



Cave Hermitage „Peștera” at the Cultural-Natural Reserve „Orheiul Vechi”

Anna was a young woman filled with excitement and anticipation. She had just received important news that she was eager to share with her beloved. News that led her on a journey of discovery about the rich cultural heritage of Moldovan traditional fine crafts and priceless artifacts.

In Butuceni village, nestled beneath the rolling hills of Orheiul Vechi there is a notable location steeped in history and spiritual significance. This hidden gem is a true testament to the devotion and perseverance of our ancestors. With its towering bell tower and cross, this religious site is more than just a place of worship, it's a symbol of hope and a connection to the past. Hidden below the earth's surface, there is an awe-inspiring Orthodox cave monastery carved into the rocky cliffs by devoted monks. This remarkable piece of architectural history is a must-visit destination for anyone exploring the region's rich cultural heritage.

Anna looked at the surroundings and stopped near a stone cross dated from around the 17th century. But the rock used for the cross was a witness of the history of the area that flowed over time like the water of the Raut river that snakes through the limestone rocks.

The rocks murmured to Anna that “They were formed in the Sarmatian limestone cliffs near the villages Butuceni and Trebujeni. People developed the complexes and they created new cave rooms inside the Sarmatian limestone cliffs. The caves were used as shelters, but they had sacral goals as well.”

The presence of the cave complexes determines the unity of the Orheiul Vechi landscape. The complexes chime with the other types of heritage from the territory of the Reserve: archaeological, architectural and natural one and forms a unique ensemble of cultural and natural elements that reflect in an

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original way the lifestyle of the ancient people. Anna found out that the place was inhabited from the oldest times and here there are traces of the Cucuteni culture (5th - 4th millennium BC), as well as 8th - 9th and 15th century settlements.

The "Peștera" monastic hermitage is part of the Butuceni Cave Complex, which spans approximately 460 meters and includes a system of caves and former hermit rooms.

From ancient times until today, the caves were often treated as sacred places, seen as a source of religious inspiration and an appropriate location for cult practices. Important evidence for religious practices include about 200 caves carved into the limestone escarpments along the Raut River. The earliest caves were dug in the XV th century AD. Many of them were - and some still are - the scenes of religious rituals. Most of the caves were used as shelters for the monks. In some of them, floor plans and other evidence suggests that they were used as churches or places of prayer or rituals.

Anna's contemplation of the area and her time travel was interrupted by the sound of a bell, she redirected her attention to the Bell Tower that actually was marking the place of "Peștera" church. She looked around and found an entrance that was dug into the cliffs, ensuring the connection of the church with the Butuceni village through a tunnel about 25 meters long.

Curious to find out more, Anna entered into the tunnel that goes down to the depths of the earth where the hermitage was dug in the cliffs. At the end of the tunnel Anna found the ancient church and was in awe of its timeless beauty, illuminated only by flickering candlelight and framed by jagged windows carved into the cliffs. She marveled at the way the medieval icons glimmered in the warm glow, a testament to the unchanging devotion of the faithful orthodox Christians who still seek solace and guidance within its walls. The cave church remained a sacred place, where religious ceremonies were still held with reverence and respect and still is welcoming faithful orthodox Christians in search of God, as well as wandering tourists.

Anna observed that the "Peștera" hermitage consists of two main parts: the church and the monastic cells. The church was built on the foundations of older

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rooms, and its layout is clearly visible in certain areas. It runs along the slope and includes an altar, nave, pronaos, porch, and access gang. A surprise for Anna was to still find an hermite inside of the church that seems to leave here from ancient times. The old man showed Anna a door leading to an exit. Using that exit, Anna found herself on a balcony that had a view of the valley of the Raut river that meandered between the cliffs. From that balcony could be seen the traces of an old entry that probably was destroyed by an earthquake.

Looking at the cliffs that were forming natural protective walls, Anna understood that the Archaeological Landscape „Orheiul Vechi” is an exceptional example of interference of human values. For people from villages traditions in many cases are equivalent with human values.

Immersing in the spirit of the place, Anna entered back into the church where she saw a couple getting ready for the wedding ceremony. She observed that someone present at the wedding procession was holding a carpet. **The "wedding carpet tradition" was especially dear to Anna's heart. She watched with a sense of wonder as couples stood or knelt on a special carpet, symbolizing their commitment to each other and to God. The carpet was their personal island, a place where they received the sacrament of marriage, donned their crowns, and became one before their family, friends, and most importantly, the eyes of the Lord. The religious wedding ceremony was not just a joyous occasion, but a rite of passage, a momentous responsibility, and an affirmation of their love for each other.**

Traditions connected with the rugs

"Carpets emanate positive vibes", they are pleasant, cozy and, at the same time, always remain enigmatic, maintaining the thread of communication between several generations. Probably, for all these reasons, in many localities, there were various customs associated with the "scoarta" carpet. For instance, on the last night before the wedding, the bride slept on a "scoarta" (eng. "rug"), so as not to forget her parental home, and the next day, during the wedding in the church, this carpet was spread under the feet of the bride and groom, "so that they would be happy in marriage." In fact, the tradition of the bride and groom standing in front of the altar on the carpet continues to

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this day. At the same time, during the wedding, "the bride knelt on a carpet in front of her parents to ask for forgiveness and receive a blessing, and while the bride and groom left the bride's parents' house, the bridegrooms showed the dowry, (including the carpets), so everyone could see how rich and hardworking the bride is.

Getting out of the “Pestera” church, Anna was climbing the stairs of the tunnel, and step by step she was coming back to the present from the immersion in a past that seemed to be so close to her heart.

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