

## Като каракачаните

От Дик ван Хартен

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ОТ ВЕСТНИКА



Фотограф: Дик ван Хартен

others take a steep jump, only to land on top of a predecessor. In a matter of seconds the path is filled with a wriggling woollen mass.

It's the beginning of the autumn transhumance, the traditional moving of the sheep from the pastures high up in the Balkan mountains where they have spent the summer, to lower pastures in the south for winter. Once, these mountains were the roaming grounds of tens of thousands of sheep. Now this herd - property of the Fund for Wild Flora & Fauna (FWFF) <Фонд за дивата флора и фауна, ФДФФ> - is the only one following the old pattern. The shepherds move the sheep from 2000 meters above Tazha to the village of Dabovitsa <Дъбовица>, south of Kotel. They are assisted by a small group of Western tourists.

“We don't just want to restore the transhumance, but also modernise it”, explains Emilian Stoinov <Емилиян Стойнов> from the FWFF. So why not combine it with eco-tourism? Shepherding is hardly profitable and tourists mean income. Although making money is not the objective. Improving the ecosystem is. Sheep keep the vegetation on the pastures short and prevent them from turning into forests. This way they remain an attractive habitat for small mammals that in turn attract predators like imperial eagle, jackal and wolf. When a sheep dies along the route the shepherds leave the carcass behind for scavengers, like the vulture, a species the FWFF tries to re-introduce. Stoinov: “That is why we revive the transhumance.”



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The tourists quickly discover driving 550 sheep straight through the mountains is no easy task. Regularly they break up the herd, sheep wandering off in all directions or simply refusing to move at all. But they learn and bravely imitate the shepherds. „Brrrrr! Huhhh! Ayayayaya!”, it rings through the forest in French, Dutch and English accents. Soon they all carry sticks, making them look almost like professionals. Shepherd Dobri - „The only real shepherd left in Bulgaria”, claims Stoinov - watches their actions.

Sometimes amused, sometimes annoyed, sometimes simply not understanding. What he thinks of having to herd them as well? He shrugs his shoulders. „That’s life”, he says. Then he raises his staff <there is a special word for this...> like Moses on Mount Sinai. The sheep start moving in one direction again. Stoinov smiles. „Dobri knows sheep.”

Traditionally the transhumance in this part of Bulgaria was dominated by the Karakachans, whom in winter migrated with their sheep deep into Greece. In the 1950’s the communists forced them to settle in towns and collectivised the herds. The regime didn’t need people wandering off through the country at their own will. Nowadays not many Karakachans work as shepherds. But the FWFF keeps the memory alive. The dogs are pure-bred Karakachanski, and so are the sheep, all remarkably smaller than the average household specimen. „Just like the Karakachans themselves”, grins Dobri. „They are also tough little fellows.”



An evening in Kotel the meaning of his words becomes clear. In a guesthouse run by singer Galina Dourmoushliyska <Галина Дурмушлийска>the tourists meet a small and muscular man, named Georgi Maroulov <Георги Марулов>. Yes, he is Karakachan. And yes, he has worked as a shepherd all his life. Maroulov speaks softly, his eyes smiling friendly. When he starts a song, his expression changes. In the Greek dialect of the Karakachans he sings in a strong voice about the end of the transhumance in the 1950’s. „In every tree in the forest we will carve the names of those who did this to us.” His hand ominously writes in the air.

Next day the herd moves through the beech forests around Kotel. The yellow, red and orange of the trees idyllically mix with the brown and wide of the sheep. Nothing remains of the Karakachan curse. But the forests hide other secrets. In a tree hangs the dried out cadaver of a wolf, skinned and beheaded. „Killed by hunters last week”, Dobri says. When the herd moves through an open field, he stops and picks up a



plug of hair from the ground. „Wolf.” His eyes carefully examine the tree line at the far end of the field. That night howling can be heard close to the campsite. Jackals, calling the pack together for the hunt. The shepherds look worried. „Jackals are worse than wolves”, says Dobri, moving his hand in a cutting manner around his throat. The tourists cheer at the presence of such a fierce predator. Dobri pays no attention. Sometimes he simply can’t understand.

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