

# Buzludzha Monument Sustainable Cultural Tourism Plan. Acknowledging the Past – Embracing the Future

Fergus T. Maclaren, Jonathan Karkut, Sanjin Mihelić

## Project premises

The goal of this sustainable cultural tourism plan is to provide destination planning and development recommendations based on the assessment of the future tourism potential and opportunities for the Buzludzha Monument. One of the priorities at this stage is to outline appropriate and sustainable tourism development options that may enhance the visitor exploration, understanding and appreciation of the Buzludzha Monument including its multi-layered cultural and natural heritage values. Given the extensive stabilisation and restoration work already undertaken on the site, the proposed tourism development approach will, in terms of built structures, focus on maintaining the existing integrity and authenticity of the Buzludzha Monument itself.

The principal objective is to ensure long-term operational and economic viability, while reconnecting the site back into the social fabric of the community in Kazanlak. Instead of its current status as a misunderstood or contested oddity at the fringes of Kazanlak's tourism offer, the site could become an integrated layer within the broader tourism framework and provide local stakeholders with further opportunities to generate lasting, consistent revenues and interest in the destination.

## Background

Every destination's attraction is not created equal. It has to instill in potential visitors inspiration and determination that it is a place worth experiencing, even the controversial sites. For example,

- Paris was not immediately enamoured with the Eiffel Tower when it was constructed as the centerpiece of the Exposition Universelle (World's Fair) in 1889, to commemorate the French Revolution's centennial. Today, the landmark welcomes almost 7 million people a year, making it the most visited paid-for monument in the world.
- The Taj Mahal was constructed by Shah Jahan to honour his wife Mumtaz in the 17th century. In 1830, it faced destruction when a crew led by the British governor of India, Lord William Bentinck, was ready to begin demolition and auction off the structure's marble. This masterpiece was saved eventually by the restoration intervention by Lord Curzon, and there is still controversy around maintaining the site with its connection to India's Mughal conquerors.
- Auschwitz was regarded as one of the Nazis' deadliest

concentration camps, with over 1.1 million people exterminated. As a 40 square kilometre compound that was not meant to last, there had even been the possibility of Allied forces bombing it to obliterate its murderous operations. Auschwitz is now a potent symbol, most famous for its infamy, and now visited by tourists and pilgrims alike.

All of these well-known places, despite their contentious pasts and issues that sometimes still resonate today, have stood the test of time and forged a strong profile that have evoked interest and generated visitors from a transverse range of interests and platforms.

The Buzludzha Monument is such a venue. Built in 1981 as a formal gathering place and tribute to Bulgarian communism, it was abandoned in the 1990s, with the end of the socialist regime. In the intervening years, it has been neglected and looted, as have many other Communist era buildings part of the vast unloved heritage of the 20th century. It transformed over a short period of time from one of the most important structures in Bulgaria to one of its least significant, reflecting the transformation in national values and society. Today, Buzludzha is a symbol of conflicting ideas and perspectives between people holding different views about the recent Communist past and those who view it as a symbol of free will, art and curiosity including the new generation of Bulgarians and interested foreigners.

On a structural basis, Buzludzha is a masterpiece of architecture, engineering and art, and one of the most iconic and significant buildings of post-war modernism in Europe. Buzludzha is also one of the most dissonant and controversial sites from the socialist period, which is also the reason for its neglect. This dissonance narrative, however, is also its unrevealed, exceptional asset, and has the power to provoke dialogue, allow open discussion, enhance education and tolerance, and foster mutual understanding.

The monument represents not only an opportunity to learn from the past, but also an invitation to inspire and encourage new inclusive visions for the future. The primary intention of the Buzludzha Monument Project is to convert the site into a multi-purpose venue free from any political agenda. A team consisting of both experts and stakeholders has been created to support this initiative and identify future uses to make it a financially viable and operationally sustainable destination. The Getty project's recommendation regarding the economic analysis and site potential noted that a more specific study was needed to evaluate the unique tourism potential of the Buzludzha Monument.



*Fig. 1 Buzludzha Monument*

## **The sustainable cultural tourism approach**

### *Plan Methodology*

The document at hand represents an approach by the ICOMOS International Cultural Tourism Committee (ICTC) team to develop a sustainable cultural tourism plan for Buzludzha, incorporating its multi-layered cultural and natural heritage values based on the recommendations of the site's Getty project report, focusing on the structure and its immediate surrounding area, and how it fits into the overall regional tourism plan for Kazanlak municipality.

The plan's development methodology involved a site visit and field research, collecting information from visitors about the purpose of visit, attitudes and expectations and also including demographic and social data. This research further involved the participation of other stakeholders, experts and the local community through individual and group meetings. To ensure research around the Monument is integrated at different levels, additional information was added from a wide range of sources, such as state statistics, company reports, online tourism destination review sites, international and national electronic and print media, archives.

Hence, the intention of this plan is to outline appropriate and sustainable cultural tourism development options that may enhance the visitor exploration, understanding and appreciation of the Buzludzha Monument.

### *Defining terms: sustainable cultural tourism and visitor economy*

According to the definition adopted by the United Nations World Tourism Organization's (UNWTO) General Assembly, at its 22nd session in September 2017, Cultural Tourism implies "A type of tourism activity in which the visitor's essential motivation is to learn, discover, experience and consume the tangible and intangible cultural attractions/products in a tourism destination. These attractions/products relate to a set of distinctive material, intellectual, spiritual and emotional features of a society that encompasses arts and architecture, historical and cultural heritage, culinary heritage, literature, music, creative industries and the living cultures with their lifestyles, value systems, beliefs and traditions".

In 2017, the United Nations commemorated the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development, tied to initiatives in support of all of the seventeen United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This special year was championed by the UNWTO in recognition of the tremendous potential of the tourism industry, to contribute to the fight against poverty and foster mutual understanding and intercultural dialogue. The International Year was aimed at supporting change in policies, business practices and consumer behavior towards a more sustainable tourism sector than can contribute effectively to the SDGs in the following five key areas:



Fig. 2 Interior of the monument in disrepair

- Inclusive and sustainable economic growth;
- Social inclusiveness, employment and poverty reduction;
- Resource efficiency, environmental protection and climate change;
- Cultural values, diversity and heritage; and
- Mutual understanding, peace and security

The UN's 2030 SDGs provide a useful framework to outline how communities can benefit from sustainable forms of tourism. The World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) defines the visitor economy as any direct, indirect, and induced economic activity resulting from visitors' interactions with their destination. This sustainable cultural tourism plan for Buzludzha integrates these different aspects and findings to adopt an appropriately focused sustainable cultural tourism development approach for Buzludzha.

### Tourism development at dissonant and communist-era sites

The sensitivity to the hardships endured under communism in Eastern Europe enables emotions to be readily manipulated for political and/or economic gain. Many examples of dissonant built heritage from this era during the 20th century still exist across Central and Eastern Europe. As in Bulgaria, the features that remain standing hold mixed feelings, but a lively debate and considerations of how to treat or re-use these is spread across academic platforms, desti-

nation management organizations and municipal planning departments.

Two case examples are worth reflecting upon when dealing with sensitive repurposing of these sites. Definitive solutions are still not easily forthcoming, but the thought and exchange of ideas on destination development and planning for these types of structures can be useful to help place the situation around Buzludzha in a wider European context.

#### *Yugoslavian 'Spomeniks'*

The 'Spomeniks' of former Yugoslavia are presented in a vast online resource that is centred around the website: <https://www.spomenikdatabase.org/>. This project was in turn stimulated by the 2006–2009 exhibition titled "spomenik" by Belgian artist Jan Kempnaers. The catalogue that comes together on the Spomenik Database explores:

- the structures;
- their designers;
- the history and narratives behind them;
- their current physical state; and
- the geographical locations of what still runs into thousands of individual sites.

Some are damaged, some repaired, some neglected, some lost entirely since the end of the Yugoslav era. What stands out, however, as explained by the website's author, Donald Niebyl, is how once introduced to them, the visitor is drawn to move and travel between sites that are individual



*Fig. 3 Perched on top of Mount Stara Planina, Buzludzha Monument dominates the landscape above Kazanlak*

and common to a theme both at once. The Spomeniks can complement a journey through the landscapes. Where they are sited, they prompt visitors to pause, contemplate, look around, to connect and experience a destination.

#### *Albanian “concrete mushrooms”*

Concrete military bunkers (shaped like mushrooms) are a ubiquitous sight in Albania, with an average of 5.7 bunkers for every square kilometre. The bunkers were constructed of concrete, steel and iron and ranged in size from one- or two-person pillboxes with gun slits to large underground nuclear bomb shelters intended for use by the Party leadership and bureaucrats. The cost of constructing them was a drain on Albania’s resources, diverting them away from more pressing needs, such as dealing with the country’s housing shortage and poor roads.

Today, there are over 750,000 reinforced concrete bunkers in Albania, in different stages of use and disrepair. Their solidity has made it difficult to get rid of them, yet many have been removed, particularly in cities. In the countryside, however, most bunkers have simply been abandoned. Some have been reused as housing for animals or as storehouses; others have been abandoned to lie derelict due to the cost of removing them.

There have been various suggestions for what to do with them. Ideas have included pizza ovens, solar heaters, beehives, mushroom farms, projection rooms for drive-in cinemas, beach huts, flower planters, youth hostels, and kiosks. Many of these examples have been fully researched and cu-

rated in a project and book by Italian architects Elian Stefa and Gyler Mydyti.

Albania’s bunkers have even become a symbol of sorts for the country. Pencil holders and ashtrays in the shape of concrete bunkers have become one of the country’s most popular tourist souvenirs. One such line of bunker souvenirs was promoted with a message to buyers: “Greetings to the land of the bunkers. We assumed that you could not afford to buy a big one.”

## **Buzludzha destination planning and development assessment**

### *Initial input, visitor and site assessment*

In an initial discussion on repurposing the structure, Buzludzha Foundation staff ruminated over the following question: “What could Buzludzha become?”. The responses were as follows, citing its role as an open stage for storytelling, applying the following lenses:

- **Stories through ART.** Could Buzludzha host the works of the most famous artists of our time? Art changes the perspective and leads to a new way of perceiving reality. A place where art raises new questions and gives new answers.
- **Stories through HISTORY.** Could it be a place where we learn about our past to make sure we don’t repeat the same mistakes again? Could it take us all the way back to communist times and show them from different perspec-

tives? A personal journey filled with interracial emotional experiences.

- **Stories through NATURE.** Could it be a place to educate, encourage and initiate nature friendly and sustainable practices? A place to explore and appreciate the beauty and variety of Buzludzha’s environment in the Central Balkans.
- **Stories of the YOUTH.** Could it be a place for young Europeans to gather and forge the future? A place to form new global strategies, discuss important matters of the present and the future through performances, workshops, lectures and conferences.

Moreover, visitor surveys were conducted in May 2021 to better understand the drivers, needs and wants of people who had travelled to Buzludzha, and to identify where the positive aspects could be enhanced and the expressed gaps in services, infrastructure and amenities be filled.

#### *Key and potential visitor origin markets*

Buzludzha is already benefiting from being visible and actively sought out by curious audiences both online and in person on site. These consist of a healthy combination of domestic and international tourists. One of the biggest challenges to growing visitation and expanding markets is the remoteness of the site which will continue to deter long-haul visitors. However, the multi-faceted natural and cultural elements in the region around Buzludzha will help counteract seasonality and allow sustainable expansion of local, regional and international markets through year-round visitation.

#### *Communication infrastructure*

A low-key circulation of information and visibility through social media already exists. The communication difficulty, in terms of cultural tourism to the site and region, is that the Monument is not yet joined into other contemporary tourism and heritage narratives. The dissonant message of the site as a crumbling communist era folly, dominates. The interest, however, and the different perspectives on the site and its possible future uses, offer a real opportunity for a successful communication. For this purpose, narratives and diverse communication platforms should be linked up to inform those growing audiences that seek to find out more about the site and make plans to visit the Buzludzha.

Financing and development With regards to raising additional funds to support development, Buzludzha does have the advantage of being an inspiring and unique feature. In the short to medium term, the extent of structural damage alongside the continuing dissonance surrounding its original construction restricts the likelihood of major public funds being secured. Nonetheless, the visual strength of the site continues to generate interest. Equally, the wider emergence of attention to dissonant heritage Europe-wide brings in opportunities for collaborative programmes bridging local and international funding support. If cultural tourism continues to grow and be a priority in Bulgaria, then Buzludzha will be

an ideal layer to blend in together with other heritage assets in Kazanlak municipality.

#### *Marketing and promotion*

Cultural tourism is being pursued as a strong driving force for future development in Bulgaria. What has to be overcome, however, is the continuing dominance of promoting the Black Sea coast. The strong image and profile of the Monument, together with the natural and cultural heritage features around Buzludzha, provides some real impetus to become an important tourism destination of broad interest. Its rural situation will mean for the foreseeable future that it cannot be considered as a mass tourism site. Yet, it may benefit from that position as a slow, quirky and sustainable destination with many different layers of interest. Taking advantage also of its futuristic science fiction image can contribute to promoting an alternative prospect for the site that does not look back over its shoulder to what was intended as its original meaning.

#### *Community involvement, employment and participation*

The emergence of the Buzludzha Foundation, the growth of its passionate volunteer force and the interest generated through the Getty project, all demonstrate a real grassroots connection to the Monument. A general understanding of the different stakeholder groups that are pertinent to the site already exists. However, a more detailed assessment is required. In particular, one should look for approaches that allow bringing together disparate voices and healing some of the tensions that obviously continue to split feelings in regards to the site’s future evolution. Restricting the situation to countering arguments has limited benefit. To fully engage and promote ongoing participation and exchange, the most effective way ahead will be to demonstrate it through actions and events. These can highlight the potential of Buzludzha “by doing” while, simultaneously, also providing additional economic and employment benefits.

#### *Education and training*

The standard of Bulgarian tourism training and education is recognized by international authorities. The greatest challenge, however, is to present how vocational prospects exist beyond the country’s dominant coastal tourism model. For this to occur, there is a need to align the positioning of cultural tourism as mentioned in the National Strategy with training opportunities.

In the case of Buzludzha, it is important to mention the different skills and prospects that come along with a growing cultural tourism. The types of employment within the visitor economy are particularly broad and flexible in view of the continuum between cultural and natural heritage creating jobs around museums, attractions, hospitality and tourism services, interpretation and guiding, to name but a few. Additionally, the direct external connection to Europe through the development of such cultural or dissonant heritage routes in Bulgaria, is an important asset. This wider connectivity, including the potential for collaborations, exchanges and

## Plan recommendations

### IMPLEMENT SITE GOVERNANCE POLICY and OVERSIGHT

**Recommendation** In cooperation with local communities co-create operational guidelines for the site capturing potential operational uses (e.g. events, promotion, carrying capacity, etc.) that are both sensitive to sentiments about Buzludzha's past and, simultaneously, provide functional parameters for site management. This endeavor would be supported by the creation of a Buzludzha Oversight Committee.

### INCLUDE RESTORATION in the TOURISM OFFER

**Recommendation** Make the restoration activities part of the Buzludzha story, where visitors are clamouring to get a sense of how the site is evolving, and how they may be able to gain a more informed, substantive interpretation during their visits.

### GENERATE DIVERSE REVENUES

**Recommendation** Establish revenue centres that can build upon and connect with existing tourism activities and resources in regards to promotion and economic funding of the Buzludzha.

### ENCOURAGE YEAR-ROUND VISITATION

**Recommendation** Bypass the typical tourism seasonality issues through the utilisation of Buzludzha's multi-layered setting and product offer, thereby enabling visitors to visit and experience the site's geography, culture, nature and heritage year round.

### ENCOURAGE SCALABILITY to ADDRESS VISITOR SURGES

**Recommendation** Encourage scalability of services and amenities at Buzludzha's during visitors surge periods to foster a more welcoming and accessible tourism environment, while lessening the fixed costs associated with more permanent forms of service infrastructure and amenities.

linkages on a European level, requires further skills, training and capacity building locally, particularly around crossroad sites like Buzludzha.

## Conclusions

The Buzludzha monument clearly challenges tourism planning as it can evoke a range of emotions and experiences. The research and consultations conducted by ICOMOS ICTC identify five significant recommendations:

- Embed a site governance policy
- Incorporate the monument restoration process within the tourism offer
- Ensure diverse revenue streams are generated
- Facilitate year-round visitation
- Provide scalable visitor management options to adapt to surges of visitation

The study further presents steps required to enact or implement those recommendations. Above and beyond those recommendations, the perspectives, information, and broader situational analysis points to three overarching takeaways:

- A. The Buzludzha Monument is a quirky, attention-grabbing site for the visitor. It draws people in as it is, and with the right support and encouragement it can also act as a nexus to help introduce many more aspects of culture and heritage in the area. Coordination, connectivity and collaboration are now essential to facilitate an integrated multi-layered and engaging destination.
- B. The site is neither static nor one-dimensional. The ways in which tourists have already experienced and inspired others to visit the Monument, highlight the potential to stimulate the imagination and provoke responses. These multiple opportunities for individuals and groups to visit Buzludzha should be encouraged all year round.
- C. On a purely economic level, the depth, diversity and prominence online of the hashtag #Buzludzha has already created huge savings on potential marketing, awareness or promotional budgets. Many destinations would envy that situation – the key now is to take full advantage of that impetus. Local and international stakeholders will help to refine and strengthen the branding of Buzludzha.

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World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC). Economic Impact Reports, October 2020. <https://wtcc.org/Research/Economic-Impact>

## Selected Buzludzha tourism websites

Buzludzha VR online – <https://buzludzhavr.com/>

Europ’Raid – <https://www.europraid.fr/>

Sofia Adventures – <https://sofiaadventures.com/how-to-get-to-buzludzha-day-trip-communist-ufo-bulgaria/>

Spomenik Database – <https://www.spomenikdatabase.org/>

Trip Hackr, travel blogger and agency – <https://triphackr.com/bulgarias-buzludzha-monument/>

## Credits

All photos by Sanjin Mihelić, ICOMOS ICTC

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<sup>1</sup> UNWTO, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> UNWTO, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> WTTC, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> MYDYTI and STEFA, Concrete Mushrooms, 2009.