

The peoples of the Puszta...



THE HORTOBÁGY NATIONAL PARK the Puszta

The Hortobágy is the diverse mosaic of vast expanses of alkaline grasslands and marshes. Its soil was always too poor for cultivation, and probably this is how it has been preserved. The large pastures and the water bodies teeming with fish attracted early nomadic peoples, as well as the Hungarian settlers conquering the Carpathian Basin. The link between the nomadic peoples arriving here well before 3,000 B.C. and today's herdsmen is how they have adapted to the natural conditions, and their land use of herding livestock.



Kurgan



Squatting barn and herdsman's haunt

The land has retained the visible traces of millennia long land use practices, and the related structures: the burial mounds of the „People of the Kurgan” built over 5,000 years ago, and the much more recent sweep wells, the remote haunts, as well as scattered roadside inns and stone bridges telling the stories of once flourishing salt and livestock trade. The Nine-Arch Bridge (1833) on the Hortobágy River has also become the symbol of the land.



The Puszta is still very sparsely populated, however, the grazing season between April and October brings here hundreds of herds of the Hungarian Grey Cattle, the Racka Sheep, and some studs of horses. The herdsmen tending the animals have a distinct tangible and intangible heritage, and while the golden era was the 18th-19th century, several aspects of this heritage are still sustained.



Herd of Racka Sheep near a sweep well

The challenges of the future

The ever decrease of natural habitats globally, the changing economic and social circumstances should keep us alert and impose a great responsibility on decision makers and locals alike. It takes us all, so the Puszta and its herdsmen not only have a long history, but also equally long prospect for the future.



An infinite landscape



The Hortobágy National Park – the Puszta is an exceptional surviving example of a cultural landscape constituted by a pastoral society, and maintains intact and visible traces of its traditional land-use forms over several thousand years, and illustrates the harmonious interaction between people and nature.

This outstanding universal value was acknowledged by UNESCO in 1999 with inscription of the site in the World Heritage List.

The Hortobágy National Park comprising nearly 80,000 hectares is the largest of Europe's remaining alkaline grasslands. It includes several elements of the landscape development, even a substantial part of the artificial Tisza Lake. The Hortobágy, as we see it today is the result of the interaction of natural and artificial forces, and is often the symbol of the Hungarian psyche and the fate of the people. While the Puszta is most associated with drought, in fact, water has played a significant role in shaping the land. The dissolved sodium salts follow the water table, and they accumulate by evaporation. This process of salination is the most important factor forming the Hortobágy: the soil conditions, the various habitats and their biota. Before the regulation the watercourse of the Tisza, the river often flooded the area bringing not only water, but also nutrient rich mud. Today, it is precipitation and nature conservation management that ensure vital quantities of water.



The monument commemorating the World Heritage designation in the village of Hortobágy.



The mosaic of vast open grasslands and marshes are interrupted occasionally with small forest patches that provide shelter for both man and animal against the scorching sun or the fury of winds. They are also habitats for creatures, and nesting sites for birds.

The open horizon, the starry night sky, or the summer thunderstorms that literally wash away the border line between land and sky, or the floating images of the Fata Morgana lend a sense of infinity.

The Hortobágy is one of the few remaining spots in Hungary least polluted by light; thus the International Dark Sky Association has certified it a dark sky park.



A bird paradise

The Hortobágy National Park provides undisturbed natural habitats for nesting birds, but most importantly a great stop-over site where migrating birds can feed and rest. The tens of thousands of cranes and wild geese arriving here between September and November en-route on their southbound migration are particularly spectacular.



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