



## **SAVING THE UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE SITE OF GJIROKASTRA**

**Gjirokastra Conservation and Development Organization (GCDO)  
Report for 2008**

## INTRODUCTION

2008 has been an important year for the efforts to conserve and restore the historic town of Gjirokastra and to promote the values of the UNESCO World Heritage Site. The government of Albania in conjunction with UNESCO has initiated the restoration of five key historic buildings, while the Gjirokastra Conservation and Development Organization has played a central part to galvanise national and international partnerships, to fundraise, and to implement a well-considered programme of projects in Gjirokastra. The GCDO would like to thank the many organizations that support its work, in particular two principal donors: the Packard Humanities Institute and the Philanthropic Collaborative (New York).

### Partnerships

In 2008 the GCDO has worked in partnership with a number of local actors and international organizations to advance the efforts to save Gjirokastra. At a local level it works closely with the Gjirokastra Municipality, the Ministry of Tourism, Culture, Youth and Sports, the Regional Directory of National Culture in Gjirokastra, Institute of Monuments of Culture in Tirana and Office for the Administration and Coordination of the City Museum of Gjirokastra. At a regional/national level it has worked in partnership with the National Confederation of Artisans, and the Butrint Foundation. At an international level, focused on projects within Gjirokastra, it has developed close partnerships with Culture Heritage without Borders (funded by the Swedish Development Agency) UNDP – GEF Small Grants Programme, GTZ (the German Government's Technical Support Agency), Swiss Contact etc.

### Staffing

The GCDO has extended its staff base to include two full time employees; 2 part-time employees and a host of trainees, volunteers and a Peace Corps volunteer. The GCDO receives assistance from a variety of international specialists affiliated to the UK registered charity, the Butrint Foundation ([www.butrint.org](http://www.butrint.org)).

### Legal Status

The GCDO is now a registered Albanian NGO. It is funded by the Packard Humanities Institute, with generous assistance from the Philanthropic Collaborative (New York), UNDP, and a variety of other donors.

## GCDO Projects in 2008

### 1. “A Chronicle in Stone”, a new museum for Gjirokastra Castle.

A detailed proposal for a new museum has been finalized and published. The \$700,000 proposal envisages the new museum being constructed within the Castle's extensive vaulted galleries. It aims to be a modern and innovative installation which will appeal to both Albanians and international tourists and act as an interpretation centre for both the Gjirokastra UNESCO World Heritage Site and the wider region.

The proposal has been widely distributed and fundraising is ongoing. So far the New York based Philanthropic Collaborative has agreed kindly to support the project and there is plenty of interest from other parties. The Albanian government has committed substantial co-funding to repair the castle roof. The Museum, “A Chronicle in Stone”, takes its name from a novel about the city by Gjirokastra's prize winning author, Ismail Kadare.

Phase 1, the preparation of the gallery space, will start in 2009 with the intention that the galleries will be a well-prepared exhibition space by the end of the year. Phase 2 of the project, the fitting out of the museum, will begin in 2010.



**Photo 1: The Castle galleries which will house the future museum**



## 2. Solar energy to illuminate the Castle's vaulted entrance gallery

The project to illuminate the 50 meter-long vaulted entrance gallery using a 1.7 kilowatt photo-voltaic array, the first renewable energy project of its kind in Albania, was completed in early 2009. The solar panels have been mounted on the castle roof where they will generate 70% of the power for the new low-energy lights.

Following on from the success of this project, the GCDO is fundraising to install more solar panels to provide for 70% of the new museum's lighting needs. The 2008 solar energy project was co-funded by GCDO and UNDP/GEF.



**Photo 2 & 3: the Gallery before and after the illumination project**



**Photo 4: the photo voltaic panels on the Castle roof**

### **3. The creation of a conservation and restoration school in Gjirokastra**

The GCDO has formed a partnership with the Swedish-funded NGO Cultural Heritage without Borders to create a three year international conservation school teaching traditional building techniques. The first two week training programme took place in the summer of 2008 with over 20 students from the Balkan region and international trainers attending. The project will see the creation of six restoration camps and result in the renovation of two Category A historic buildings in the town. It is hoped that the school will help train a new generation of skilled craftsmen equal to the challenge of conserving Gjirokastra's historic buildings.



**Photo 5: the restoration camp in Gjirokastra in September 2008**

### **4. Information for tourists**

The GCDO has continued its support of projects created in 2007 to provide a modern and informative tourism information service to Gjirokastra. In 2008 a set of eight illustrated interpretation panels were created for the Gjirokastra Castle, and these will be mounted at strategic points within the castle in the spring 2009. A guidebook for Gjirokastra has been researched and written and will go to press early in 2009 and new information leaflets for the Antigonea National Park and the Zekate house have also been prepared and will be published shortly. Meanwhile the GCDO continues to provide logistical support to the Tourist Information Center which it established in 2007.



## 5. Development of regional crafts

The GCDO has a raft of initiatives ongoing to help develop and support traditional craft industries in the town. This included a very successful traditional arts and crafts fair in the summer (attended by artisans from all over Albania), as well as the development of an Arts and Crafts training centre (or the Artisan Incubator), which should be opened in 2009. The latter is being co-funded by UNDP with Greek government money. The GCDO is collaborating with Swiss Contact, a Swiss Governmental Agency and local partners.



**Photo 6 & 7: the Gjirokastra Artisan fair held on Heritage Day in September 08**

## 6. The Communist Tunnel and the Cold War heritage

A remarkable network of nuclear bunkers built in Gjirokastra in the 1970s and 80s to protect the party elite from nuclear attack has been opened up by the GCDO for tourist visits. The 50 room network tells an extraordinary story of cold-war paranoia, and following on from a programme to record, clean and illuminate, have proved of great interest to tourists. The ultimate goal is to create a museum to Albania's communist past inside the tunnels. The project to open up the nuclear bunkers was a joint collaboration between the GCDO and the Gjirokastra municipality.



**Photo 8 & 9: tourists visiting the tunnel - work on cleaning and recording the nuclear bunkers**

## **7. The restoration of cobbled stairs next to the Asim Zeneli High School**

An important cobble-stone stairway next to Gjirokastra's Asim Zeneli High School has been rehabilitated including decorative elements of stone and green areas. The project saw the reinstatement of the public area, which for a while has been strewn with debris and vegetation. The stairway creates new access to the Zekate House and the Ethnographic Museum and provides a relaxing environment for the young students of the High School nearby. The project was funded by the GCDO in collaboration with the Municipality of Gjirokastra,





**Photo 10 & 11: The stairs during the restoration works**

## **8. Advocacy and Awareness**

In addition to a wide variety of multi-disciplinary projects aimed at advancing conservation and promoting much-needed tourism, the GCDO has led the field in terms of national and international advocacy to raise awareness about the plight of the city. As a result of the growing stature and expertise of the GCDO, one staff member was invited by ICCROM to undertake a month's training in historic building management and conservation in Rome, while another undertook a fact-finding mission to Sweden, at the invitation of SIDA.

## **9. Training**

In 2008 staff have participated in training schemes, workshops and conferences organised by the World Bank, ICCROM, and The London Travel Fair to name a few. The local GCDO team has benefited from training courses provided by UNDP, Regional Environmental Centre, USAID/EDEM and ICCROM. One GCDO employee, at the invitation of the World Bank, has helped develop a regional World Bank “community development” program based on cultural heritage.