

MONTENEGRO  
SINJAJEVINA.  
THE THREATENED PARADISE  
by Giacomo Lai







Preparing the Kolašinski lisnatic cheese. Nemanja Bojić, aged 21, lives and works in Sinjajevina during the summer. He spends the rest of the year studying to become a primary school teacher. Kristina Bučić, aged 81, spends the summer in a koliba, a typical local construction, and helps her grandson.

## THE SHADOW OF A NATO FIRING RANGE LOOMS OVER AN OASIS OF BIODIVERSITY

The Sinjajevina massif is a paradise where time appears to have stood still. This highland plateau in the heart of Montenegro is home to the vastest mountain pastures in the Balkans, while the nearby Tara River Canyon, the deepest in Europe, is a UNESCO biosphere. There is no electricity network, water is rationed and the pace of life follows the slow rhythm of the "katuns", pastoral settlements that have been self-governing for centuries. Today, however, the inhabitants of Sinjajevina are under threat from a worrying development: the possible creation on their land of a huge NATO military firing range. Montenegro, a candidate member of the European Union, joined NATO in 2017 and two years later, the first military operations were conducted in Sinjajevina. At around that time came the announcement

of the transformation of some areas into military exercise zones. Sinjajevina, however, is one of five European sites to be studied by researchers for the European project "IRIS-Inspiring rural heritage", a precursor to protecting the use of the mountain areas and safeguarding their living cultural heritage. For this reason shepherds, activists and families with links to the area have formed the "Save Sinjajevina" association, campaigning against the local population's apparent exclusion from the decision-making process and the failure to conduct environmental impact studies before considering the NATO project. Numerous petitions and various protests on site have so far managed to postpone the creation of the firing range. But how long can the Sinjajevina activists resist?





Obrad Miličić, aged 60, at the entrance to his koliba (a typical local construction) built in 1972. He believes that the government should support young people who want to work in the mountains. They could, for example, build better roads to facilitate the trade in local products between the highlands and the villages and towns in the area.





Namocé Joët, aged 21, is from France. She studies Geography at the University of Toulouse and is finishing a Master's in Rural Development. She is in Montenegro for an "IRIS-Inspiring rural heritage" research project into how local people live in Sinjajevina.



Petar Ašanin, aged 50, relaxes on the sofa in his koliba. The koliba is a typical local construction.





Save Sinjajevina Solidarity Camp. During the Petrovdan celebrations (the feast day of St. Peter and St. Paul), people listen to speeches in defence of Sinjajevina.



The Save Sinjajevina Solidarity Camp, the mountain camp organized by local NGO Save Sinjajevina. The organization is calling on the government to abandon any project to militarize the mountain.







Mutton prepared for the Save Sinjajevina Solidarity Camp.



Widow Kristina Bučić lives with her daughters and spends the summers in Sinjajevina.





Vesna Miličić prepares cicvara, a dish made from melted cheese.





Save Sinjajevina Solidarity Camp. Dancers sit on the grass on Petrovdan day (the feast day of St. Peter and St. Paul).





Sinjajevina hospitality is hard to beat. Turkish coffee and food made in the mountain are offered to visitors passing through the katun (pastoral settlement)





Aleksandra Kapetanović and Namomé Joët interview the Ašanin family as part of the IRIS project. Aleksandra, aged 49, is an architect involved in conservation. Namomé (21), is from France. She studies Geography at the University of Toulouse and is finishing a Master's in Rural Development.





Mileva Gara Jovanović filters fresh milk. She considers herself a “daughter of Sinjajevina”.





Almost all of Sinjajevina is composed of common land. Due to a slow decline in population, today less and less land is used for pastoral activities. Vast areas appear to be completely free of livestock.





The Dinarica path is considered by many hikers to be the best destination on Earth. After years of conflicts and divisions, this path unites eight countries in the western Balkans through a network of ancient shepherd's trails.



Goran Rabrenović, aged 58, designed and built Camp Rabrenović, which he now manages. The campsite has rooms, bungalows and spaces for tents and campervans. Outside the campsite is one of the many trekking trails that lead into the mountains.





Save Sinjavevina Solidarity Camp. A group of men chat during the Petrovdan (the feast day of St. Peter and St. Paul) celebrations.





Flowers at sunset. Sinjajevina's biodiversity is studied by researchers from the IRIS project. The mountain is also a candidate to become an Area of Special Conservation Interest Emerald site.



Nada, aged 15, brings in the goats to be milked in the evening.







Save Sinjajevina Solidarity Camp. Traditional dances during the Petrovdan (the feast day of St. Peter and St. Paul) celebrations.





Cows drink at a manmade pond that collects rainwater.



p a r a l l e l o z e r o

