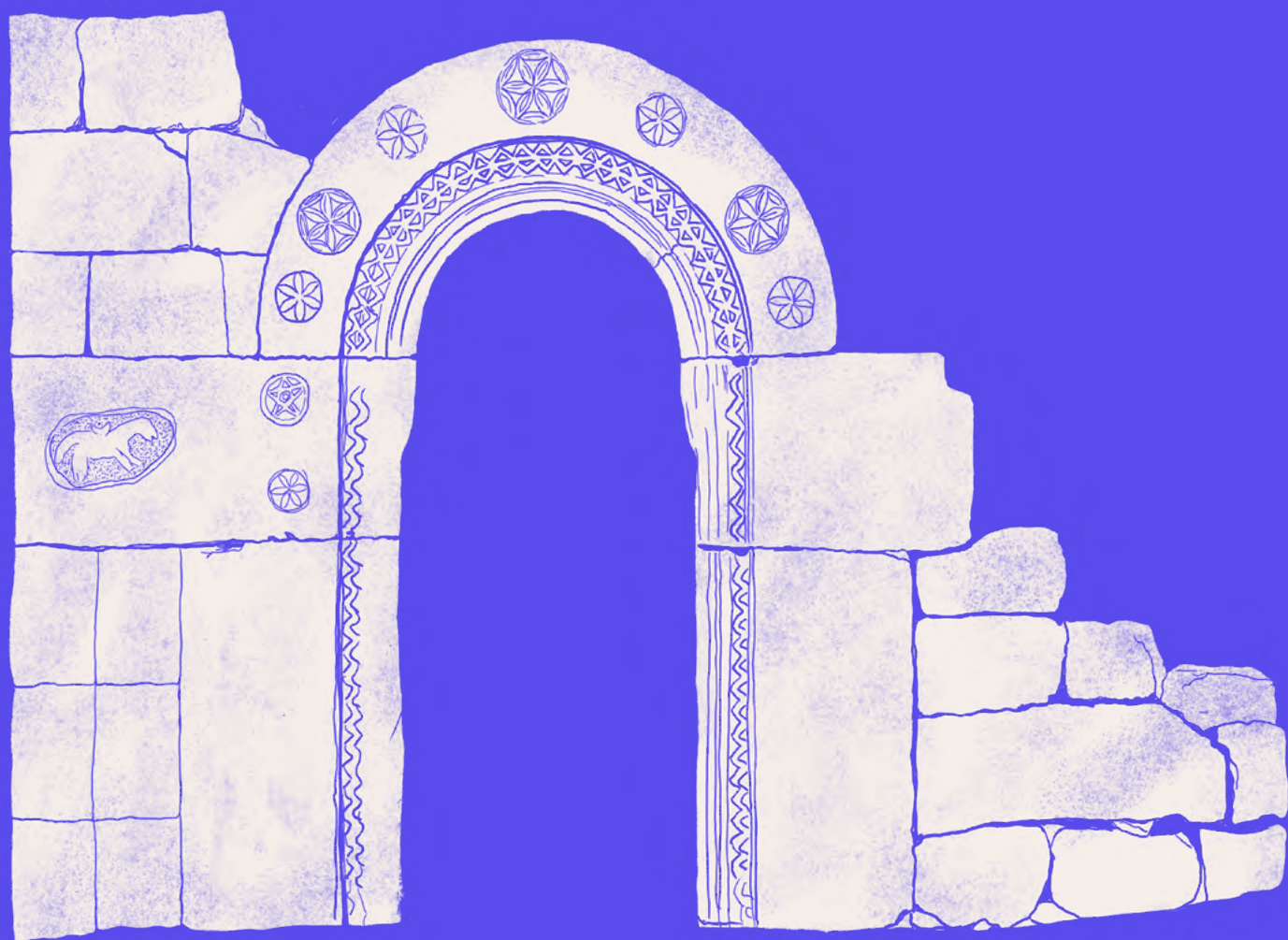


REVEALING MIRDITA'S HERITAGE

Cultour
Mirdita





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THE NAME OF MIRDITË

Once upon a time there was a father who had five sons. He worked long and hard in his life, but was unlucky in money. So, when it came time to divide his very few possessions among his sons, he gave a sieve (*shoshë*) to the first, a saddle (*shalë*) to the second, a sword (*shpatë*) to the third, a funnel (*hinkë*) to the fourth and told the fifth to go and rule over Orosh. This gives credence to the old proverb that the regions of Shalë, Shosh, Kuzhnen, Spaç and Orosh are closely related with one-another of old.

Another version of the legend speaks of three brothers **Shalë, Shosh and Mirdita.** The origin of the name stretches far into days long gone, when the King made war on his enemies and the local mirditas swelled the ranks of his armies. On a certain campaign, the King demurred from giving battle on a Friday and desired the fighting to begin on the Saturday. The chieftain of the mirditas, hearing of the King's wish during the council of war, managed to persuade him that attacking the enemy on the Friday would catch him unawares and give the King's arms a glorious victory. So, the King took the advice, gave battle on the Friday and won such a great triumph, that it was henceforth known as the Good Day (*Dita e Mirë*).

'Dita e Mirë'.



THE ORIGINS OF MIRDITË

Though the *mirditas* do not appear among the classic authors who write on Albania prior to the Ottoman rule, the long-standing tradition of these highlanders is that they are descended from the Princes of Dukagjin. These great nobles of the North, seeing the unravelling of their power and dominion after the death of Skanderbeg, are said to have left the plain that bears their name and taken to the highlands, bringing with them their desire for freedom, their Christianity and their refusal to submit to the Ottoman sultans. Despite many and repeated attempts to bring these people and their highlands to heel, the Ottomans could not overcome the traitorous mountains and narrow defiles, guarded day and night with the terrible determination to be killed, rather than allow their land to be touched by the Ottoman.

Unable to conquer by force, the Sultan extended them a generous peace offer, whereby their chieftain was officially recognized and their internal governance left undisturbed - with reedom of worship and exemption from any and all taxes - on the single condition that they provide a number of armed bannermen, under their own chieftain, to serve the Sultan in time of war.

Local tales have it that this generous peace and their privileges date from the reign ofvSultan Bayezid and some of them mention the battle of Kosova as the precise time of their granting. Once the battle had been won, the chieftain of the mirditas is said to have received an inscribed metal plate from the Sultan, on which were listed all the privileges they enjoyed.



THE FATES OF MIRDITË

Mirditë has a long and well-known tradition of the adoration and protection of the natural environment, generally known under the name of 'The Cult of Nature'. Local legend has it that, once the flock summers in the shade of great old trees for three years in a row, that place becomes sacrosanct and the trees are untouchable: not even a branch may be cut, for any reason. Any transgressors to this ancient law would fall on harm, for the trees and the pastures are the abodes of Fates (*Orët*), sacred deities that have watched over these lands from time immemorial, the earliest days when people started living there. The great elms inhabited by the Fates are considered Auspicious Places (*vende të mira*) and the Fates brought both good fortune to passers-by, as well as harm (*orë të liga*) to those that impinged on their rest.

These Fates are found in other lands under several different names - *Zana*, *Ora* and *Zëra* - which indicates a merging between the *Ora*, Fates of Nature, and *Zana*, Fates of Folk and lends credence to the antiquity of these practices, going back to the pre-Christian Antiquity of these dwellings and these people. The Cult of Nature, also observed on houses and clothes in Mirditë, is expressed through engravings and decorations of Concentric Circles, Double Spirals and the Sun; as well as the lighting of the Yule Log on the 24 th of December, later recast as the Christian Christmas.

References:

Hyacinthe Hecquard, Histoire et description de la Haute Albanie ou Guégarie. (Paris: Arthus Bertrand, 1858), k. 4.

Mark Tirta, Mitologjia ndër shqiptarë. (Tiranë: Akademia e Shkencave e Shqipërisë, 2004).



1

CULTURAL AND NATURAL HERITAGE ITINERARY



CULTURAL AND NATURAL HERITAGE ITINERARY

- 1 Info Tower
- 2 "Abat Doci" house
- 3 Palace of Culture Rubik
- 4 Shëlbuemi's Church
- 5 Bulzhizë
- 6 Marianne Graf Point
- 7 Matriz Castle
- 8 Pictograms
- 9 Marub Hotel



Distance
11.77 km



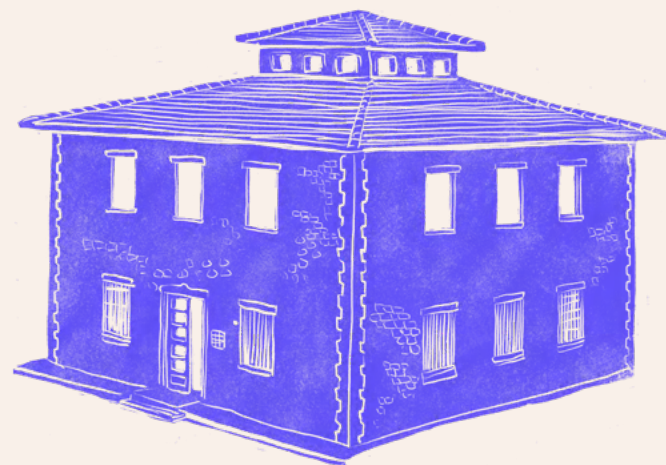
Natural and Cultural Heritage Itinerary

The first itinerary provides the opportunity to explore some natural and cultural treasures of the Mirdita region, as well as the history, typical dwellings, and distinguished personalities of the culture, art, politics, prehistoric rock art, etc. The initial segment of the itinerary involves the use of vehicles, whereas the subsequent part entails walking and hiking at an easy to moderate difficulty level, necessitating suitable attire, along with water and light snacks.

During this itinerary, the following locations will be visited:

- Info Tower
- Abbot Doçi's Residence
- Cultural Center "Abbot Doçi"
- Church of the Holy Savior, Rubik
- Pictograms of Rubik
- The Castle
- Baven
- Toven Naturae
- Marubi Hotel

Info Tower



The itinerary begins at the Info Tower, where there is an opportunity to better understand the region's history through digital materials, maps, and other resources on display.

The journey continues by vehicle to Abbot Prend Doçi's residence, declared a Cultural Monument of Category II. Abbot Doçi emerged as a prominent figure during the National Renaissance and the early 20th century in Albania, significantly contributing to pivotal political and cultural advancements, particularly in the realms of Albanian language and literature. Renowned as a scholar, poet, publicist, and a fervent political and cultural advocate, he played a foundational role in establishing the cultural society "Bashkimi" and the Literary Commission, which determined the current Latin alphabet of the Albanian language.



Despite the significant influence on his contemporaries, the notable contributions of the Abbot of Mirdita, along with those of numerous other Catholic prelates, remain insufficiently studied or recognized in Albanian history. Although still inhabited, the residence of Abbot Doçi is in a state of considerable decay.

Abat Preng Doçi



Subsequently, the journey continues on the other side of the route, in the town of Rubik, where a stop is made at the Cultural Center “Abbot Doçi, a place where artistic life thrives, and various cultural activities are organized.

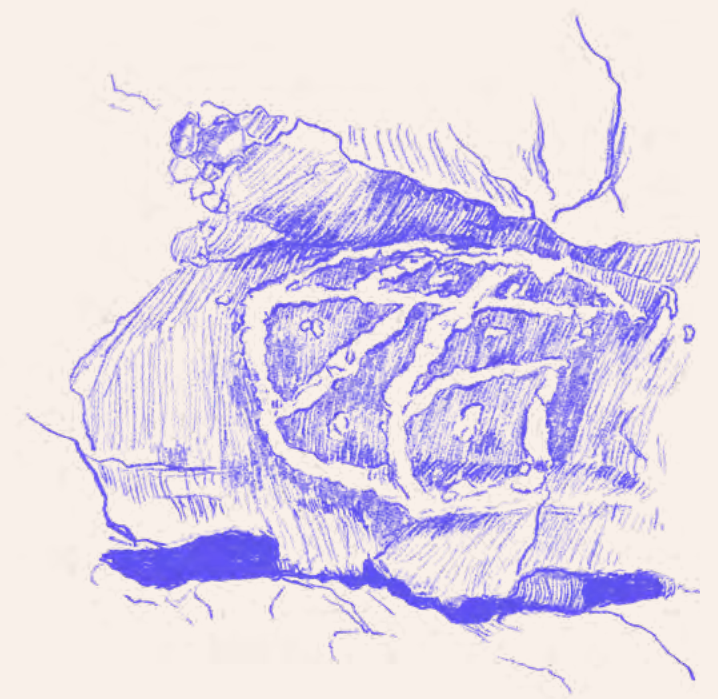
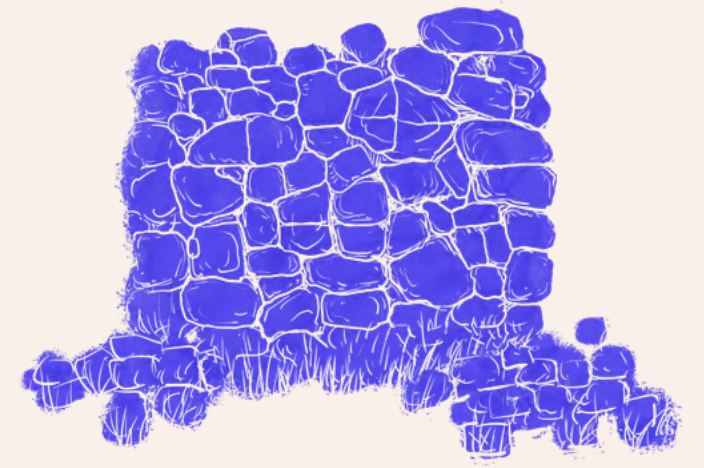
Further, we pause to visit the Church of the Assembly (Monastery) of Rubik otherwise known as the Church of the Holy Savior, a significant monument of cultural and architectural heritage in the Municipality of Mirdita and the Lezhë District. The Church of the Rubik Monastery has been recognized as a Benedictine abbey since 1166. The edifice is a single-nave church with an east-west orientation (apse-main entrance), designed in the Norman style, featuring a cruciform layout and reaching a maximum height of 13.86 m. It continues to provide a place of worship for believers up to the present day.



The Church of Rubik

Following the church visit, the hiking trail commences, offering an easy-to-moderate level suitable for visitors of all ages. Along this trail, which extends for approximately two and a half hours, you will have the opportunity to immerse yourself in the splendor of nature, admire prehistoric art, and explore the castle (though it is technically comprised of ancient walls and remnants of old defensive towers, the locals commonly refer to it as castle).

The itinerary concludes at Marubi Hotel, where you can have dinner and spend the night.



Pictogram

2

GASTRONOMY AND ADVENTURE ITINERARY

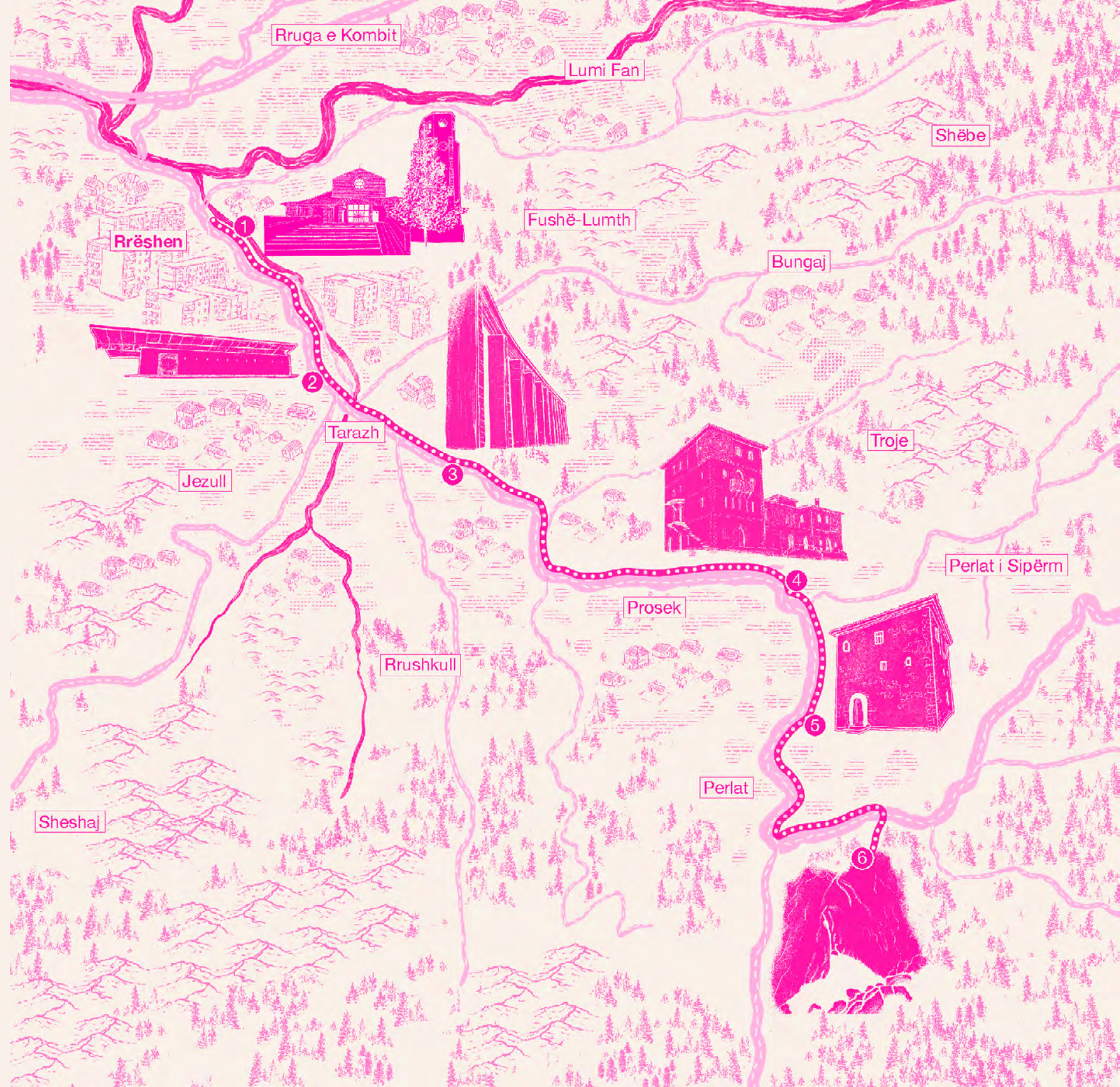


GASTRONOMY AND ADVENTURE ITINERARY

- 1 Church of Rëshen
- 2 Arbëri Winery
- 3 Tarazh Train Bridge
- 4 Agrotourism N'Kanu
- 5 Tower of Dodaj
- 6 Cave of Vali



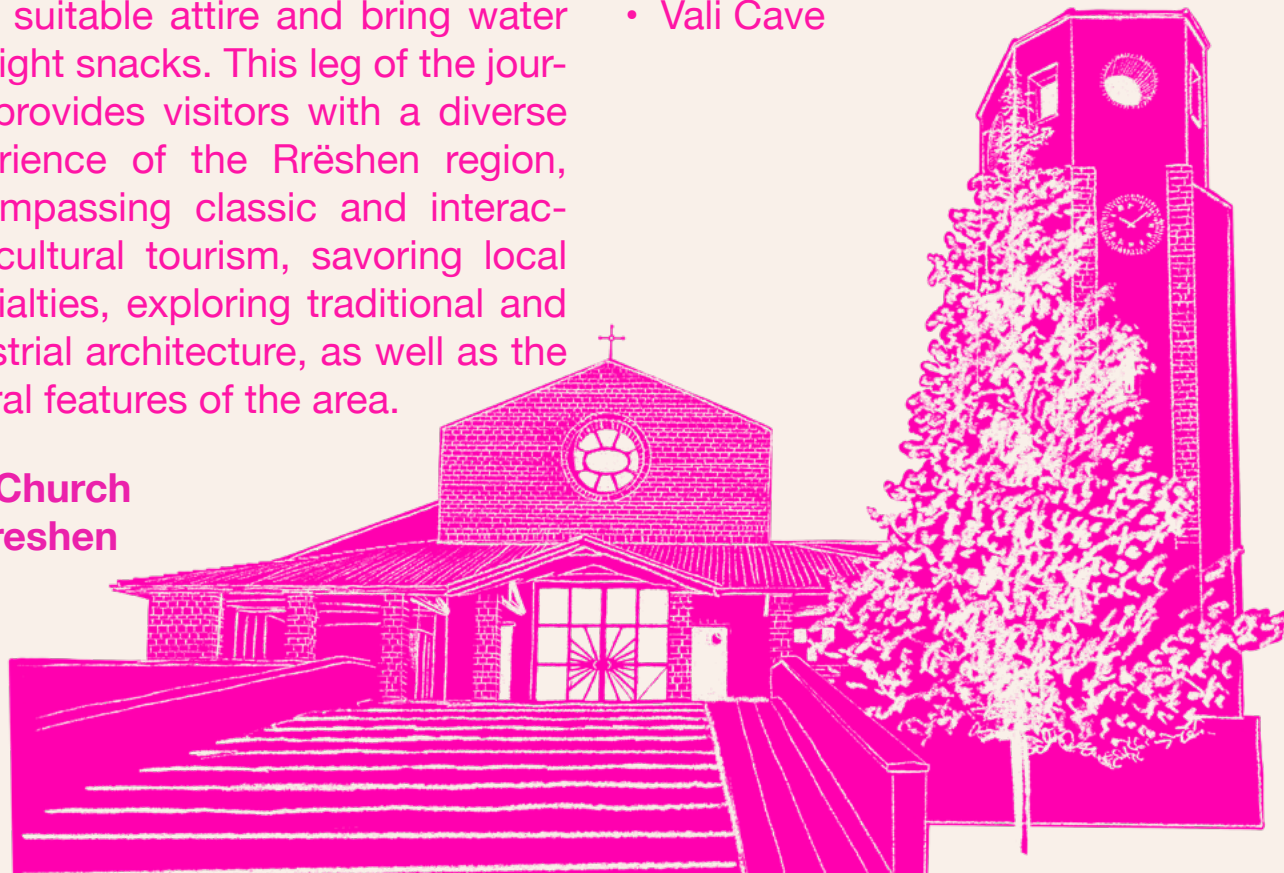
Distance
20.4 km



The Gastronomy and Adventure Itinerary

The second itinerary commences with the historical center of the town of Rrëshen and concludes at the Vali Cave. It is divided into three segments, two of which can be covered on foot or by hiking, while one of them requires the use of a vehicle. The concluding segment of the itinerary involves a roughly two-hour hike with an easy-to-moderate difficulty level, accommodating individuals of all ages. Participants are advised to wear suitable attire and bring water and light snacks. This leg of the journey provides visitors with a diverse experience of the Rrëshen region, encompassing classic and interactive cultural tourism, savoring local specialties, exploring traditional and industrial architecture, as well as the natural features of the area.

The Church of Rreshen



The second itinerary encompasses the following points of interest:

- Rrëshen Center
- Cultural Palace of Rrëshen
- The Historical Museum of the region
- Catholic Church of Rrëshen
- Arbëri Wine Cellar
- Tarazh Iron Bridge
- “N’Kanu” Agrotourism
- Dodaj Tower
- “Duka” Castle
- Vali Cave

The itinerary commences from the historical center of the town of Rrëshen, where the Cultural Palace and the Historical Museum of the city are located. These two stops provide the opportunity to delve deeper into the history, ethnography, and culture of the region through various exhibits of local artifacts and accompanying explanations. Additionally, the itinerary includes a visit to the Church of Rrëshen, a monument of significant importance in this predominantly Christian region.

N’KANU



Further, the use of vehicles is required to reach **the Arbëri Wine Cellar**, where, besides acquiring knowledge about grape cultivation and processing techniques, an opportunity arises to indulge in the wines and distinctive dishes of the region. Following lunch, the journey continues towards an intriguing facet of Albanian industrial architecture: **the Tarazh Iron Bridge**, the longest railway bridge in the country, which was completed in 1989 but was never put into operation.

The next destination is the **N’Kanu** guesthouse, a quaint family-run agrotourism establishment that provides not just lodging for the night but also an opportunity to explore the nearly two-century-old **Dodaj Tower** nearby—an iconic example of Rrëshen’s unique architecture—along with a visit to the Duka Castle by the roadside.

The Mirdita Bread

In Mirdita, as well as in other parts on Northern Albania, the principal ritual offering was *the peta bread*. It was made by laying a layer of dough on the tray, then laying on minced vegetables and crushed walnut sauce, and then a second layer of dough on top. The two layers of dough were joined together, giving the dish the shape of bread. Once baked in an oven or a large baking dish, it was covered in a layer of butter and crushed walnuts. The *peta* was served to welcome guests and to celebrate important feast days, such as Christmas, New Year's, Spring Day or Saint George's Day.



The journey by vehicle continues until the beginning of the **Vali Cave** trail, which spans approximately an hour by foot and offers the opportunity to visit and explore a multitude of natural beauties: the village of Perlati; the Selita mountain range, including Mulli-Didhë-Valmor, at elevations of 1300-1500 meters above sea level; and the marvelous gorge of Urakë, which separates the latter. Vali Cave is situated on the edge of the field bearing the same name, and presents the appearance of a natural fortress with massive limestone formations. Extending approximately 90 meters in the west-east direction, the cave terminates in two exits, one of which is thought to intricately connect, through a labyrinth, to Nezirli Cave in Bruç. This connection holds archaeological and historical significance, contributing to our understanding of the antiquity of the region.

Meanwhile, the north-south width varies from 50 to 60 meters. At the center of the cave lies a vertical chimney, reaching from its surface to its depth, tightly linking the external environment with the interior of the cave. The vertical chimney has a diameter of approximately 10 to 15 meters and plunges to the surface with depths ranging between 20 to 25 meters, revealing the substantial thickness of the rock and sediment layers enveloping the cave. The rocks are organic, characterized by distinct solidity and a composition abundant in limestone, a potential singularity within the entire hillside system of the region renowned for its prevalent erodible carbonate. This distinctive feature explains the diversity of their forms and densities, sculpted over time by the erosive forces of flowing waters.



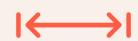
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MEMORY
AND REMEMBRANCE
ITINERARY

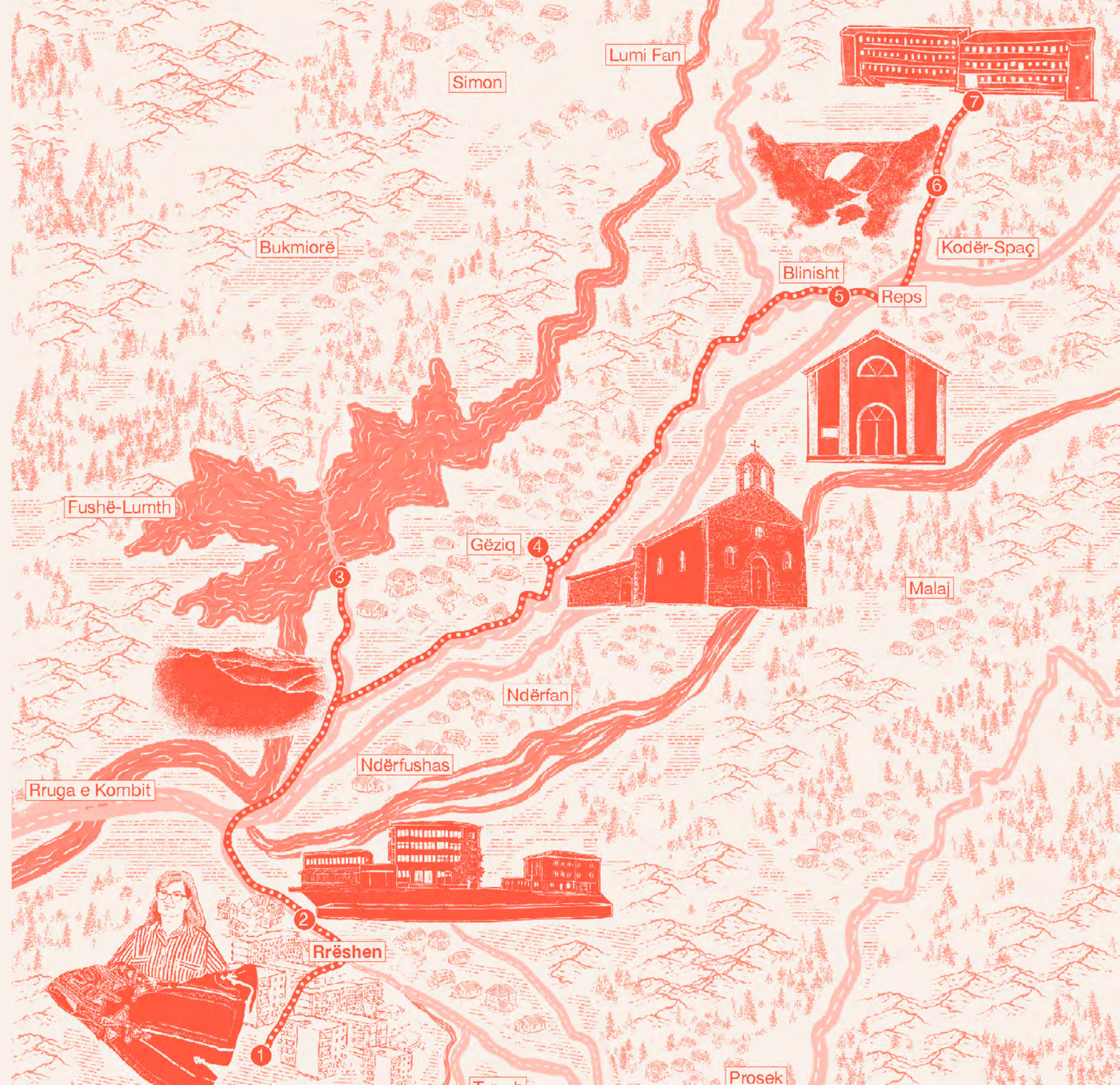


MEMORY AND REMEMBRANCE ITINERARY

- 1 Artisan Drane Fizi's workshop
- 2 Center of Rrëshen
- 3 Real Park
- 4 The church of Ndrefana (Gëzig)
- 5 Church of Shpal
- 6 The Old Bridge of Spaç
- 7 Spaç prison



Distance
42.91 km



In the 3rd itinerary, we had the opportunity to start again from the city of Rrëseni, but including artisans.

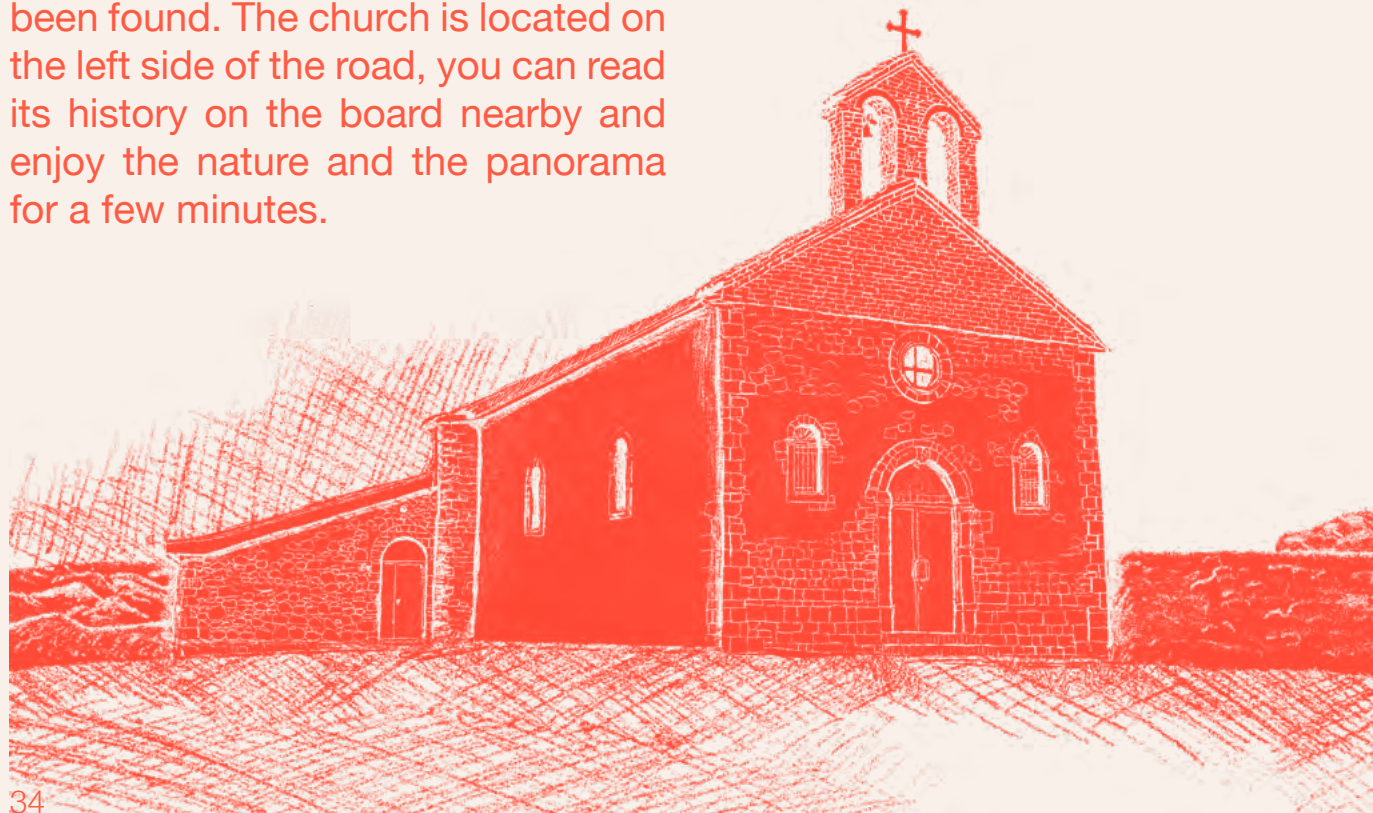
The itinerary begins with **Mrs. Drane**, who decorates clothes, produces clothes characteristic of the Mirdita area. Mrs. Drane, has been dealing with clothes all her life, she is a good connoisseur of the culture and tradition of the area. Soon she is thinking of opening her own shop so that she can have more opportunities to order, sell and in turn.

After we had the opportunity to look at these clothes, the road continues to the city center, with the square, the palace of culture and a coffee there. To continue this itinerary to the end we needed to have a car, so the suggestion is that you should definitely have a car as long as the distances are far from each other.



The journey continues to one of the restaurants in the “Real Park” area. It is a new restaurant which has just opened and offers a varied menu with local products, but which is also a relaxing environment in nature near the water dam. You can use this environment in this hotel to hang out or you can go to have lunch or dinner with friends or family.

The journey continues on the old road that once connected Kukësi and Tirana. In the village of Gëziq, the next stop is **the church of Ndrefana (Gëziq)** where residents say that the Emblem of the State of Arbër has been found. The church is located on the left side of the road, you can read its history on the board nearby and enjoy the nature and the panorama for a few minutes.



The heraldic coat of arms and the inscription of the Principality of Arbër (1190-1216) were discovered by Theodor Ippen in the church of Gëziq in 1901. The church in the photo was built on the ruins of the abbey of St. Mary, which according to the documents is destroyed by the Ottoman armies from the middle of the century. XV.

From the archaeological point of view, it has been proven that Ndrefana was for some time the main center of the Principality of Arbër.



Emblem of the Principality of Arbri, found in the Church of Geziq

After leaving the church, we continue towards the village of Shpal, where we have the opportunity to see another old church, **the Church of Shpal**. Its characteristic is that it once served as an assembly for blood reconciliation between residents. Church of Shpal (Saint Paul).

In medieval Blinishti, the center of the noble arboretum family Blinishti (13th century), was one of the most important ecclesiastical centers of Upper Albania, with the Benedictine abbey of St. Paul which, according to researchers, was the episcopal seat of the Diocese of Pulti, but also with a number of other cult objects.

St. Paul of Blinishti is mentioned in a Byzantine document of 878, as one of the most important spiritual centers of northern Albania. During the Middle Ages, Blinishti was a fortified town. Toponyms have been preserved: Town, Shkorreti castle, Preçi castle, Bazhella castle, Kodra e kalasa, etc., as traces of an early arboreal civilization. Opposite Blinishti is Bukli, where in 1963, archaeologists discovered one of the most important arboreal necropolises.



Church of Shpali

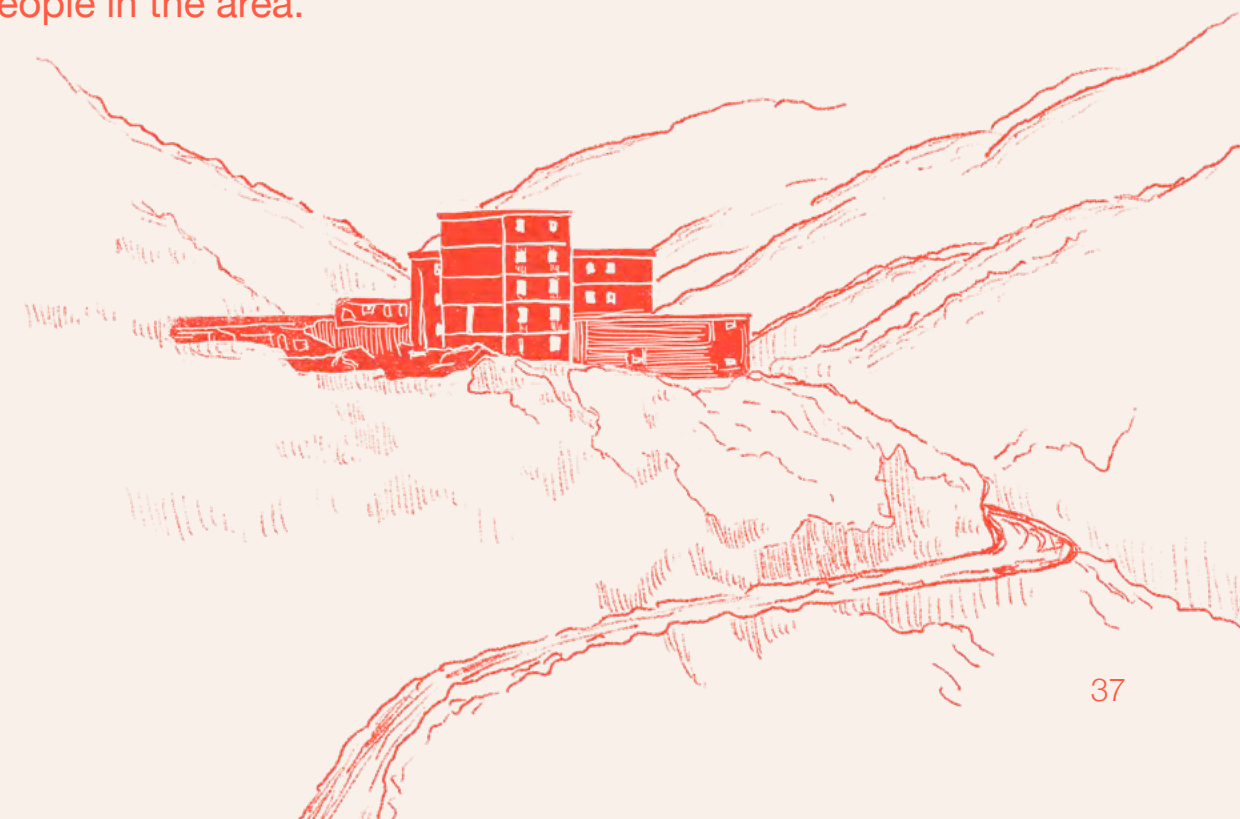


After we have left the church of Shpal, we turn to **Spaci Prison**. The road to get there is not paved, but it is a road that you can do with any car.

Spaçi Prison is a cultural heritage monument in Spac, Mirdita District, Lezha County, Albania. This monument is of the “Architecture” type, the prison was opened in 1968 and operated until 1988, and according to the data there were over 1000 prisoners. Built for the use of the Spaçi Mine where copper and pyrite were extracted. There are about 7 buildings that are part of the prison, but there are also other buildings that served as camps for prisoners, but also the premises that served as a work environment for people in the area.

It was a mining complex where not only convicts worked. It is currently in a completely destroyed state. It has a typical architecture of the communist period with regular shapes.

The prison was also the closing for this internship which we decided to call the memory internship because all the points you mentioned are not visited by local or foreign visitors but are a very important attraction not only in Mirdita but for the whole of Albania.



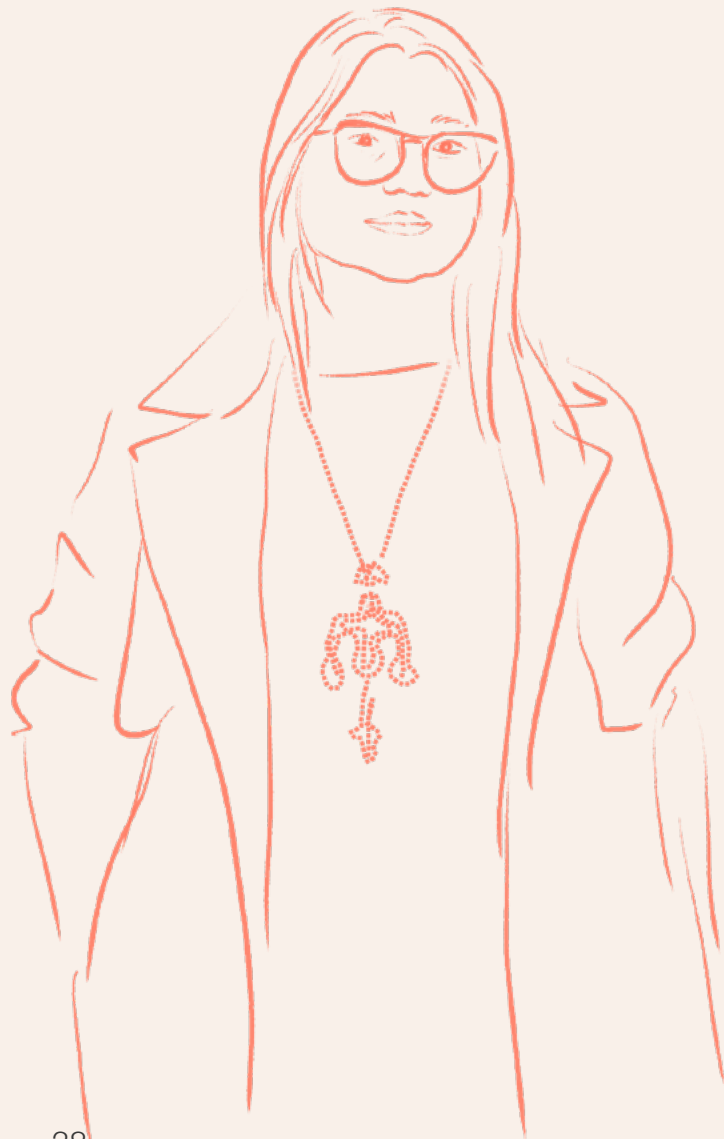
Spac Prison

THE ARTISANS OF MIRDITA

Mirela Pepkola

Originally from Dibra, but born and raised in Mirdita, Mirela has been a master of working with spears for many years. He started this journey at a very young age, inheriting it from his mother and sisters. She strongly believes that heirlooms are preserved forever and that, when made in a family environment, they can turn into a real passion. Since 2004, she has started and runs a business dedicated to the production and marketing of spear works, which have already found their way around the country and beyond.

Recently, Mirela has been involved in the project “Promotion of cultural heritage through creative and experiential tourism - CulTour” in Mirdita, where she has shared experience with experts in the field, as well as participated in various activities to perfect and promote it. even further her professional enterprise.



Drane Fizi

Drania was born and lives in Gëziq in Rrëshen, in a large family with ten brothers and sisters. She learned from her mother and sisters how to make traditional clothing of the province, a skill that required needlework and crocheting, as well as various embroideries. Secondary education with an agrarian orientation gave Drane the opportunity to know and better understand the use of medicinal plants and herbal medicines, a passion that has accompanied him throughout his life, in addition to handicrafts.

Drania makes a variety of traditional garments and products, including traditional Mirdira clothing for men and women of all ages - from baby to adult clothing - as well as girdle and pupa socks that can be used in everyday life. She also works with details of traditional clothing and various embroideries, which she mainly sells framed as souvenirs and memories from the province.



Pashkë Marku

Originally from Dibra, but born and raised in Mirdita, Mirela has been a master of working with spears for many years. He started this journey at a very young age, inheriting it from his mother and sisters. She strongly believes that heirlooms are preserved forever and that, when made in a family environment, they can turn into a real passion. Since 2004, she has started and runs a business dedicated to the production and marketing of spear works, which have already found their way around the country and beyond.

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Elida Vocaj

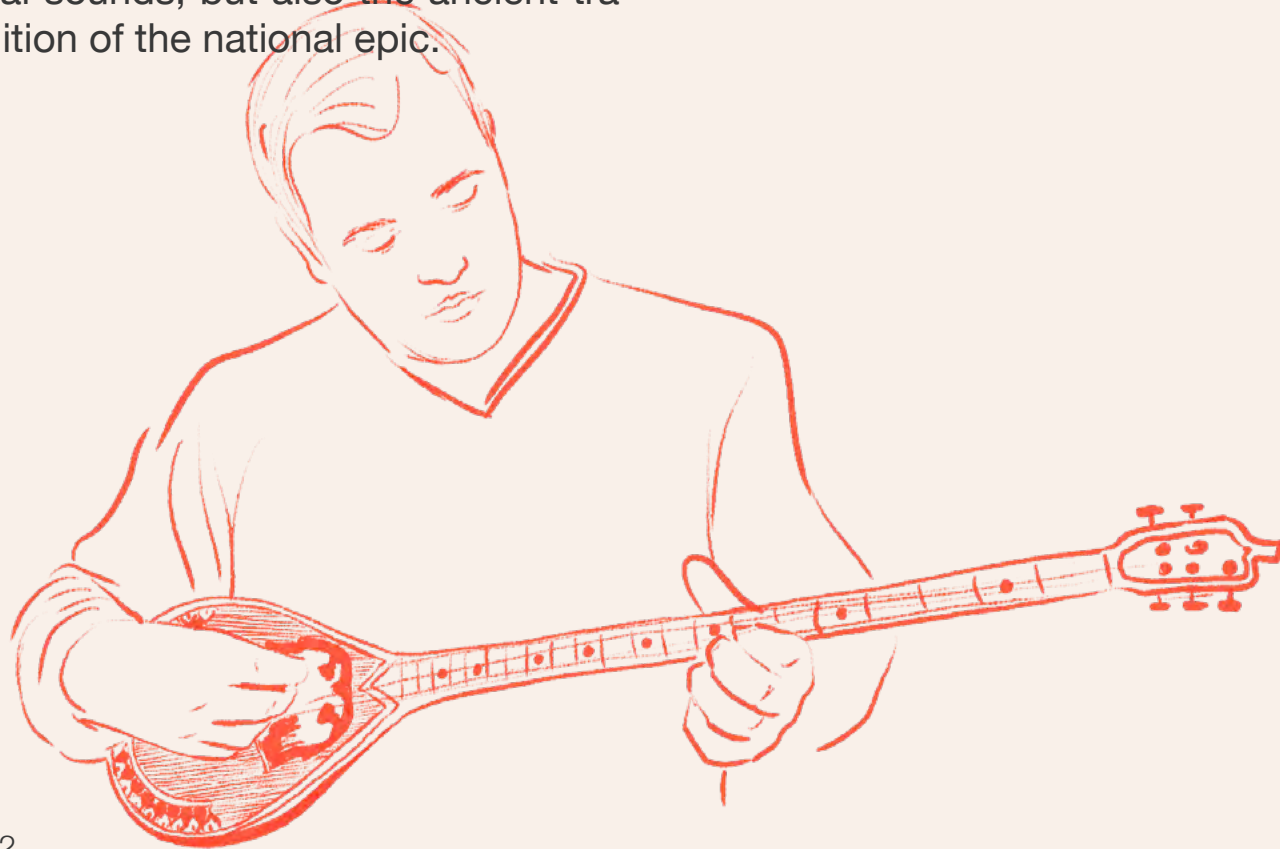
Elida’s journey with handicrafts began in her childhood, when she saw her mother and grandmother doing handicrafts in their spare time. Elida comes from an area that has an important part of the tradition of the ‘dowry’ that girls bring with them when they get married, so handicrafts are closely related to the latter. Girls were taught embroidery and knitting early so that they could create their own dowry. Therefore, embroidery was considered as a ritual that brought together the girls and women of the family.

Elida has introduced herself to this craft by creating an embroidered, personalized certificate for her son. Then the idea came to him to create a business that would deal only with making and selling such works. Her enterprise now counts eight years of activity and she does her best to, through her own example, include young people who want to dedicate themselves to this craft.



Gëzim Pershqefa

Gezim's journey in the production of couplets has started since early childhood. He received it from his father, Ndue Pershqefa and, through him, a family heritage that has its origin in the distant year 1895. The craftsmanship of the production of musical instruments attracted him to the harmony they produced and the pleasure he gave in the work of the exactness of each eye. The completion of each instrument brought back to life not only a whole world of musical sounds, but also the ancient tradition of the national epic.



Joy has turned this inherited skill into a life profession and a source of income, all while continuing to devote herself to the progress of its development, on a contemporary musical scale. For thirty years now, he has continued the production of couplets, sharks, tempered couplets, primes and couplets for children without interruption, giving his valuable contribution to the revival of the crafts of Mirdita.

Adelina Përleka

Adelina was born and raised in the town of Rrëshen. Her curiosity led her to explore the art of crafting flowers, animals, and other decorations through needlework since early childhood. Witnessing her keen interest in this craft, her family gifted her various threads and materials, an embroidery pattern, and the 'two-hundred-(lek)-fabric', as it was called back then. Adelina quickly acquired the skill and managed to recreate the patterns at a very young age. Simultaneously, at the age of six, she acquired the skill of knitting and successfully fashioned her first sweater for her newborn brother, before reaching the age of nine.

Adelina harbors an additional passion for recycling, which intricately intertwined with her craftsmanship over the course of her career. This inclination arose from the desire to dress tastefully but affordably, and it ultimately evolved into a leisurely pursuit. In 2022, she participated in the 'Eco Fashion Show Albania,' skillfully blending both her passions to craft captivating and sustainable apparel suitable for everyday wear.



Anila Vokri

Anila was born in Kthella i Eper and lives in the town of Rreshen. Her journey with handicrafts started very early, comparing her mother's needlework. Hand-in-hand, she started taking the first lessons and then embroidering and crocheting, skills she did together with some other friends.

Since 2009, Anila has been collaborating with 'Caritas - Mirdita', in the context of the craft promotion program through the exchange of experiences with Austrian experts. She works with spears and crochet, as well as making shajaku works - mostly winter dolls - crafts which she has perfected and enriched with new contemporary models, which are inspired by traditional production techniques.



Gjelina Lika

Gjelina was born in a noble family where the importance of preserving and maintaining the skills of tradition was appreciated. Although her father was a master of the production of couplets and other traditional musical instruments of the province, she was kneaded from a very young age with a passion for embroidery and work with spears and crochet - all these skills necessary for the manufacture of traditional clothing. of Mirdita - from her mother, who at that time wove carpets and vaults on a loom.

Although already retired, Gjelina continues to do her crochet and needlework, as well as sewing traditional clothing, in order to pass on the tradition and traditional techniques of work to the next generations. She hopes that her work will serve as an example and as a basis on which a sustainable and long-term craft model can be created.



The “Cultour Mirdita” project aims to promote cultural heritage and revitalize the craft scene in Mirdita through creative tourism and experiential tourism.

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