

TRANSDANUBE TRAVEL STORIES

Returning to the Last Danube: nature and mankind

Trail # 2 (by Eszter Buchert, coordinator; Zsófia Joó, copywriter)

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Introduction

In the beginning was the Danube. Being Europe's most significant river, it nourished, protected, enriched and connected different groups of people as early as in prehistoric times, later providing bonds between countries and nations. Its life-sustaining freshwater has served as a rich source of fish and shelter, with fertile lands, fruit-laden orchards and shady groves providing ample building materials along the shore. The mighty river runs a total of 2880 kilometres; its east-west course connects the two sides of the continent and once traversed the vast Roman Empire. An indispensable and profoundly impactful part of everyday life in countless regions, it has always been a steadfast European symbol of grandness, even infinity. Napoléon Bonaparte rather reverently referred to the Danube as "*Le roi des fleuves de l'Europe*", the king of Europe's rivers.

The Danube is a vital life source for the millions who inhabit its shores. To them, it means livelihood, homeland, traditions, a place to rest, reeds filled with singing birds – a peaceful, tranquil respite from the hustle and bustle of day-to-day life. For millennia, the river has inspired artists, provided a secure trade route for merchants, and given rise to an improbably diverse range of culinary fish dishes. For whoever has been in some sort of contact with the Danube, it ultimately bears a unique, personal meaning and a multitude of bonds.

Adding to its cultural, economic, and historic importance is its incredible impact on the surrounding natural terrain. The Danube is a multifaceted, eternal, ever-renewing entity. Sovereign and seemingly inevitable, its currents have the power to transform rocks, earth, and sand to its own shape. Much more than just a body of water, it encompasses mountain rapids, lowland river stretches with floodlands, hundreds of islands and thousands of plant and animal species. Its waters are home to the great sturgeon, one of the largest river-dwelling fish on earth; its shores are where Europe's oldest gallery forests are found, its delta is where huge colonies of pelicans nest, and its oxbows serve as hunting grounds for white egrets and black storks.

Despite a great deal of human interference, sections of the Danube river system remain virtually untouched, its ancient natural systems intact. Dozens of protected species have found a last refuge in its ecosystem. So why, one wonders, has it lost so much of its appeal as a tourist attraction? It's been years since the Danube was among the most sought-after destinations in Europe, say nothing of the world, although it still has tremendous potential.

Proceeding along the river in the direction of its flow, the Danube's upper and middle sections reveal a great number of opportunities for active recreation in unrivalled natural surroundings. Take the upper section of the river, for example, near the source of the Danube in Germany. Two headwater streams known as the Breg and Brigach converge near the town of Donaueschingen, where visitors can marvel at and explore

the magical slopes of the Black Forest. Somewhat further down the river is the Danube Riparian Forest corridor between Neuburg and Ingolstadt, a birdwatcher's paradise.

Continue along the river across the Austrian border and you will find the breathtaking Donauschlinge bend, followed by the Donau-Auen National Park near Vienna, where curious travellers can learn about the fiercely-protected, last remaining major wetlands environment in Central Europe. Further along, in the Hungarian section, is Szigetköz, the island plain noted for its low-lying watery flatland and shallow shoals, but also the Danube-bend separating the Börzsöny and Visegrádi mountain ranges, and Gemenc, the adventurous, mostly forest-covered floodplain – all of which allow the visitor to submerge in the highly diverse realm of the river.

Other thrill-seekers might be tempted by what lies further ahead, in the legendary, pristine and – for many of us – unknown wilderness in the lower Danube sections across the Hungarian-Croatian-Serbian border.

The sprawling green oasis along these middle sections of the river offers a blissful haven for water birds and fishes. This extremely disparate range of habitats and vegetation including marshlands, floodplain forests and wet meadows shifts with the flood dynamics in Béda-Karapanca in Hungary, Kopački Rit in eastern Croatia and Gornje Podunavlje, a large protected area of wetland in the northwest of Serbia. At the same time the Iron Gates, a monumental gorge on the river between Serbia and Romania, offers visitors a breathtaking reminder of the ongoing grapping between humankind versus nature and carries a dubious message. Other marvels include Persina, an island-filled realm almost completely unknown to tourists, and the Danube Delta. The majestic finale of the river's nearly 3000 km long journey is a fantastic, 21-thousand-hectare wetland paradise. Visitors come to experience the largest remaining natural wetland's unparalleled richness and diversity, to immerse themselves in the transient essence of Europe's last unspoilt wilderness.

Reasons for the Danube's current lack of local and European tourism are complex and call for more analysis than we can offer here. However, one important aspect is a shift in contemporary pleasure-seeking. Modern-day travellers seem more inclined to pursue exotic destinations, luxury hotels and bustling cities to wilderness, to choose the adrenaline rush of urban parties over adventures on the languid river flowing just a step away. While many know of the existence of the Danube, few know very much about it; and even fewer know about the Last Danube.

I. The Last Danube

The lower section of the Danube, in other words the reach from Hungary's southern border with Serbia and Croatia to the delta, holds what so many seek in remote Asian mountains or hot African sands: the promise of a return to, and reconnection with, unspoilt nature and with ourselves.

The Last Danube represents an end in two senses of the word. It is the final section of a massive river system connecting ten countries, and yet it also constitutes the last remnants of a majestic wetland wilderness that once covered half the continent. Its largely wild, unspoilt nature is unlike anything one can find in Western Europe or along the middle and upper sections of the Danube, where human development and activity have had a dramatic, ecosystem-altering effect. A visit to this romantic, pristine world is a must for city-dwellers longing for tranquillity and regeneration, a spirit-boosting retreat.

Any journey along the Last Danube involves a great deal of boundary-crossing, and not only in terms of geography. Travellers to this place find themselves transcending their own limits as well, moving beyond fixed mindsets and predetermined concepts of the world. The journey starts no later than your choice of destination and plans for getting there: with the decision to explore a watery wilderness as opposed to another decadent, empty, consumer-driven attraction. The moment you opt for regional transport over a globe-circling flight, browse rural tourist accommodations in lieu of five-star hotels, choose hiking boots and a backpack over high heels and a trolley bag, you have already transcended your own, engrained boundaries. So many details, adventures and experiences beckon just beyond the confines of 21st-century life, and all lie squarely beyond the comfort zones of most city-dwelling people. These experiences are opportunities for personal growth, a chance to step out of an often alienating, largely technology-driven world.

The Last Danube is a call to slow down. Those of us accustomed to a globalised, non-stop, plastic-producing reality have only hidden, rare, special experiences to gain, the simple pleasures of times past. This is an experience that confounds usual concepts of luxury, giving perpetually stressed contemporary people a way to comfortably and immersively enjoy freedom, find balance, and relish the sights, smells and feel of natural treasures. Those familiar with the burn-out and apathy of the Internet Age can reconnect with nature, explore a wilderness with the power to re-establish that ever-longed-for – but so rarely attained – sense of emotional and mental well-being.

Yet in order to wholly understand what this invaluable region has to offer we also have to look at the relationship between man – the motivating factor in tourism – and the river. We must understand the kinds of diversions and pleasures that 21st-century people seek as well as their desire to return to nature.

New proximity

In the beginning was the Danube – it is not without reason that this rephrased Biblical reference found its way into our introduction. The mighty river Danube is the lifeblood of this region's wildlife and history. Every life form and species, every habitat in its system has its source in the river itself. Prehistoric humans settled near it with good cause: the Danube offered protection. It meant a source of nourishment and drinking

water, a sustainable way of life and a reliable waterway, but it also doubled as a line of natural defence, a buffer against enemy attacks and natural disasters.

This deeply entwined way of life and connection to the river continued as civilisation developed and is still evident today, with some substantial changes. With it came the advent of agriculture and domesticated animal husbandry, hydro-powered mills, innovations in trade, warfare and architecture. Where the processes of nature remained dangerous or unpredictable, humans transformed the river and floodplain to better meet their needs.

Human beings and the river coexisted peacefully for centuries. While our ancestors had a healthy respect for nature, technical developments and a growing nothing-is-ever-enough mindset have fuelled our appetite for possession, our need to intervene in nature and its processes for our own gain.

Twenty-first century city-dwellers along the Danube have simultaneously grown **too close** to the river and **further from it than ever before**. Never have they been so disconnected. Suddenly a hillside view of the river no longer suffices; anyone who could afford it claimed a piece of the river for him- or herself. Houses, villas, bars, docks and industrial structures have engulfed every metre of the river's shores, with some architecture boasting humanity's perceived sense of superiority directly on the water rather than simply next to it. This false sense of confidence has brought a rush of problems in its wake, from flushed-away homes to ruined existences, flooded roads and railway lines, prompting even more radical, drastic measures. Humans felt the last word was theirs, and aimed to prove it.

Sophisticated river regulation measures in the form of dams, dykes, sluices and power stations, a dramatic reduction of floodplains and forcing the Danube into a concrete bed have relegated this watery marvel to a simple urban construction. Most of its wilderness including the majority of its native wildlife has been eradicated, effectively decimating nature that dominated the land for millions of years. The remaining water bodies have been ransacked and violated, made little more than canals in many cases. Although the colours, ripples and sounds of the water continue to please eyes and ears, these sections are seldom a popular spot for strolls or picnicking. Most city laws and regulations favour commerce, mass tourism and urban development above all.

The river is a shadow of its former, majestic self, and few see its value for recreation or even nature. It is often perceived as just another body of water to be crossed, an impediment to the flow of urban traffic. Its overdeveloped shores have no remaining space; river-goers must content themselves with pontoons or barges when it comes to such simple pleasures as dangling a foot into the gentle waves or simply relaxing in their presence.

Ask the average Danubian city-dweller what kind of connection he or she has with the river and you are likely to hear something rather neutral. Many perceive the river as

part of the city but nothing more, an element with no particular appeal nor any special connection to nature, for that matter. Few would describe it as a landmark of substance, a go-to attraction, a source of any kind of pleasure or recreation. Tell that same person about the magical wilderness and unparalleled beauty of the lower stretch of the Danube and their response will probably be one of surprise. Few people – even those living along the Danube’s upper sections – are aware of the Lower Danube’s natural splendour and tourism potential.

New proximity has a twofold meaning. While on the one hand it draws attention to a certain sense of alienation, an unfortunate outcome of overzealous river regulation and exploitation, it also points to a more positive future outlook. It sheds light on a means by which tired, over-stressed modern individuals can find their way back to nature, and by doing so come to recognise the urgency of preserving these last pockets of untouched wilderness.

Over-worked, over-extended *Homo urbanus* (urban man) urgently needs a place to slow-down and regenerate, to recoup the connection to a life-giving river. And yet for all its downsides, this lack of connection is not entirely negative. It could also be seen as an opportunity to re-establish and redefine this new connection on different grounds. Thus, the more exploitation-focused, suppressive approach could give rise to a more sustainable, humble attitude whereby man admits that preserving the last bit of wilderness of the Last Danube goes hand in hand with a human-scale, sustainable type of recreation in nature. The Last Danube is an exquisite location and the last opportunity to foster this new type of consciousness, this novel approach to the wild. In it lies the hope that Europe might yet rediscover that “biotic highway”, that mighty channel connecting the lives, cultures, economies and futures of the entire region. An ideal scenario in which as many people as possible look to the riparian wilderness for adventure and recreation – and by doing so ensure the survival and protection of its habitats, iconic sights and as-yet-unexplored areas along the lower sections of the river – can only be attained via humble, respectful reconnection with the Danube’s wildlife and other natural treasures.

Tourist attractions of the Last Danube such as the vast, rich floodplains stretching across political borders like Béda and Karapanca in Hungary, Kopački Rit in Croatia, Gornje Podunavje in Serbia, the breathtaking Iron Gates, the infinite island world and captivating wildlife of the Danube Delta are all unique, if vulnerable locations. Sustainable tourism in this case could mean visits to specific points of interest that can be accessed by means of local community transportation, with a focus on active recreational activity programmes, local accommodation and restaurants offering an answer to urban visitors’ unspoken questions. City-dwellers want to know how to return to themselves, so to speak, how to feel a stronger sense of connection to the Earth and nature and take it to a new level, how to find peace and slow the pace of life, restore their emotional well-being.

Return to nature and to ourselves

Recent decades have seen a number of social and economic changes (scientific-technological developments, expanding human horizons, and an accelerating consumer lifestyle), many of which have taken a toll on human physical health and overall well-being. The solution? The same “revolutionary” one that our ancient ancestors knew all along, with the research to support it: many of these harms can be offset by a return to nature, an encounter with the wild. Fresh air fuels both the body and the mind; sounds, shapes, scents and colours encountered in nature are tranquillizing, restorative, and energy-boosting. These experiences have a positive, regenerative effect on humankind, body and soul.

One thing is clear: man is a part of nature, man *is* nature, not an outside observer. It is only in recent centuries that this fundamental, millennia-old sense of oneness has fallen by the wayside. This alienation from nature – along with reduced opportunities to interface with the few remaining bits of nature we have left – has contributed strongly to rising stress levels, reduced concentration, caused creativity and motivation to lag, and sometimes come hand in hand with a rise in mental and physical disorders. The capitalist treadmill that is our modern, accelerated and globalised world – coupled with its focus on earning money, climbing career ladders and acquiring possessions – can lead to burn-out, anxiety, sometimes even significant psychological disorders that can be observed in every nation, social class and demographic group. This overheated pace leaves people with almost no time to relax and regenerate, which is why it is no wonder that fewer and fewer people know what true, holistic rest and relaxation even mean anymore.

Few would deny that an outdoor stroll causes stress levels to drop. Even a simple walk outside can be an inevitable energy boost, offering an escape from the everyday grind. Joggers report feeling fresher after a short run, a rebound of creativity and mental agility. Outdoor activity can restore a sense of calm and balance, make a person able to relate to his or her environment in a more positive, focused way. We might also feel more emotionally and mentally present outdoors, in our natural environment, than at any other time.

Luckily, more and more city-dwellers seem to be consciously seeking out a reconnection with nature. This desire to re-live, re-discover or re-establish the ancient human-nature bond is far from exclusive to eco-tourists; it appears to be a larger, socially-driven need felt by a range of different kinds of people – a fact that speaks to Lower Danube’s many untapped possibilities and substantial tourism potential.

More and more people are looking for ways to escape and slow down, and yet few have even the faintest idea of where to start. Despite the skyrocketing number of exotic nature tourism destinations around the world, the wetland wilderness along the lower part of Europe’s second biggest river seems completely off the radar. The vast majority

of tourists are oblivious to the Last Danube and the many fascinating sights it has to offer.

The experience of hiking, cycling, pilgrimaging or kayaking in Europe's last wetland wilderness stands in stark contrast to empty, fast-paced weekdays. The Lower Danube can be a welcome relief from the artificial, bustling impulses of city life, offering an unparalleled, one-of-a-kind encounter with nature that is every bit as tranquil, harmonious, and enriching as the city is hectic.

Visitors to this area can enjoy such simple, yet unforgettable experiences as dining leisurely on a traditional fish dish, climbing a hill, dangling their feet in the cool waters of the river, relaxing on the banks and counting passing clouds overhead, enjoying the sound of lapping waves and the splashing of a stream. The Last Danube is a chance to slow down, unwind, and take in your surroundings using each of your five senses.

The Last Danube on two wheels

The best of the Lower Danube comes to those in hiking boots or paddling a boat or kayak, where the slow pace and prolonged contact with nature reveal life at its fullest. That said, boating and exploring on foot aren't the only ways to experience this incredible environment. Although conquering the Last Danube on two wheels takes serious determination, anyone who does it will have plenty of glorious adventures to show for it. The EuroVelo bicycle route is definitely worth a try, whether you're one of the ever-growing number of flashpackers (i.e. travellers in their 30s and 40s who were born to travel, actively seek out authentic encounters and have the budget to experience the best every destination has to offer), organising a family trip or, in some river sections, an older cyclist eager to enjoy the sights.

The bicycle is a wonderful, noble and sustainable tool that deserves to be used in worthy surroundings such as the beautiful landscapes of the Last Danube. Cyclists have far more opportunity to listen to, absorb, and feel their environment than those travelling by car. Navigating a bicycle is a matter of slowness, passing lightly through verdant paths bursting with life. It involves the constant, mindful stringing-together of impressions and an awareness of your route, an interweaving of precious memories. It means taking the time to enjoy a coffee at a local bar, booking accommodation at a village bed and breakfast, sampling the local cuisine, resting for a few hours, allowing your senses to be overcome with the river's smells and sounds, its simple pleasures.

All that takes time and patience, for the Danube is a massive, quiet, slow-moving entity. It can take a while to adjust to that languid pace, to appreciate its slow flow rather than fight it. That and more makes it all but impossible to really travel the river in a motorised package tour, where quickly-passed kilometres are often lost ones – rushed encounters that are hard to recall in retrospect. For this reason and more, many see the bicycle as the key to adventure and one of the best ways to connect with the Danube and its environs.

Danubian encounters

The Lower Danube is a place unlike any other when it comes to communing with nature and to active recreation, but also for up-close experiences of natural forces and processes. Unlike fully-booked hotels and overcrowded beach resorts, the Last Danube and the wildlife of this living river is something that will never lose its appeal and that more and more people will want to discover and experience.

Yet each encounter is different. The Last Danube can never be experienced the same way twice, which might explain why every single encounter with it feels so valuable. Travellers soon discover that the river will never be the same again.

Reasons for this have to do with much more than the succession of seasons; they involve the magic of a changing wilderness, the ever-evolving, ever-transforming flux and flow of a mighty river, connecting everything. Seemingly endless reed beds, disappearing and reappearing islets, the sandy and gravelly ground on the outskirts of settlements look different every time, bring fresh sights, new revelations and unique sounds to every single visitor. A traveller could return to the exact same spot year after year; he or she would find nothing of the permanence evoked by big-city concrete or stone edifices, only playful transience, tricks of nature.

But how could a small pixel remain static if the larger view of the Last Danube as a whole shows a much more varied picture? The nature in the Danube's lower reaches is incomparably varied – a diversity and richness mirrored by the multitude of economies, cultures, art traditions, and ethnicities along its shores.

This wetland wilderness with its vast stretches of untouched landscape, abundant rare plant and animal species, astonishing array of habitats and potential experiences, might well be a grandiose **symphony** performed by a mighty orchestra. Pulsating with life, the monumental musical piece would tell of rapid streams finding their way down a mountain, of a young river winding between rocks, cutting through slopes, of mind-blowing depths and the pure, elemental force rushing across artificial dams and sluices. It speaks of cool shade, ancient trees weeping above waves, the endless sunlit peace of reeds brightened with birdsong, of the motionless charm of swampy oxbows, hundreds of animals and plants.

The symphony that is the Danube's lower reach tells of the last remaining wetland wilderness – a wilderness with bewitching qualities, one that can easily charm if given a chance. It strikes visitors with its power, liberates them from the dull weekday grind, transports them to a simpler, more honest world where human beings once lived in nature as part of nature, in symbiosis with this life-giving river.

Of course, not even the lower reaches of the river have remained completely untouched. Traces of human impact appear almost everywhere. At some places,

especially near cities by the river, the Danube flows past monstrous docks, industrial plants or agricultural lands. The remaining, valuable habitats are sometimes replaced by hybrid tree plantations, roads or crumbling ruins.

At the same time, the Last Danube, as we move towards its estuary, sings of ever-changing, roaring floods with different sounds, delicious crops in fertile lands along the riverbank, fish teeming in slow-flowing bends ... all the value, the abundance the river has offered and continues to provide to this day.

Focusing more on the comparison of the Last Danube's tales to nature's music – a monumental orchestral concert –, visitors can encounter an immersive, spiritual masterpiece, and can experience it with all their senses. To follow the course of the river is to witness the unfolding of three movements, each complete in its entirety yet characteristically different, all merging into a perfect symphony. These melodies perfectly complement each other, showing multiple, different facets of this vibrant, blue-and-green giant at once. After the quiet, mysterious and softer *andante* of the heart of the Danube, it changes abruptly to a rapid, swift *presto* voice at the Iron Gates. It then reaches the mighty Delta, where its tones dissolve in a flashy and ornate, superior *menuetto* climax, reaching towards infinity.

If, however, the majestic river is analysed with the eyes of the naturalist, one will find similarly diverse, yet obviously cohesive habitats along its terminal section. After the adventurous marshes, forests and floodplain meadows of Kopački Rit, often called the heart of the Danube, it is the Iron Gates region that demands attention with its high-rising cliffs of the gorges separating the Carpathian Basin from the Balkan Peninsula, followed by a gradually slowing river section restrained by hydroelectric power stations. It first reaches Persina, then extends a fan of tributaries to the Black Sea, creating millions of small islands before finally depositing its load in the estuary area – a spectacular haven for plant and animal species.

Representing unrepeatable, unique diversity as far as the eye can see, the Last Danube really is the alpha and omega of the last remaining European wetland habitats.

II. Jewels of the Last Danube

Travellers seeking a way back to nature have three key destinations to look forward to, each of which offers an astonishing lesson on the immense power and significance of the river. While **the Heart of the Danube** constitutes a highly demonstrative master example of how man has co-existed with nature for centuries, **the Iron Gates** illustrates the constant, incomprehensibly forceful clash of water and rocks, those two elemental materials. Finally, **the Danube Delta** region reveals the area's former natural state in its most complete form – the world before humans, now mostly lost.

And so the Last Danube speaks to everyone. In it, we find a slower, more peaceful world – a glimpse of nature's untouched face with enough attractions, sights and adventures

to rival any mass-tourist hub. It speaks of moderation and contemplation instead of uncontrolled consumption, human scale instead of globalism. Visitors come to appreciate slow processes over rapid ones, learn to rediscover themselves as opposed to chasing new stimuli.

The heart of the Danube – Gemenc – Béda-Karapanca – Kopački Rit – Gornje Podunavlje

Almost right at the geometric halfway point of Danube's nearly 3000 km long journey, around the entrance to the middle section of the river, lies a vast, continuous floodplain. It is shared by three countries: in Hungary Croatia and Serbia.

As a result of slow, considerate tourism development in recent years – preserving the full authenticity of the area – visitors to the Heart of the Danube can experience it on foot, cycling, or with a short boat ride. Given the relatively high number of public transport options and rural tourist accommodation possibilities, travellers wishing to return to nature can experience the stunning wildlife of Kopački Rit and Gornje Podunavlje comfortably, at their own pace, accompanied by local guides, whilst also learning about local, ancient, natural crafts and traditions.

The once-agricultural landscape began to change around the time of the Ottoman Empire, giving rise to the extensive, pristine floodplains and forests we see today. Kopács Meadow (Kopački Rit) – the real natural treasure of the region, now a strictly-protected preserve – retains the untouched, ancient appearance of the Last Danube. One of Europe's best-preserved natural floodplains promises an adventure, a journey through time that no self-seeking mass-tourist destination can offer. Visitors can choose to immerse themselves in this world of seemingly endless reeds on foot, cycling or even on water; it holds endless potential for colourful, exciting, unique experiences for individual travellers and family holidaymakers alike.

Clash of forces – the Iron Gates

The magnitude of the most famous Danubian gorges is simply impossible to explain – it has to be witnessed, experienced in person. The Iron Gates are the most amazing, most picturesque section of the Lower Danube. At the same time, they are also the most obvious evidence of the infinite clash of powers between water and rock, and the force with which water has carved a way for itself. Austere and striking with steep-walled, towering cliffs at both sides of the river, they are nothing less than awe-inspiring – a spectacular masterpiece of nature. While the Romanian side of the gorge is known as Iron Gates Natural Park, the Serbian part is known as Đerdap National Park. A Romanian-Yugoslavian hydroelectric power plant was built here in the 1970s and '80s, effectively "taming" the Danube. The development raised the water level, creating the beautiful artificial Lake Đerdap. The grand project had a devastating impact on the local fauna and flora.

The Danube and its surrounding nature have doubtlessly paid a huge price for rigorous river regulation efforts. Nevertheless, it still has substantial natural and human-made sights to offer, even beyond the breath-taking geographic conditions of the gorge and the enormous size of the hydroelectric power station, both of which make this mysterious region a noteworthy or must-see destination.

A true nature show – Persina and the Danube Delta

The Last Danube, as if only intentionally, saves its dizzying finale for the very end, where a majestic delta meets an enormous island world, an area braced by a forking river with millions of tributaries leading to the sea. The Danube's estuary is the ultimate nature show, a place teeming with life where the diverse essence of the wetland wilderness, some of it still untouched, can be admired in its entirety.

Only few know that the area boasts not one, but two special destinations, both abounding with wild islands begging to be explored. Backpackers and cyclists would be loath to skip the Bulgarian section, a lesser-known but dazzling part of the river inhabited by a rich variety of protected birds and fish species. Exceptional cycling routes include the one along Rusenski Lom, the Danube's last major right tributary before it meets the Black Sea. Rusenski Lom Nature Park is a veritable treasure trove of stunning attractions.

This unparalleled show of nature peaks as the river finally reaches the Black Sea. The Danube Delta, a vast expanse of water and reeds, is a spectacular place of breathtaking biodiversity – a world of peace and mystery teeming with untold life-forms. It is here that the monumental orchestra concert crescendos, where all themes collide into a single, fantastic final symphony trumpeting the majesty of nature. This is the Danube untouched by the rhythms of the modern world, a place where time abides other rules. Its calm and serenity are nothing short of awe-inspiring, an experience not to be missed.

III. Opportunities for sustainable nature tourism

The Last Danube holds tremendous tourism potential, and its natural treasures will doubtlessly delight any hikers or holidaymakers who are receptive to them. While major plans and concepts designed to tap this potential are truly justified, the more important goal is to protect and preserve the exceptional habitat along the lower reaches of the Danube – and to facilitate what might, unfortunately, be our chance to experience it.

Mass tourism and consumer-driven holiday making have had an incredibly negative impact on places around the world and typically come with a huge ecological footprint. Still, there is no reason to expect that the fate of popular destinations drained of their uniqueness, originality and character, and void precisely because of their uniformed

infrastructures and plastic clichés, is one that the Last Danube will have to share. After all, there are other, increasingly popular ways that even large numbers of people can explore the wilderness while preserving the area's largely unspoilt state.

Dynamic trends surrounding ecotourism, slow-living and mindfulness have created the perfect framework for positioning the Last Danube's natural treasures and underscoring their appeal. Holidays and tourist excursions relying on local resources, local transport, small businesses and village accommodation hold inevitable appeal for those interested in these mindful, eco-aware movements and will not harm the region's many sights. The area need not succumb to the dark side of contemporary mass tourism.

Enabling an opportunity to re-consider and reinforce our relationship with nature – not to mention building a sustainable nature-tourism concept – would considerably contribute to the physical and psychological well-being of humans. It is also the only way to prevent rampant exploitation of the region.

The danger is real. If infrastructure development and large-scale service and hotel investments are allowed at the outset, then those few remaining wilderness destinations – the essence and soul of the Last Danube, still largely unmolested and currently only accessible with meticulous planning – will soon disappear. New proximity means cultivating a gentle, respectful, caring type of tourism that protects natural values.

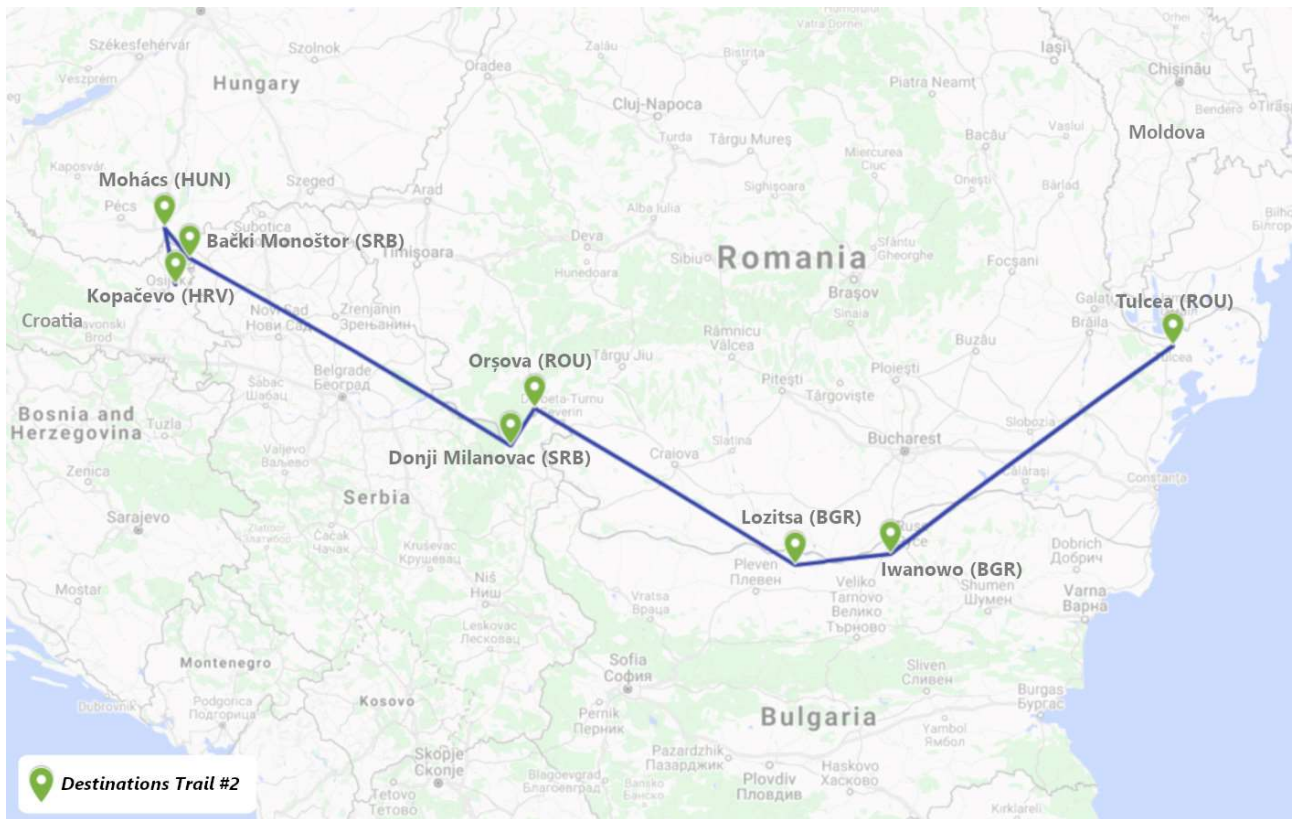
Enabling access to the Last Danube's wildlife and natural treasures also provides an excellent opportunity to shape tourist attitudes. In contrast to the now typical tourist approach – one that involves wanting to instantly see, live and experience everything, in all its splendour, at the touch of a button – it presents an alternative form of exploration and discovery based on patience, humility and acceptance.

Nature is not a robot, not a zoo, and certainly not a static exhibition. The dazzling snapshots seen on social media platforms, brochures and programme guides take many days, weeks or months of work to create. One can hardly expect every individual visitor to be able to see what promotional images show on a single visit while also avoiding mud, insects, obstructive vegetation and poor weather.

Yet with proper education and expectations management, it is possible to emphasise the uniqueness and unrepeatability of such encounters with nature and the sheer grandiosity of the Last Danube's thousand faces and constant changes, or even to help create demand for them. In a world where virtually every individual is seeking something special and unparalleled, the value of one-of-a-kind, personal, intimate encounters and experiences could very well generate tourism in the entire region. Slow-paced tourism that enhances personal well-being, enables a true understanding of and full immersion in nature could ultimately satisfy a deep-seated, critical human need.

The Last Danube wilderness talks to everyone, tells her stories to anyone willing to listen. She says different things, in different ways, every time – and that is precisely what makes her so incredibly appealing.

IV. APPENDIX – trail destinations & points of interest



THE HEART OF THE DANUBE

A pristine wetland, treasure-trove of undulating reeds and vibrant natural life: the unique, romantic world of Kopački Rit (HR)

White Water-Lily Boardwalk & Interactive Exhibition

Curious nature-lovers eager to explore the wetland wilderness have several options here. The trail features educational signage with images and descriptions of plants, animals and information about the wetland habitat, enriching one's experience of the wetland eco-system.

Sakadaš tourist dock

Those eager to get to know the true, breathtaking wilderness of Kopački Rit are advised to take a water route instead. Docked on Sakadaš Lake is a silent electric tourist boat ready to guide visitors to the very heart of the Danube. The trip includes a slow glide through the “New Canal”, past islands with a large cormorant colony. Kopački Rit is known for its bare trees full of cormorant nests.

Cycling in Kopački Rit Nature Park

This beautiful, 30-kilometre-long cycle route starts at Kopački Rit Visitor Centre and continues through one of the most verdant forests and striking river settings in all of Croatia.

Tikveš Castle Complex

It would be a shame to visit Kopački Rit without learning something of the area's history, particularly that of Tikveš Castle. Locals refer to the residence as "Tito's castle" on account of the late, former Yugoslav president Josip Broz, commonly known as Tito. The palace grounds were reputedly one of Tito's favourite hunting spots. A significant cult of personality developed around Tito, and locals take pride in Tito's visits to the area.

Educational trail "Stari brijest" (Old Elm)

Not far from the castle is the "Stari brijest" educational trail, named after a 300-year-old elm tree. Its respectable lifespan far surpasses that of any other elm tree in this forest or any other in the area.

Village Kopačevo

Kopačevo, a village located at the edge of Kopački Rit Nature Park, lights up the Baranja region in early autumn. The village's traditional Fishermen's Days in mid-September are the most visited September tourist event in the area.

Ethno-village Karanac

Karanac has an ancient feel – every house has its own history and unique story, one that involves a gradual passing from generation to generation. Its unique way of life has been kept far away from the hustle and bustle of urban life. Those on the lookout for slow, sustainable experiences are advised to eat here, go for a ride in the village's original country carriage and stay in one of its restful, authentically decorated rooms.

Gornje Podunavlje (SRB)

The "Gornje Podunavlje", "Bagremara", "Obedska Bara", "Koviljsko-Petrovaradinski Rit" and "Deliblatska Peščara" nature reserves are intact natural beauties and a testament to our ability to keep natural treasures for future generations. A visit to one of these protected areas is a welcome reprieve from city life, an opportunity to spend active quality time in nature.

Monsters at the heart of the Danube: the legendary Busó Parade (HU)

Visitors admiring unique natural treasures in the lower part of the river might want to head across the border to Hungary for a day or two. This cultural attraction is an absolute must-see.

Busó Parade – Busó tradition – Busó Yard

The Busó Parade or 'Busójárás' is a world-famous folk celebration of the Šokac people in the town of Mohács, and dates back to the 18th century. According to legend, Šokac

men fleeing the plunder and destruction of Ottoman troops abandoned Mohács to live on the moorland of Mohács Island instead. Returning to town at night, they crossed the Danube by boat and – dressed in terrifying masks and making as much noise as possible with instruments – drove the Ottoman soldiers from town. Though the procession itself is traditionally held in February, tourists visiting Mohács at other times can visit Busóudvar, a cultural centre devoted to the centuries-old carnival tradition. The museum offers a taste of the parade’s unique atmosphere and provides insight into local craftsmen’s year-round activities building up to the event.

Kanizsai Dorottya Museum

This ethnographic and local history museum dedicated to the town of Mohács and its surroundings offers a broad perspective on the region and its people. It is also the main museum devoted to the Croatian, Serbian and Slovenian minorities in Hungary.

Mohács National Memorial

This national memorial is not to be missed. On the 29th August 1526, a tragic day in Hungarian history, outnumbered Christian troops faced and were defeated by the invading Ottoman army in a fateful battle. Visitors to the seven-hectare area are treading on sacred ground. The memorial park is a living history book written in pain and dignity; vivid, tasteful symbols carved in wood and stone are harmoniously enhanced and enlivened by technological elements, including a number of virtual-reality films in the visitor centre. An interactive exhibition introduces the battle of Mohács and the fate of the Hungarian nation.

Kölked – White Stork Museum

Inhabitants of Kölked, located south of Mohács, have lived with storks for hundreds of years. Located at the fringes of the Danube floodplain, the village has always been a safe place for white storks to nest and feed. The White Stork Museum is the only one of its kind in Europe and an absolute delight.

Boki-Duna – fishermen’s outdoor exhibition

A perfect tourist highlight off the beaten path. This beautiful waterside area was once an overdeveloped bend of the Danube. An interactive, informative outdoor fishing exhibition offers visitors a glimpse of this spot as it existed 500 years ago. Peer into an ancient aquatic world.

CLASH OF FORCES – THE IRON GATES

Prehistoric time machine – Lepenski Vir

Lepenski Vir, a Paleolithic site on the banks of the Danube, is proof that the local culture developed social relations, architecture and art more than six thousand years ago.

Golubac Fortress

Remains of the medieval fortified town of Golubac are located on the right bank of the Danube, in a very inaccessible place that marks the entrance to the Đerdap Gorge from the west.

Miraculous Tumane Monastery

Visitors travelling the shores of the Last Danube near the gorges, a unique natural tunnel, have access to the Boljetin River Canyon.

Famous Boljetin

The path leading over the bridge at the upstream part of the Boljetin gorge continues straight onto an old asphalt road along the river. The road slowly unfurls under beautiful vegetation in the direction of Boljetin Hill. Once they have reached the canyon, visitors can opt to follow a well-maintained, slightly more demanding path to Viewpoint Greben, a renowned spot offering an unrivalled look at the power and mystery of the Danube.

Veliki Štrbac hiking trail

This trail leads through the most attractive part of Đerdap National Park and ends at Veliki Štrbac. At an altitude of 768 m, Veliki Štrbac is the highest peak of Miroč Mountain and provides a beautiful view of the Danube at its narrowest point.

Viewpoint Ploče

This viewing spot in Đerdap National Park consists of the smooth space just above Mali Kazan Canyon and a limestone plateau under the Veliki Štrbac summit. Ploče offers a unique view of the Danube and acquaints visitors with the Veliki Kazan gorge.

A TRUE NATURE SHOW – PERSINA AND THE DANUBE DELTA

The “undiscovered land” of the Lower Danube, Persina Nature Park

Northern Bulgaria, particularly the Danube river valley in the central northern part of the country, is often terra incognita for tourists. It is a vast, fascinating, hidden oasis teeming with wildlife. Untouched by human activity, its biodiversity is intertwined with a rich cultural heritage and remnants of the past. Though an island viewed from the Danube’s shore may look beautiful and harmonious, setting foot on those islands is a different sensation altogether. A wild island is sacred ground. Home to pristine nature, it is a place where time is in nature’s hands alone and people can do little about it. Of course, not all islands along the river are accessible and hospitable for visitors. Many resemble a flooded forest with climbing plants, marshes and very difficult terrain.

Walking and cycling in the Kaykusha Marsh

The **Kaykusha Protected Area** wetland is located right on the southern border of its territory and includes a stunning marsh.

Cycling in the vicinity

It is a unique experience to explore the area on bicycle. Before entering the Bulgarian port town of Ruse, why not take a turn into **Rusenski Lom Nature Park!** The river known as Rusenski Lom is the last major right-side tributary of the Danube before it meets (the still distant) waters of the Black Sea. The remoteness of its canyon appealed to monks, who founded cave monasteries there between the 12th and the 14th centuries. A number of churches and hermitages were carved into the canyon's rocky sides.

The high point of the Danube nature show – the Danube Delta

Here, the Danube hosts a world untouched by the rhythms of the modern world, one where time is governed by other rules. The calm, serene Danube Delta is at the end of the Danube, stretching into the Black Sea. It is here that the river ends its 2,860-kilometre journey from its source in Germany's mountainous Black Forest. A varied, verdant landscape awaits with limitless expanses of reeds, lakes, channels, islands, tropical-looking forests with luxuriant vegetation and sand dunes, natural landscapes that seem pulled from the illustrated pages of fantastical storybooks.

Letea and Caraorman forests

No Lower Danube holiday is complete without a trip to the oldest nature reserve in Romania. Protected since 1930, these forests in the northern part of the Danube Delta are an absolute highlight. Grown among sand dunes and presenting in the form of 10–250-metre-wide strips (*hasmac*), their woods consist mainly of oak, grey oak, white poplar, swamp ash, silver lime and elm trees.

The strictly protected Sărățuri–Murighiol

Located near the Romanian village of Murighiol, this area is a must for birdwatchers.

Wild beaches of the Black Sea coast

This area boasts one of the Black Sea's most beautiful beaches. Visit to enjoy wide, long stretches of beach with fine sand, calm and shallow seas, but also sections of interesting vegetation and shells. The stunning, relaxing views these beaches offer will not be forgotten. Coastal areas interesting for tourists include those in Sulina, Sfântu Gheorghe, Gura Portiței and Vadu-Corbu-Midia – gorgeous spots with a number of attractive leisure options.

Travel channels on the Danube Delta by boat

A journey along this complicated system of channels is an experience of complete immersion in utterly pristine nature. Its beauty is simply breathtaking. This is a place where nature has the final word.

The Danube Delta Eco-Tourism Museum Centre

This museum centre is located near the town promenade along the Danube. It joins an art museum and an ethnography museum, a Muslim mosque and other area heritage buildings to form the cultural hub of Tulcea, the town at the gates of the Danube Delta.

Sfântu Gheorghe

This picturesque village along the Danube river's oldest tributary is located where the river converges with the Black Sea. Tourists can enjoy the settlement's authentic fishing traditions, take in surrounding sights and marvel at the natural landscape. Its brackish water habitats support a range of bird species attracted to the abundance of food. One can also find spectacular agglomerations of birds on the opposite side of the river, specifically on the sandy banks of Sahalin.

Mila 23

This is a typical fishermen's village in the Danube Delta. It is the main hub for eco-tourism in the Delta and one of the key starting points for journeys in non-motorised tour boats (*canotca*, a combination of a traditional lotca and a canoe). The tours offer an opportunity to participate in a traditional fishing activity (*pescaturim*) and learn more about Lipovan culture.

Măcin Mountains National Park "The tales of Măcin"

Travellers in the delta should not miss the oldest mountains in Romania. The Măcin Mountains are spectacular not for their height, but on account of their many historical sites and archaeological remnants. Other highlights include the area's natural treasures, which have geological, botanical and zoological significance. Măcinului Mountains National Park is a fascinating presentation and a true nature show, with its steppe at the base of the mountains, medium-height oak forests and bushes or rock formations at the peak, their shapes sculpted by rain and wind. The Măcin Mountains "Sphinx" is an elegant example.