

# “COMBINATION OF HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL TRADITIONS WITH THE NATURAL RESOURCES FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN THE DISTRICT OF BERAT, ALBANIA”

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## ABSTRACT

Berat, a city of over 2400 years of life, holds upon its shoulders a rich history of events and facts of great importance. The perfect harmony between different religions; the unique architecture of its oldest quarters; the magnificent castle, one of the only inhabited castles not only in Albania but in the Balkans as well, have attracted the eye of many historians, travelers, scientists, and geographers.

The perfect combination of high altitudes, river valleys, and fields with their rich cultural and historical heritage has lured a great number of foreign and domestic tourists. This city manifests the refined fantasy of its builders and creators. It has been a muse to poets and painters for this reason. Berat is also house to numerous museums and cultural artifacts of unique value which make the city attractive to foreign and domestic tourists. The Sustainable development of tourism in the area continues thanks to the natural and cultural heritage of this city.

This article gives a view of historical and cultural traditions of the city of Berat and the natural and geographical landscape of the Canyons of the river Osum, the touristic potential of the region and the values it holds. The article analyses the actual state of the natural resources of the Canyons, different actual problems the area surrounding faces and the risks created as a result of the total absence of investments. It evaluates the influence of these qualities for the creation of diverse landscapes of great Eco touristic values.

This study also presents what has been done so far to conserve these values, by pointing out how important it is the urban development as a means of integrating these values and making it possible to requalify and re-evaluate into the general urban and cultural assembly off this 2400-year-old city.

**KEYWORDS:** Berat, Traditions, Heritage, Sustainable Development, Urban Planning & Development

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 GEOGRAPHICAL DESCRIPTION OF THE CITY OF BERAT AND THE CANYONS OF OSUM

The Municipality of Berat stretches in the Southern Region and Western Lowlands in both sides of middle and lower flow of the river Osum, which runs through the city. Berat rests upon the top of a triangle that ends the field of Myzeqe, where the mountain ranges of Southern Albania begin.

Lying in these two different regions of different physical and geographical attributes affects the changeability of the territory, the diversity of physical and geographical conditions from all geographical directions as well as the diversity of all geographical landscapes.

Berat is one of the rarest cities which belong to the early dawn of mankind. Once upon a time when uncontrolled and devastating waters rushed through this area, a massive rock was created, uncovered by nature itself, this rock seems to be there exactly to welcome a city the life of which began to settle around 2400 years ago.

Initially, the city of Berat was raised like a castle, over the rocky hill of an altitude of 187 m above sea level, on the right side of the river Osum just as it was about to reach the field of Myzeqe, with a surface of 1,6 km square<sup>2</sup>.

The city of Berat lies mainly in a territory of hills with an average altitude of 58 m above the sea level. In the natural environment of Berat you can spot: the hills and fields of Berat, Tomori Mountain (east, 2417m), Shpirag Mountain (west, 1218) as well as the Valley of Osum.

The river Osum flows through and out of the city, near UraVajgurore, it joins the river Devoll and they both create the Seman (the length of which within the district reaches 32 km).

The climate is typically the Mediterranean, with an annual average temperature of 15,9 degrees Celsius.

*The Canyon of Osum* is a rare combination of scientific values (especially geological and geomorphologic), stunning natural beauty, as well as unique spiritual values. This harmony of values offers the city powerful touristic attraction and great cultural and didactic importance.

For these unrivaled values, for its sizes: 13 km long, 4-35 m wide and around 70-80 m deep; much bigger than all the other canyons in Albania, for its rare grandeur, the Canyon of Osum was given the status of Monument of nature (2002) and rightfully earned its nickname "The Albanian Colorado".

The Canyon begins in a place called Hambull about 18 km from the city of Çorovode, it breaks when it passes through the village of Lapan, because of a widening of the river bank near a place called "MulliriiBabait", from there it stretches unbroken until it reaches Grepcka, 2 km out of the city of Corovode, with superb, marvelous and irresistible scenery. However, its most beautiful area lies from the village of Blezencke through to the village of Cerenisht. At the end of the village of Grepcka, the Canyon widens creating "Vaun e Grepckes" -Grepcka'S Ford. Here the Canyon loses altitude and gives people the opportunity to exploit the richness of both faces of the Canyon with decoration slates, tiles, and stones. Its white and brown-reddish colors make it more precious and more interesting to exploit.

The marvels of the Canyon are numerous. The great straits of the Canyon, its limestone cordons on its ridges, its hanging geographical and karstic forms in the edges of the rocks and the waterfalls on both sides of the Canyon make it seem weird and unbelievable to you. The most impressive and trustworthy study can be done by climbing down the Canyon, walking along all its stretch or canoeing through the river. The best touristic season is the period April-May-September when visitors can explore and be impressed by the Canyon in a time range of 3-4 hours. They can see just a little piece of the sky because of the height of 80-100m overhead. The marvels of the Canyon<sup>3</sup> are numerous. There are 6 straits along the Canyon which make it more interesting to visit. At the end of the village of Dhores can be found the sixth strait, which is about 40-50m long, in the shape of a tunnel, in the width of the river bank about 2-3.5m and a height of the ridge about 70-80m. In the mid-height of the ridges the Canyon widens again and reaches its most famous width.

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<sup>2</sup> P.Qiriazhi, S.Sala, A.Shahu, S.Xhaferri. Monuments of Skrapar. Tiranë 2005

<sup>3</sup> P. Qiriazhi, S. Sala, A. Shahu, S. Xhaferri. Monuments of Skrapar. Tiranë 2005

*Sharova Bridge*<sup>4,5,6</sup>, appointed as a Cultural Monument in 1973, built over the river Osum south of Corovode about 1 km out of the town. You can still find remains of the antique bridge in the foundations of the medieval bridge, which is also about to collapse. The antique road of the valley of Osum passed through this bridge, which linked the seacoast to the field of Korca through Berat, the left bank of the river Osum, Sharova Bridge and the Highland of Opar. Based on its building techniques, Sharova Bridge must have been built in the time of Augustus, at the beginning of the first century A.D.

Another distinguishing feature of the Canyon is its special shape created by its Karstic processes. “*Vrima e Nuses*” (*the Brides Hole*) is located about 800m from the village of Bigaz. It has the shape of a gallery about 78m long with a diameter of 2m. Legend links this place with the fate of a young girl who was forced to marry without her will. She was obliged to follow this old tradition. On her way to the groom’s village, the girl announces to the in-laws that she was being married without her free will, but they did not give the girl a reply. Thinking how to escape and praying God she addresses the Rock of the Canyon “Open up so I can hide away and be saved from the embarrassment”. The rock heard her call and opened a hole in the shape of a cut. The bride jumped off the horse and hid in the hole, leaving the in-laws without a bride.

The second legend is about the Footprint of Abas Ali the Saint. It is linked to the strange shapes created by the corrupting powers of the waters in the limestone (karstic process). These strange shapes are very similar to those of the footprint of a horse and the print of a walking stick. They are located 5km from the city of Corovode, near the village of Dhores, over the limestone rocks on top of the edge of the Canyon. Legend defines them as the Footprint of Abas Ali the Saint, who came from Qerbela to Tomorr on his white horse. Legend has it that he flew and left his horse’s footprint on a stopover he had over the slate of Kajca, from where he once again flew straight back to the mountain of Tomorr. After that, he gazed at his prints from the top of the mountain. Bektashian religious visit these prints seeking the help of the saint. These prints are considered to be of a great spiritual value. Once again confirming the spiritual values of the Canyons and the area itself.



**Figure 1: Footprint of Saint Abas Ali**

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<sup>4</sup>V. Shtylla. Old Roads and Bridges in Albania. Tiranë 1998

<sup>5</sup> P. Qiriazhi, S. Sala, A. Shahu, S. Xhaferri. Monuments of Skrapar. Tiranë 2005.

<sup>6</sup> N.Ceka. Antique and Mediaval Monuments in the Valley of Osum. ( article ). Magazine: The monuments. Nr. 5 – 6. Tiranë 1973

## 2. MAIN HISTORICAL, CULTURAL AND ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE OF BERAT

Berat is a wonderful scenic city with very beautiful buildings of the historical and architectural point of view.

### 2.1 Mangalem and Gorica

Two of the most characteristic quarters of Berat. The houses built one on top of the other, in a way not even a painter could have done it better, have given this city the name of "The city of one window on top of the other". The musical assembly of Mangalem is like a precious stone in the art of construction, where the harmonious composition of the houses has reached a very high level of professionalism. It has the shape of an elegant pyramid which imitates the silhouette of the hill, on top of which stands proudly the castle of Berat. This composition, huge in size and delicate in making, is characterized by an intensive transparency due to a large number of windows, from which the city gets its nickname. The unique and original architecture of the condos seems to belong to the constructing phase of XVII-XIX century where the elements of stone and wood are combined. The condos are pressed with each-other and most of them are tiny in dimensions.

Visitors are attracted by the alleyways, which even though may be "hidden" possess an extraordinary beauty. They are very intimate and they challenge the condos with their darkness.

The assembly of Gorica is located in the lower part of a hill altitude, crowned on the top with a fortification from the period of antiquity. It is divided with the rest of the town by the river Osum and the only way till recently to communicate with the town was Gorica Bridge. According to Celebi, in the XVII century, the quarter had 200 condos, suggesting that the other houses, as well as the other two parts of the quarter, were reconstructed after the devastating earthquake of 1851. There are some large condos in this quarter which belong to Cardak Type of houses., dating back from XVIII century.

The continuity of the line of the condos is disrupted by the presence of the Basilican Church of Saint Spiridhon in the center of the quarter. The other quarters of the town are located on the right bank of the river Osum, or around the hills, a configuration which donates the city the sight of an Amphitheatre. The quarter of Gorice is also recognized with the name GjonGjorm (the quarter that does not see sunlight). In the winter the entire quarter rests in the shade without feeling the heat of the sunlight due to its position. Humorously the people use the expression "InGorice, a rooster can stand on one foot due to the freezing winter"

### 2.2 Gorica Bridge

The wooden bridge<sup>7</sup>, subsequently replaced by a stone bridge in the XVIII century, was built by Ahmet Kurt Pascha in 1780 and rebuilt in 1920-1930. It is 129.3m long, 5.3m wide and the arches are about 9-16,7m away from each other. It stands 10m above the level of the river and it has 7 arches which make it a very beautiful Bridge. Built on a solid basement, all the bridge is ornamented with white carved stones tied with metallic hooks.

### 2.3 "Kala" Quarter

The quarter of "Kala" (The Castle) a symbiosis of life and war and the pride of the city. It is located within the surrounding walls of the castle and it is one of the most complete examples of great architectural monuments in Albania.

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<sup>7</sup> A.Baçe, A.Meksi, E.Riza. Berati, History and Architecture. Tiranë 1987

The dwellings within the castle testify these great architectural values. The construction in Kala belongs to the XVIII-XIX centuries. The castle of Berat stands on top of a 187m hill, on the left of the bottleneck of the river Osum. At first, a Proto-city dwelling, in the VII-V centuries B.C it was an important strategic point which was converted in a Castle-town with walls reaching a height of 1400m and a surface of 10 hectares.



Figure 2: "Kala" Quarter

## 2.4 Cult and Religious Buildings

Some capitols and colonnades<sup>8</sup> witness that Berat has had churches of paleo Christian period from the IV-VI centuries (Saint Todri). Among the most beautiful churches built in the XIII-XIV centuries: Saint Mari Vllaherna, Saint Triadha, and Saint Mehilli. A number of Islamic buildings with great artistic and architectonic values can also be found in Berat such as HelveteTeqe, The Mosque of Bachelors, The Leaden Mosque etc. All these churches and mosques and other urban buildings, especially the assemblies of Mangalem, Gorice and Kala can be defined as Pearls of Medieval Architecture.

### 2.4.1 The Ethnographic Museum

The Ethnographic Museum<sup>9</sup> in Berat was opened in 1979. It includes the ethnographic popular culture of the region of Berat and the South of Albania as well. The museum is set in a two-floor tricenentary house typical of the region of Berat. On the first floor, you can see a hall which represents a medieval alleyway with traditional shops on both sides. On the second floor, there is an open cardak for guest waiting. You can visit the archive, the loom, the waiting room of the village, the waiting room of the city and the kitchen.

### 2.4.2. The Codices of Berat

The codices are old books with religious content written in scrolls. “The purple codex of Berat” is considered to be an essential reference to the evangelist literature and the Christian culture in general. It is ranked as a foundation of the Christian literature of eastern rites. “The purple codex of Berat”, scientifically known as Codex PurpureusBeratinus, also marked “ϕ” with identifying number 043, belongs to the early Christian period. This manuscript, the oldest of our ancient times, was written at a time when the gospel thoughtwas still in movement. It contains a frequent deviation from the unified text which was accepted as unchangeable in the coming centuries only. The manuscript was written in the VI

<sup>8</sup> A.Baçe, A.Meksi, E.Riza. Berati, History and Architecture. Tiranë 1987.

<sup>9</sup> Regional Directory of Monuments of Culture. Berat 20018

century in Greek. It has 190 pages and contains 2 gospels: by Marcus and by Matheus. It was discovered in 1868, studied and published by French theologian P. Battifol in 1884.



**Figure 3: The Codices of Berat**

### **3. BERAT'S PROTECTED AREAS AND THEIR MANAGEMENT**

According to the General Local Plan for all the constructions made near the cultural monuments such as Churches, city mosques and other cultural monuments in all the cases the work is done has been held with proper care, rigorously respecting all the standards foreseen by the law. There has also been shown care for all archeological objects which have been found while digging for building new objects. These objects have been protected and there has been working for their proper conservation in the future.

The new areas of the city were built from the beginning to mid-XX century. They stretch towards the north along Antipatrea street, and eastward along the field in the northern bank of the river Osum.

With the help of grants by the European Commission, there have been making investments in the Castle of Berat to restore the cobbled alleyways, to restore the underground infrastructure such as the energy, the drinking water, the telephone lines and the enlightenment of the surrounding walls of the castle.

However, despite the work done, the problems are still evident with the objects of natural and cultural heritage. Some of these objects still need ongoing restoring and maintenance. There has not been made a full promotion yet for all the objects of natural and cultural heritage in Berat. The Canyons of Osum, even though a monument of extraordinary natural values, unfortunately, are treated and managed like "forgotten" museum. Some of the problems encountered are:

- There has been no prediction of possible risks there have been cases of tourists being blocked on their canoes in the Canyons.
- Another problem is about the low investments and the absence of management plans for the control of all the activities on both sides of the valley. This has brought about the abandoning of the villages of Blezencke, Zaberzan, Bigaz, and Dhores.
- Unlawful damage to the woods, illegal logging for fire purposes, natural fires, the risk of extinction some birds or fish face as a result of illegal hunting and fishing.



#### 4. SWOT ANALYSIS

The process of SWOT analysis makes possible the identification of the best combination of all the attributes, the problems, the priorities and the drawbacks in the city of Berat, as well as setting the positive sides, the weak sides, opportunities and threats/risks which have been identified in the city:

- **Positive Sides**
  - A city of Historical Heritage listed by UNESCO
  - Nature and natural riches
  - The river Osum
  - Regional Center with a rich agriculture
  - Knowing and accepting the importance of urban planning
- **Weak sides**
  - Insufficient infrastructure
  - Problems with land owning- informal structures
  - Environmental deterioration
  - Construction deterioration
  - The division of the city in sections
  - The positioning at the end of the national road
- **Opportunities**
  - Development of the historical area assisted by UNESCO
  - The river Osum saw as a regional park which connects and integrates different sections of the city as well as the informal areas along it
  - Regulatory plan to develop urban services in the area
  - A plan to improve the infrastructure
  - A touristic scenario from Tirana to Gjirokaster passing through Berat
  - Investments coming from foreign resources including here the Albanian emigration.
- **Risks**
  - Lack of investments in infrastructure ruins the quality of life
  - Bad maintenance of historical areas will lead to a shrink of the values of the city
  - Dumping the sewage in the river Osum and the absence of a method to elaborate the waste causes health and environmental risks

## 5. RESULTS

**Precautions that need to be taken for the combination of historical, natural and cultural heritage for a sustainable touristic development in the district of Berat.**

Some of the strategic aims and conservation programs to promote the values of our historical, natural and cultural heritage for an urban development in the city of Berat:

The development of a city with a touristic destination based on World heritage, historical, natural and cultural values

### 5.1 Objectives and Programs

Berat is a perfect example of a city under World Heritage with a sustainable cultural and historical tourism, based on religious tolerance.

- Berat as a center of massive tourism.
- Berat as a touristic destination for family tourism in hosting houses
- Berat a center of activities based on tourism and ecotourism (rafting, hiking, biking, camping etc.)

Berat as a center for traditional art, culture, architecture, contemporary art and regional craftsmanship.

- A historic city, where the historical objects have been reconstructed and restored to make them functional with premises for an active and dynamic life.
- Promoting the city as an Albanian iconographic center and a center of Medievalartifacts.
- Opening the historic and art museum to exhibit works of artwith unique values of cultural, historical and architectonic heritage.
- Transforming the river Osumin one of the most important resourcesof public spacesand recreational centers.
- Creating an urban park along the river Osum which touches different parts of the city, making Berat an interconnected large city.

Even though this natural monument has extraordinary values, it is very little known by the public, whether it is a specialized public, or by the central and local authorities, by planners and touristic operators. As a result, the degree of sensibilization of this opinion is very low compared to the values it holds. For this reason, a study and management program is needed to aim:

- To prepare a plan for the conservation of values, management of values for scientific exploitation for study, cultural, didactics, and especially touristic purposes. For the latter, it would be a good idea to differentiate the Canyon in the section of touristic recreation and the section strictly protected, where every interference of man including visits is prohibited.
- To raise the awareness of the public about the values of the Canyon and the conservation of these values.
- To build the right infrastructure; road asphaltting, building observatory spots and landing spots as well as other facilities such as traveling and safety.



- To provide the right touristic road signs in both Albanian and English.
- To provide promotional publishing such as catalogs, maps, photographic albums, web pages etc.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

### 5.1 The Suggestions for the Future Vision and Development

The Municipality of Berat has thought of a vision for the future of the city as an important step in creating a development plan. The aims and objectives<sup>10</sup> of the vision have been divided into a hierarchy of objectives and aim, the priority of which will help to lead the work of the municipality to reach the desired vision of the city.

“ Ancient Berat, a city of World Cultural Heritage, with a community joyous of harmonic development and equal opportunities, a center of international tourism, with a dynamic economy based on agriculture and consoled craftsmanship”

Berat will keep on being a main urban center for allthe region. Its geographical role will change from a city at the end of a road corridor into a main passing point in the national road network of the entire country – what is more of a touristic importance. Berat will be an important historical center in Albania. The vitality and dynamism of the city’s historical core will become a great touristic attraction which will contribute to establishing Berat into levels of international tourism. The river Osum will serve as an integral part of the city’s urban system. The river will play an important role in the creation of the connections between the quarters of Berat- especially the historic part of the town and the castle. The river will also be exploited to develop the informal structure into the urban base. In addition, the corridor of the river will serve as a stretch of a green line, full of green spaces which will offer an abundance of recreational objects.

Berat will also enjoy an improved and well-assigned urban structure, regardless of its topographic restrictions it will integrate a strong bond between all the neighborhoods of the city. The informal areas will fit in perfectly into the new urban structure.

The space concept of Berat includes the compact urban continuity of the town comprising the river Osum and the Historical Park of the city (the Castle, Mangalem, and Gorice). The consolidation of the city will depend on its physical nucleus, the historical center, which offers administrative and marketing services, and its future connection with he national road segment Tirane – Berat -Gjirokaster.

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