bulgaria can be found at www.kerkini.gr and www.belasitsa.net