



The Story of Katuns

... nomadic life, customs and tradition of cattle breeders in Montenegro ...



Horseshoe,
a detail found at many katun huts

IMPRESSUM

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Preface

Our organization, Regional Development Agency for Bjelasica, Komovi and Prokletije, is primarily concerned with rural and regional development, and we spend significant part of our time in the field, talking to the local population, agricultural producers, tourists, representatives of various institutions and businesses. Doing this type of work, we realized that katuns represent an exceptional value of our region, culturally as well as in terms of agriculture and tourism. And we realized that this value in which we strongly believe is not seen as a value in a substantial part of the Montenegrin society. That's why we have de-

cided to create a publication in which we will tell the story of Montenegrin katuns, the people who live in them, and try to make them more visible and draw the attention to their importance, their needs and great potential. Fortunately, this idea of ours has been evaluated as important at the Call for distribution of funds from games of chance, and we have been granted funds for printing of this publication.

We hope you will enjoy this story, and that you will understand it is sufficiently important to be retold to others. And we also hope that we will meet you in one of our katuns!

Jelena Krivčević,
Director of the Regional Development Agency
for Bjelasica, Komovi and Prokletije



1. What are katuns

Katuns are temporary, farmer's settlements in the mountains, at high altitudes, where herders move their livestock to graze in the summer. The tradition of herders moving high into the mountains is a long one, and the nomadic way of life has throughout history developed a special culture and customs unique only to the katuns. At the present time this moving of livestock to katuns is practiced less and less each year, but this tradition is still maintained. As mountain tourism in Montenegro grows and develops, the shepherds in katuns became part of the tourist offer for several reasons.

Katuns are located at high altitudes, usually in vicinity of hiking and biking trails, and tourists often encounter katuns on their travels. Special architecture of katuns, well integrated into the environment, as well as a specific culture that can be found here represent something that tourists from Western Europe and other countries rarely have the opportunity to see. The food that is eaten in the katuns, though simple, is extremely tasty and good, so outdoor enthusiasts, after a day-long journey and effort, enjoy the local cuisine that is rarely found in the offer of local restaurants.

Katun women
Stanoje Bojović (1909-1990)



2. History of katuns

Katuns have developed as a necessary activity that follows cattle breeding, as the need of herders to feed their cattle. And cattle breeding has always been the basic economic activity of the population in rural, mountainous parts of Montenegro. The most important areas related to the movement of herders in Montenegro are Prokletiije, Pester, Komovi, Kucke mountains, Durmitor and Sinjajevina.

Katuns were first mentioned in historical documents sometimes in XII century, but archaeological sites found high in Dinara mountains testify that the herders lived there since the time when man-hunter became the man-breeder of livestock, and livestock movement toward the mountains in various periods of history has not been interrupted neither by Roman, nor Slavic, nor Venetian, nor Turkish, nor any other colonization. Although cattle breeding in these areas was not technologically developed, the wealth of the family was reflected by the size of the herd, and practically all rural families have kept cattle. Lack of their own pastures for grazing has pushed herders

A view of Komovi from Bjelasica
1960s, XX century



to move their herds towards high mountainous regions, which would happen usually in May and they would stay there until snow. The pastures in villages were used for collection of hay, for feeding their cattle during winter time. However, in those times, the far greater number of local residents were cattle farmers, and the need for quality grazing was far greater. Therefore, the katuns were passionately guarded, defended, and real battles were fought for pasture lands. In many katuns in Montenegro you can still find old-times headstones that witness how important pastures and katuns were at those time. And another fact goes further to confirm this – those clans that were particularly successful in certain country battles were awarded with pastures in katuns by rulers of Montenegro, in certain mountains that they have never used before. It sometimes occurred, and there are such examples nowadays as well, that the katuns were so distant from the villages of farmers that it would take them couple of days of walking to reach them. However, this distance was not as important as it was important to have quality

pastures for their herds, and even such remote katuns were vehemently defended.

When forming katuns, people would choose sites that are hidden from wind, as summer storms in mountains can be cruel and harsh. They would pick spots that have water nearby, since water, just as pasture, was worth as gold. If water was lacking, they would make snow wells – they would pick deep caves and fill them with snow during winter, and in summer they would slice and melt this snow to make water. Katun huts, which are called differently in different parts of Montenegro – stan, glada, savardak, dubirog – were constructed near each other. This was primarily done as a defense mechanism, so that herders could defend better together, from people and from wild animals. Practically whole villages were moving into the mountains, and the whole social life would temporarily move to katuns, and out there, in completely new circumstances, it would change and adapt and whole new customs and traditions were created.

Gradišnica
1960s, XX century







Štit Mountain

3. The way of life in katuns

Living conditions in katuns are completely different compared to rural areas. In katuns there is no running water in the huts, no electricity, no infrastructure that is common for urban areas and villages. Dirt roads have reached most of the katuns today, and that is practically all infrastructure that is available here. And primary mission of staying in katun is taking care of livestock. These two conditions have shaped the overall way of life in katuns.

Movement of farmers to katuns happens in spring, the date differs from katun to katun, depending on its altitude and vegetation times. There is also something that is called spring katun, at a bit lower altitude where snow melts earlier so they are accessible ear-

lier. Some farmers move twice, once to spring katun, and then to real mountain katun, at higher altitudes. Farmers from the same katun usually move there together, and they return to their villages together. They go to katuns on foot, and only some members of the family remain in the village in order to care for arable land, orchards and meadows. Men usually go to katuns a few days before the rest of the family, to fix whatever the snow and winds have ruined. They bring from the village everything that that they need for simple, herders' life in katun. And every member of the family has a role in the distribution of work. What they all have in common is the incredible hospitality, authentic and not trained but natural and inherited from generation to generation.



Mušino brdo



Suvodo



Kape



Krivi do



Murgaš



Džakovica



Kaludarske kape Katun

A woman in katun

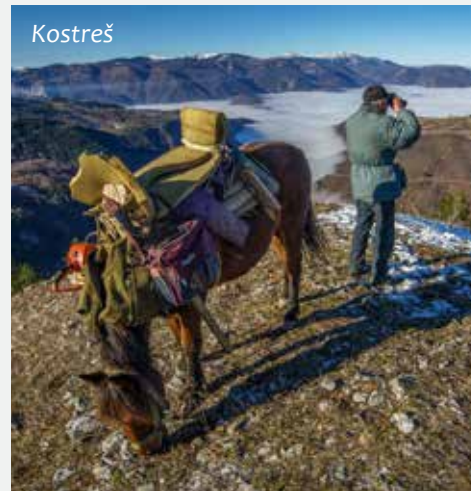
A woman in katun is called 'planinka' which literally means mountain woman. She is the most important link in the life of the katun. Her role, as is the case with other family members as well, is closely related to cattle breeding, but she has an additional duty to care for the whole family. Every morning and every evening when cows and sheep return from the pastures, she has to milk them and then to make all kinds of dairy products that are made in katuns – cheese, kajmak (cream), kisjelo mlijeko (thick, home-made yogurt), jardum (a specialty made of sheep milk), urda (a type of skimmed cheese). This is serious work, and it repeats every day. In the meantime, she prepares meals for the family, cares for the garden as the family stays in katun long enough to plant a garden for basic food. Potatoes grown in katuns are widely known for their taste. The woman's role is also to maintain hygiene in the hut and around it. In the season of mushrooms or blueberries, and after all her other work is done, she will often go to collect the mushrooms and blueberries, and medicinal and aromatic herbs. If any time remains, she will spin wool and knit socks, vests and sweaters for the family members. A life of a woman in katun is a hard one, a lot of hard and tiring work, and this is probably why fewer and fewer girls choose such life, and more and more young men in villages remain unmarried.



A man in katun

The man in the katun usually deals with all the difficult tasks - collecting firewood, fixing and building sheep pens and huts, working with hay, but his key duty is herding. Sometimes his children will help with cows and sheep, but for the fear of wild animals attacking, the shepherd is usually a grown man, who follows the herd and passes incredible distances each and every day. Sometimes the shepherd returns to katun for lunch, but most often he takes his food with him and eats somewhere in the mountain, and returns to katun just before night. The shepherd needs to be prepared for heat, mountain storms, wind and rain. He will also collect mushrooms and blueberries while following his herd. To pass the time, shepherds used to play 'frula', a traditional type of flute played by shepherds in these parts, and this sound used to be very common in the mountains. However, this custom is almost lost today. Upon his return to katun, after making sure that cattle has settled for the night and after the dinner, the shepherd sleeps in the miniature hut just next to the sheep pen, in order to be as close to the herd as possible and to react swiftly in case a wolf or a bear shows up. It is interesting that every shepherd clearly can recognize each of his sheep, no matter how big his herd is, and very often he names his sheep.







Mašnički Katun
Mokra Mountain

Children

There are less and less children in katuns today, because this tradition of going to katuns is mainly practiced by older people. But their grandchildren often come to visit in summer, and there are still some young families with children who are present in katuns. The children also have their share of work in katuns, and they help the grownups in caring for animals and in household chores. Most often they assist shepherds in herding, they bring water from the spring, and nowadays, when collecting mushrooms and blueberries has become profitable activity and grew into the possibility of significant additional income for the family, all family members, including children of all ages, participate in it. There is a big difference between katuns where there are children and those in which there are only elderly households. The whole atmosphere changes when you see healthy, hardworking and cheerful and yet somehow serious and unusually mature children in katuns.

When it gets dark, and all the work is done, the families in katun visit each other, and under the light of candles and gas lanterns, they play cards, drink home-made rakija or a cup of coffee or tea, they talk, and the children play with each other. They all go to sleep early, because the working day in katun begins with the first rays of the sun.



Rovačka brda

4. Cattle breeding

As it was already noted, the whole life in katuns is dedicated to caring for animals, and katuns as settlements were formed due to the need of farmers to provide pastures for their cattle. They usually have cows and sheep, and they are the key reason for moving to katuns. People in katuns will tell you that it is much easier to care for the cattle in the mountain than in the village. Today the pastures are not as crowded as they used to be so one does not need to worry about equal pasture rights, and the pastures are mostly state owned, so there is no need to herd the cows, you just let them go in the morning and they return on their own before night. Sheep, on the other hand, must be followed, because there is always the possibility that they will be attacked by the wolves and other wild animals. Herds of sheep are rarely as big as they used to be in past, there are only a few examples of families with herds of more than 100 sheep. Cows are kept mainly for milk, while the sheep are kept and for milk and for meat. In the past farmers used to sell wool as well, but there is no demand for it today, and very often you can see wool dumped in the mountain after the shearing. What is significant is that the quality of milk and meat on the mountain is far better than that from the intensive livestock production, although yields are lower. When cows and sheep graze on intact and absolutely unpolluted pastures, then this is virtually organic production, and consumers in the western world are prepared to pay significant amount of

money for such high-quality and healthy products. That's why lambs bred in katuns are export goods, and though we do not have large quantities, the quality we have is highly competitive.

Along with sheep and cows, farmers take other animals to katuns. Very often you will see pigs and piglets, but also chicken, and less often goats. It is a must to take horses and dogs to katuns as well. Horses are used to transport things from village to katun and vice versa, for getting firewood to katun, for transporting hay. There is a custom to let horses wander through the mountains freely once they are not needed. They then gather in herds on their own, and can often be seen bareback and allowed to enjoy the freedom and rich green pastures, and this scene so reminds of the herds of wild horses in areas where human foot has not yet set. Before the winter the owners pick them up and return them back to the villages. Dogs are generally Šarplaninac breed (in cynology known as Yugoslavian Shepherd Dog), but even if they are some other breed or mixed breed, it must be a dog that is taught to always be with the herd of sheep, and to inform the shepherd about the presence of foreigners or wild animals. They will seem dangerous and vicious, but if you approach them patiently and cautiously, most often you will realize that they are in fact good and gentle and it is only their job to look dangerous.

Zagorska Iokva Katun
Cmiljevica



Rasova Katun
Bjelasica





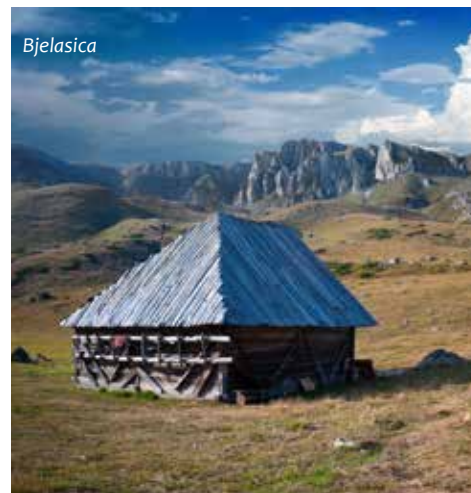
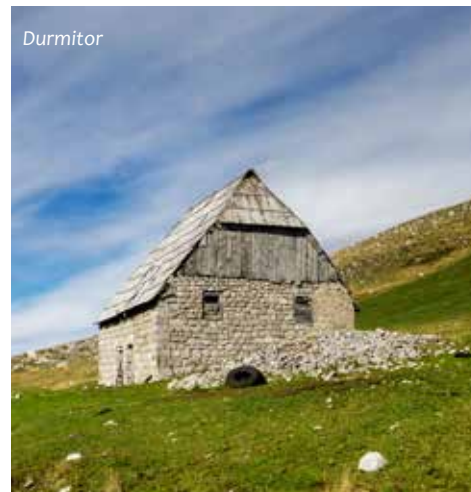
Pešića rupa
Bjelasica

5. Architecture and interior of katuns

Katun huts in different parts of Montenegro were built in different ways, all depending on the environment and natural materials that are available in different areas. In the mountains such as Bjelasica and Komovi on Andrijevica side, where forests are abundant, they are made of wood. On Sinjajevina, Durmitor or Komovi on Podgorica side, on rocky mountains with no forests, the huts and all auxiliary buildings, even sheep pens, are made of stone. Common to them all is that in each case people used those materials that were available on site, and this is why, even though the huts are constructed by human hands, they look as continuation of the nature, they are so well adapted to the environment and do not stand out from the wild beauty that surrounds them.

Katun huts are usually small, with one room and small partitioned space that serves as a kitchen. Sometimes people build a small hut just next to the main one, which is used specifically for milk processing and storage of cheese and cream. Cabins are generally covered by cut timber, in past they used to be covered with straw and fir branches, while today some farmers use modern materials. The main huts generally have no floor, they are set up directly on the ground. It used to be because in the

middle of the hut there was a fireplace with cauldron, but the custom of the no flooring held to this day. Women in katuns say that, although it sounds illogical, it is much easier to fight with the dust (and dust is very inconvenient during the process of making cheese and cream) when there is no floor at all than when you have wooden or concrete floor. It is interesting that the thresholds on doors are always high, likely that the animals would not enter, while the doorframe are very low, so you have to duck carefully while you enter the hut. None of the villagers know how to explain why this is so. The assumption is that this is because the openings in the huts should be as small as possible in order to better preserve the inside temperature. Probably for the same reason there are no windows on the huts, and it is usually quite dark inside. The furniture in the huts is very simple - there are improvised wooden beds that are made of beams and planks, the old, traditional mattresses made of wool or straw, usually more mattresses than beds, in case the guests come. On the walls of the huts there are shelves, and they contain everything that is needed for several months long stay at the mountain - all dishes, pots and bowls with milk, groceries, candles and lanterns. An indispensable item in every cabin is a firewood stove, because it is used



for heating – nights in the mountains are very cold even in summer, but also for food preparation and processing of milk - because there is no electricity. The most commonly used firewood stove is a so-called ciganac (a gypsy stove), which looks like an improvisation, but warms up the space quickly, is excellent for baking and cooking, it is very easy to maintain and is very light so it can be easily moved around.

Next to katun huts there are numerous auxiliary buildings, all dedicated to cattle - pens, stables, pigsties, those miniature huts where shepherds sleep. Almost always there is a water spring somewhere near, and a large wooden trough where all the animals drink water. The entire atmosphere, with all these simple constructions, looks idyllic, serene and soothing. And to anyone who comes from outside it is evident at the first glance that katuns are truly authentic, a unique cultural treasure, an old and well-preserved tradition, the unique value that can rarely be found elsewhere in Europe. That is why tourists who return from Montenegro, in addition to photos of our beautiful mountains, usually publish photos of katuns, shepherds and their wives, and often write stories about katuns and famous hospitality of local farmers.

Gusle
Montenegrin national instrument



6. The customs and traditions in katuns

Katuns in Montenegro are a real, alive treasury of numerous customs and specific culture and traditions preserved from the old times till today. The way of life in katun impacted, and does so today, a number of other things such as gastronomy, activities related to leisure and

entertainment. What is most interesting is a very close relationship and co-existence of man and nature which is impossible to see in urban areas. It is this exposure to nature that influenced certain habits and customs to form, unique to katuns.

Gastronomy

Distance of katuns and inability of farmers to frequently go and get groceries in villages have influenced katun gastronomy to center around those ingredients that are produced in katuns, or can be collected in nature around them. In both cases, ingredients are of high-quality, completely natural and unpolluted, which is a genuine rarity in the 21st century and it gives this type of cuisine a tremendous value.

Locals bring with them or regularly get only wheat and corn flour, salt, oil, sugar and coffee. Cattle breeding means that families enjoy the abundance of dairy products, and it is these products that represent the backbone of most meals in katuns. Some of the famous dishes are kacamak (a dish made of wheat or corn flour, potatoes and cheese), kukuruza (traditional

corn bread), gotov or cicvara (melted cheese and cream cooked with corn flour), priganice (fried bread dough), beans or potato stew, and even simple boiled or roasted potato with mountain cheese and cream has a special taste here. A home-made bread, of locally produced flour, that used to be baked directly on hotplate and on embers, and today is baked in that famous firewood stove 'ciganac', when served warm along with cheese and cream is unusually tasty and all the guests who come from abroad regularly mention it. Meals in katuns have abundance of calories, in order to provide energy needed to all family members who over the day have numerous and exhausting tasks to handle. Especially delicious dish you can find in mountains only is called ko-prive or skrob, and is made from nettle collected in the mountain, or zeljanica, a pie made of wild spinach also



Kačamak



Spinich pie
and thick yogurt



Kukuruza – Corn bread



Roasted meat



Prosciutto, cream, yogurt
and pickled peppers



Patispanja
traditional cake



Spinich pie - Pita zeljanica

collected in nature. Sheep and lambs are rarely slaughtered for food, because in katuns it is hard to preserve raw meat, but this is done only when farmers know that all the meat will be eaten quickly - when the great works such as mowing and hay collection are done and the whole extended family and friends come to help, or during mountain fairs when katuns are full of guests from all sides. A particular delicacy in katuns is lamb roasted on a spit, which takes half a day to prepare, but when it is finally done you understand that it was worth your while to wait.

Even all the drinks here are home-made. Juices and liqueurs are made from pine cones, pine needles, elder tree flowers, wild strawberries, blueberries, raspberries, blackberries. Tea is never purchased, locals collect various medicinal and aromatic herbs, dry them, mix them to their preference and prepare perfect hot beverages. Sweets are rarely prepared here, today people buy them when they can, and still keep them to serve the guests. What children in past used to do for refreshment while herding was taking the snow from still frozen heaps of snow that in mountains can be found even in summer, sprinkle it with a little bit of sugar, and milk a sheep directly over it all. The children used to call this katun ice-cream.

Montenegrin national folklore dance



Games

At old times katuns were full of life, a lot of grownups, youth and children were here, all of whom had their ways of entertainment. There are many poems and songs that were designed and sung in katuns, with gusle (national instrument in Montenegro) or without it. Children had their special games - goats or ring (hide and search for rings), hen (group game involving both adults and children), float (when you need accuracy to throw a stone at a particular place) and the like. Young people had their games, male and female, male usually related to competitions in strength or skills, and female games were for fun. They regularly organized 'sijelo', gatherings, where they danced and sang, mostly in the evenings. And the most important events in katuns were fairs, organized on different dates in different mountains, usually around St. Peter's or St. Elia's day, and they were very well attended. In katun or on mountain where these fairs were held the whole family would gather, relatives and friends would come, along with people from the other katuns. This is a tradition that is still kept, though to a lesser extent, and in many katuns you can still see unusual crowds of people on fair days.



Handicrafts

To make use of the time, and to create something that they don't have to buy, both shepherds and their wives are skilled to make beautiful things with their own hands. Women generally work with wool, they spin wool and knit famous woolen socks called 'bjelace', vests and sweaters, hats and scarves. These are the things that are most needed by the family members. And if there is enough time and skill, then they also crochet and embroider. At past times they used to weave, they would make carpets and blankets and woven bags called 'dzaklje' that can still be seen in the mountains, but women who make them are really rare. Men are generally skilled with wood, and in katuns they will often tell you that they have built their huts with their own hands. And some of them make various other things – wooden barrels used for cheese, wooden dishes for cream, canes used by almost all shepherds, and sometimes even 'frula', a traditional flute, or gusle, if they are really skilled. Even today you will often see shepherds in the meadow, carving wood while following their herds.





7. Katuns today - needs and possibilities

Much has been said about the tradition of going to summer pastures being less and less practiced each year, and less and less farmers are present in the mountains. However, maintaining this tradition is extremely important, not only from a cultural point of view, but also for many other reasons. Our ancestors knew how to take full advantage of the mountain, to use it for their economic prosperity but not to devastate it, while today when options are far greater we have still not found a way to valorize the mountains in a sustainable manner. Of course, katuns as we have described them in this publication, will cease to exist at certain point, unless we find a way to adapt this tradition to the modern times, and provide the farmers with living conditions that modern times can offer. Young people will continue to avoid cattle breeding in this manner, the old ones will disappear, and katuns will remain empty and eventually collapse. It would be devastating for several reasons. Having cattle graze in the mountains is very important for maintenance of pasturelands, which is important economic resource, and a precondition for any further discussion about farming. Cattle breeding as sector will lose its quality. Milk and meat produced in the mountains are of incomparably better quality than milk and meat that come from intensive production on farms,

and this should be an advantage of small Montenegrin economy today and in future. And one beautiful and long tradition will become a story only.

In order to avoid this, it is necessary to make efforts to support the cattle breeding in katuns, and encourage continuation of existence of katuns as authentic settlements with all the necessary facilities that modern times can offer. Solar systems are utmost necessity for katuns, and although efforts in this direction have already started, they need to step up and solar systems should be made available to absolutely all katuns in Montenegro. It is necessary to work on the water supply in katuns, on providing stable mobile telephony coverage in the mountains as there are still katuns that are cut off from the world. It is necessary to protect the architectural heritage of the katuns, while making katun huts comfortable for life. And it is necessary to create a tourist offer around the katuns, so that locals have the possibility of additional revenues and are further encouraged to stay in katuns. And finally, we need to make great efforts and to devise measures to make young people see cattle breeding and katuns as profitable business, so that they may decide to continue the centuries-old traditions of their ancestors.



Vranjak Katun
Bjelasica

