



Vilkovo - The DeltaTown

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Dear Reader

I am delighted to present to you this short description of Vilkovo - the historic town that is the "capital" of the Ukrainian part of the River Danube delta. If you are visiting our town for the first time - a hearty greeting to you! If you are returning here - then welcome back!

Our town has experienced great changes over the last two and half centuries since it was established. It has been shaped both by the natural forces of the River Danube, the creativity of its culturally diverse population, and the tides of history as Vilkovo fell under different rulers.

This booklet provides an excellent introduction to the main features of the town and the map on the back cover will help you to find your way around the old centre. Today, Vilkovo is again undergoing rapid changes as the region and the country as a whole becomes re-integrated into Europe as a whole. However, thanks to the efforts of many local businesses, not least Salix Ltd who prepared this guide, there are now encouraging signs of a recovery. We shall seek to improve our community, while maintaining the unique natural and cultural heritage of the town.

I hope you will enjoy your visit in Vilkovo, and we shall always extend a warm welcome to you.



Ivan V. Tymoshenko
Mayor of Vilkovo



The Kilia delta of the River Danube

The delta of the River Danube begins some way upstream of Izmail, where it bifurcates in to the Tulcea and Kilia branches. The Tulcea branch then divides again to form the Sulina (central) and St George (southern) branches.

The northern Kilia branch marks the boundary between Romania and Ukraine. It carries just over half of the water flowing into the delta. The sediments deposited by the river rapidly build up new islands and sand bars, which cause the Kilia branch to split in to many smaller channels downstream of Vilково. In fact, so active is the formation of new land that the Kilia part of the delta is one of the fastest growing deltas in the world - it changes its shape not only year by year but sometimes from season to season!

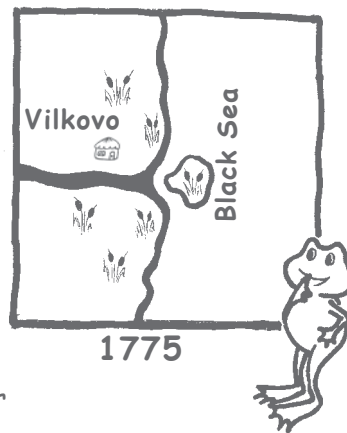


Vilkovo Town

The town of Vilkovo was founded in 1775. It is situated on left bank of the River Danube, at the point where the Kilia branch of the Danube began to build a new coastal delta about 300 years ago. The first settlers actually lived on the seashore.

Today, the Belgorodsky channel (called *Goosevo* by the locals), which is a side-arm of the Kilia branch, divides the town in two parts: the mainland and Belgorodsky Island.

Vilkovo is the youngest town on the Danube in Ukraine, but it is also the most famous. The main feature of the town is the network of waterways, known as "yeriks". These were formed when the inhabitants built up small islands from the sediments, and on which they built their houses.

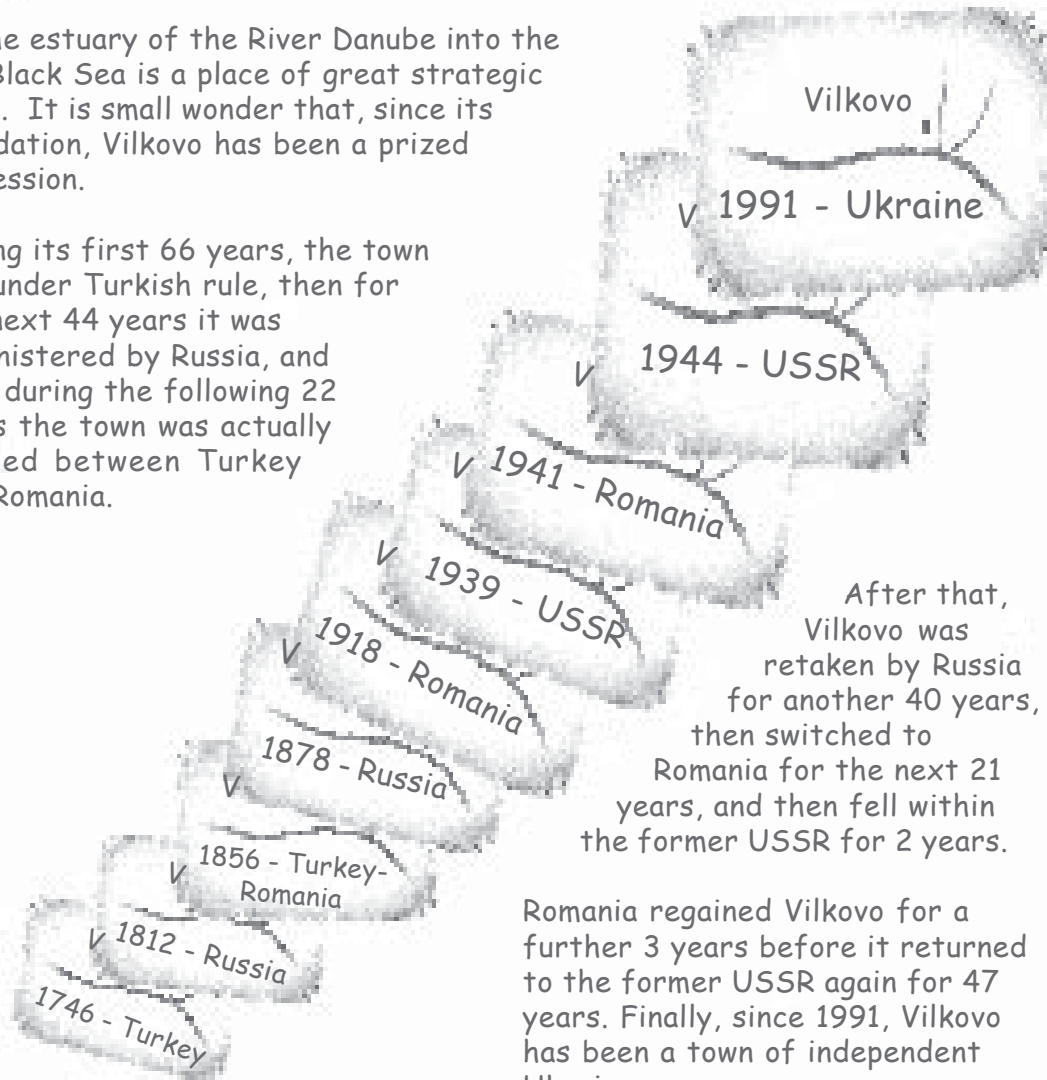


There were no roads in the past, but the narrow waterways allowed people to move around by boat. The original system of waterways still exists in the old town and provides delightful strolls among the cottages and gardens. However, many of the waterways need some work to restore them to their former beauty and glory.

A See-Saw History

The estuary of the River Danube into the Black Sea is a place of great strategic value. It is small wonder that, since its foundation, Vilkovo has been a prized possession.

During its first 66 years, the town was under Turkish rule, then for the next 44 years it was administered by Russia, and then during the following 22 years the town was actually divided between Turkey and Romania.



An Island Home

Vilkovo is a town built on marshland and very different from the typical towns of the region. People have established their homes and gardens on islands dug out of the silty marshes. Every year, the island dwellers have to repair and restore their islands to prevent them from sinking back into the marsh. The soil is dug out of a trench around the island: this practice serves to keep the trench clear for boat traffic and also provides a defence against flooding.

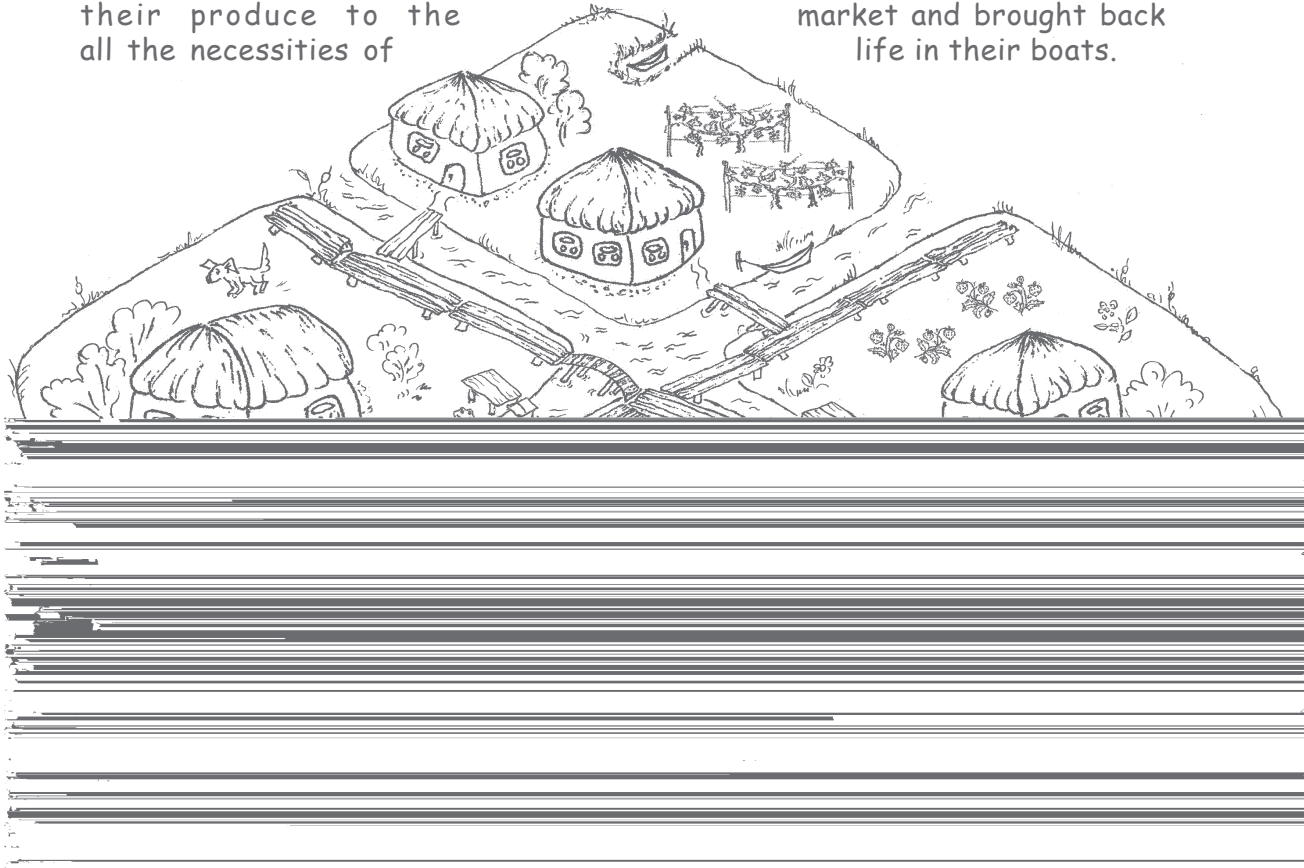


The Waterways - “Yeriks”

The old heart of Vilково has a system of waterways (called "yeriks") instead of the streets. Yeriks played a very important role in Vilково in the past. They served as roads and water-pipes, and the endless deposition of river silt in them provided building-materials, soil and fertilizer.

The yeriks also bore the boats that connecting townspeople with their produce to the all the necessities of

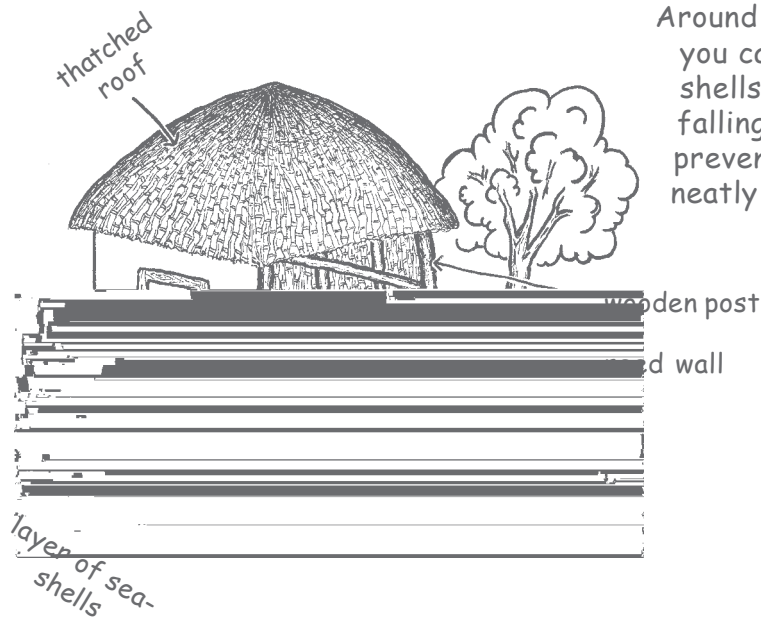
were the only mode of transport, the mainland. They carried market and brought back life in their boats.



The House

People in Vilkovo use several techniques when building their house. They build the walls from reeds, plastered with a mixture of silt and straw. The stove is built from bricks made out of silt. In the past, the floor was simply the bare earth surface again plastered with silt and straw and covered with a layer of sea-shells in case the floor became wet. The roof was made from thatched reeds. The house was very warm in winter, but it was cool in hot summers and dry even during high water levels.

If the house became wet during the spring flood (this happened quite often when the islands were still new and low), then it was quite simple to dry it out: the sea-shells were taken outside and the wet plaster was removed and replaced once the reed walls had also dried.



Around the base of the house you can see a belt of sea-shells that receive rainwater falling off the roof and so prevent mud splashing on the neatly whitewashed walls.

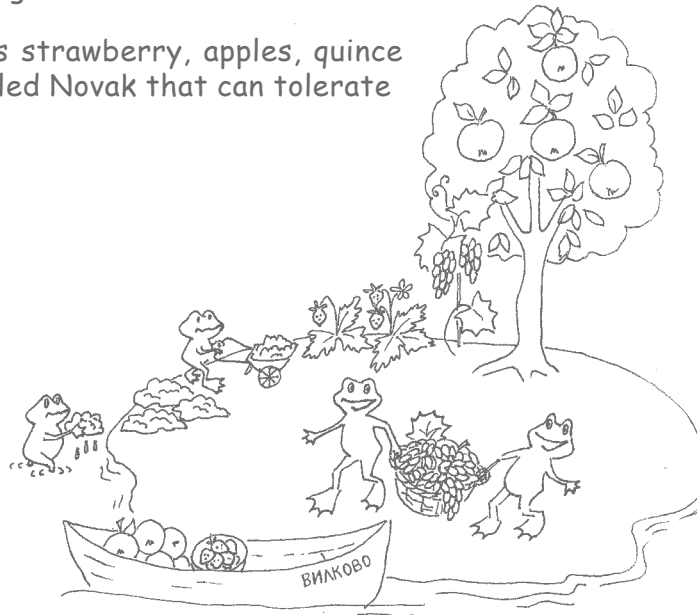
The Vegetable Garden

The early settlers in Vilково soon established vegetable gardens around their houses on the islands. The results were amazing, with luxuriant growth and high yields.

The main fertilizer for the gardens is the Danube silt. Each year, when the water level is low, people dig out the accumulated silt and pile it on the banks of their island.

The silt stays on the bank till the following spring so that it weathers and becomes crumbly; then it can be spread out. Consequently, vegetable productivity is greater than usual and the plots themselves grow higher and less vulnerable to flooding.

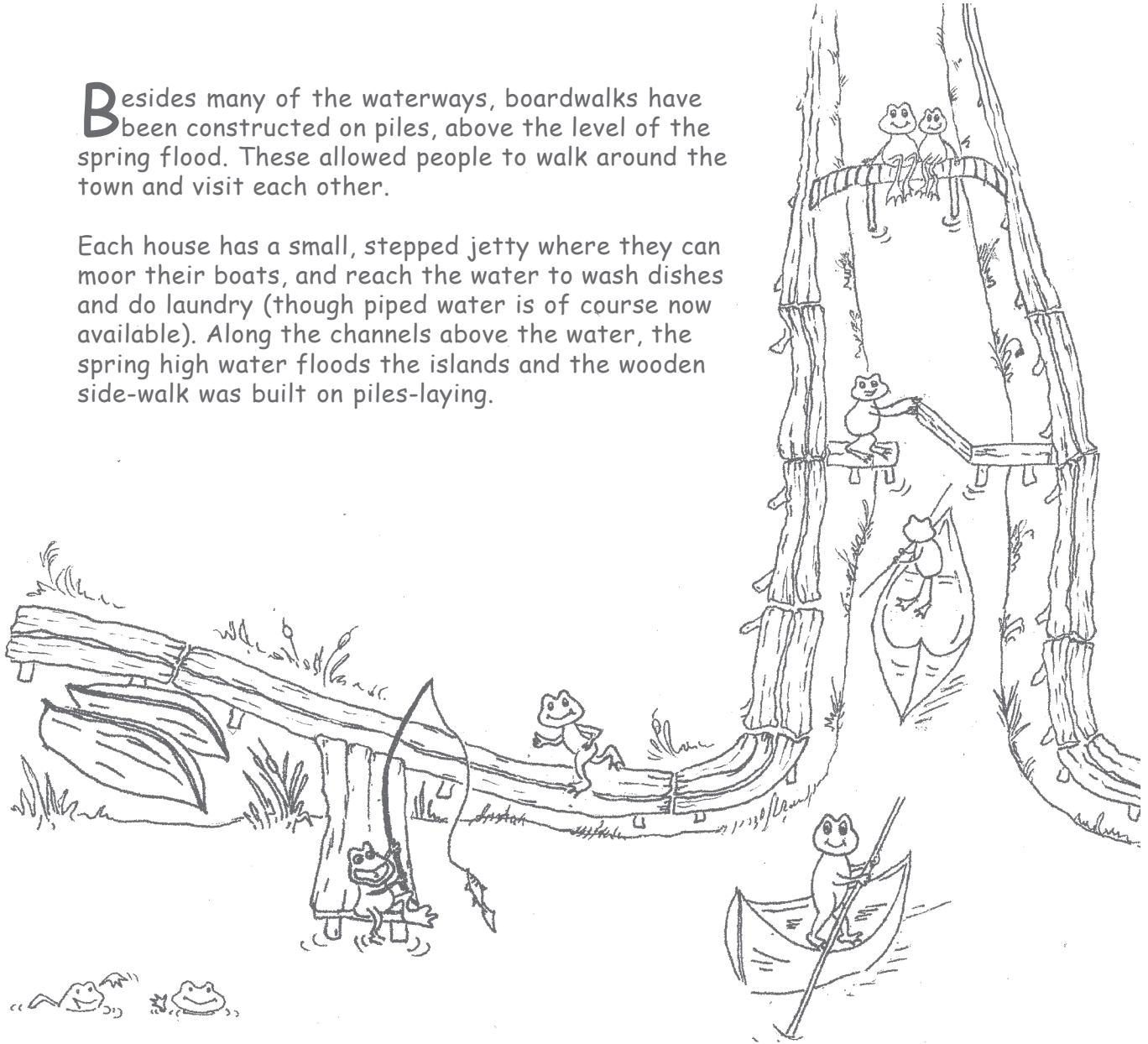
Vilково is famous for its strawberry, apples, quince and grapes (a variety called Novak that can tolerate high water tables).



Boardwalks, Jetties . . .

Besides many of the waterways, boardwalks have been constructed on piles, above the level of the spring flood. These allowed people to walk around the town and visit each other.

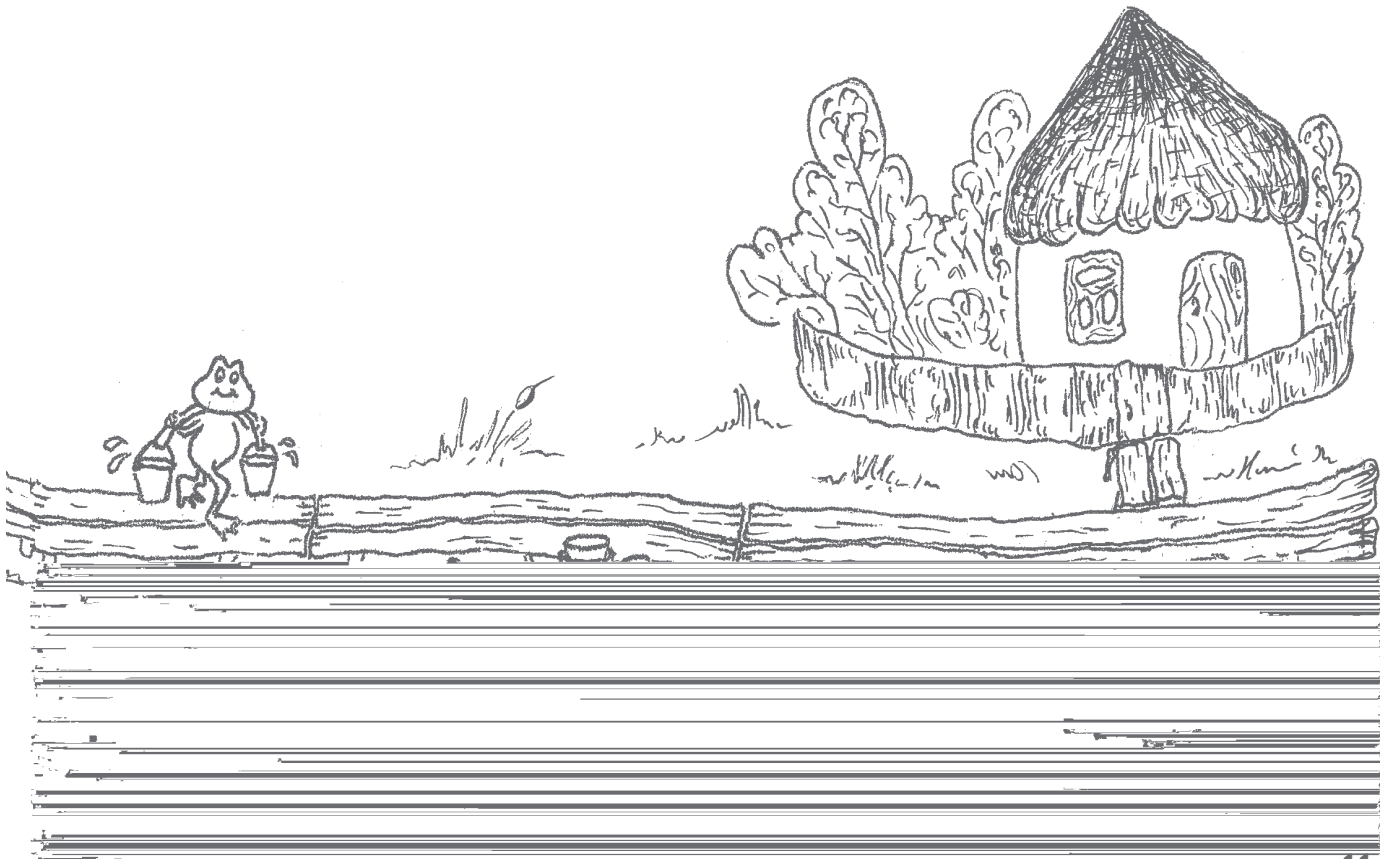
Each house has a small, stepped jetty where they can moor their boats, and reach the water to wash dishes and do laundry (though piped water is of course now available). Along the channels above the water, the spring high water floods the islands and the wooden side-walk was built on piles-laying.



. . . and Bridges

The jetties need three steps to allow for the fluctuating water levels - it can change by more than a metre during the year.

The boardwalks are complemented by elegant bridges that cross over the waterways and give nice views along them. The lower bridges can be lifted up to allow boats to pass.



Seagull Boats



The traditional Vilково boat is an exact copy of a Cossack type known as a "seagull". The seagulls were used by the Cossacks from Zaporozhiya as fighting craft: to avoid wasting time on turning, the boats were built with two bows.

These days, the inhabitants of Vilково call such craft "herring boats" since they are used by the local fishermen who catch the famous Danube herring in the river.

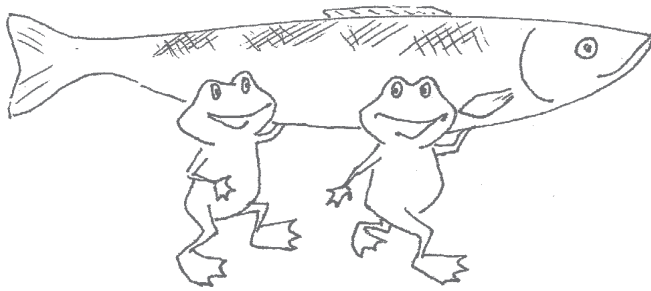
The boats can also be used for fishing some way out to sea - where sturgeon can be found.

There is no shortage of boats in Vilково: there are at least 5,000 of them presently afloat - or more than 2 boats per family!



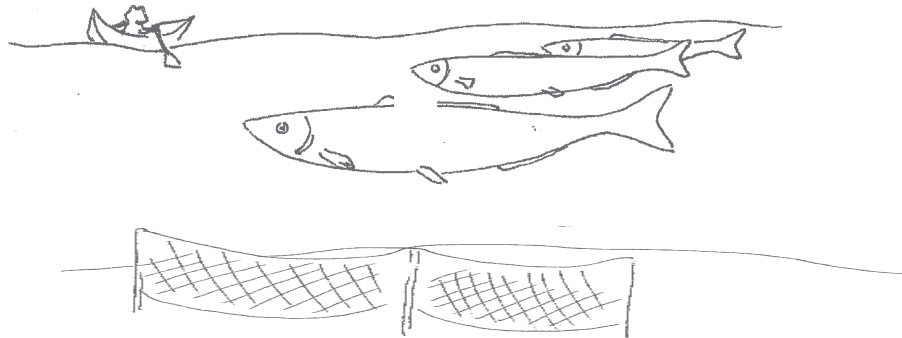
The Danube Herring

The Danube herring lives in the Black Sea but spawns in the River Danube. It can be caught chiefly when it comes to the river on its annual spawning migration. It is generally fished for at night.



Fresh herring is boiled (especially as a soup) or fried and is extremely tasty

In former times, Danube herring was a prized delicacy in restaurants in Moscow and Paris. People in Vilково salt the herring and eat it during the year until the next spring.



The Lipovans

In 1654, Patriarch Nikon carried out some reforms of religious practices in the Russian orthodox church. However, some of the congregation found them unacceptable so they were branded as heretics and persecuted (many were put to death by fire). The dissidents were known as "old believers" or "Lipovans" - a term derived from "filipovan" or followers of Philip Vasiliev, who led the schism.



The Lipovans fled from their home villages and dispersed widely; however, quite a few came and settled in new villages throughout the Danube delta. A bronze statute depicting an early Lipovanian settler stands at the Vilkovo boat station.

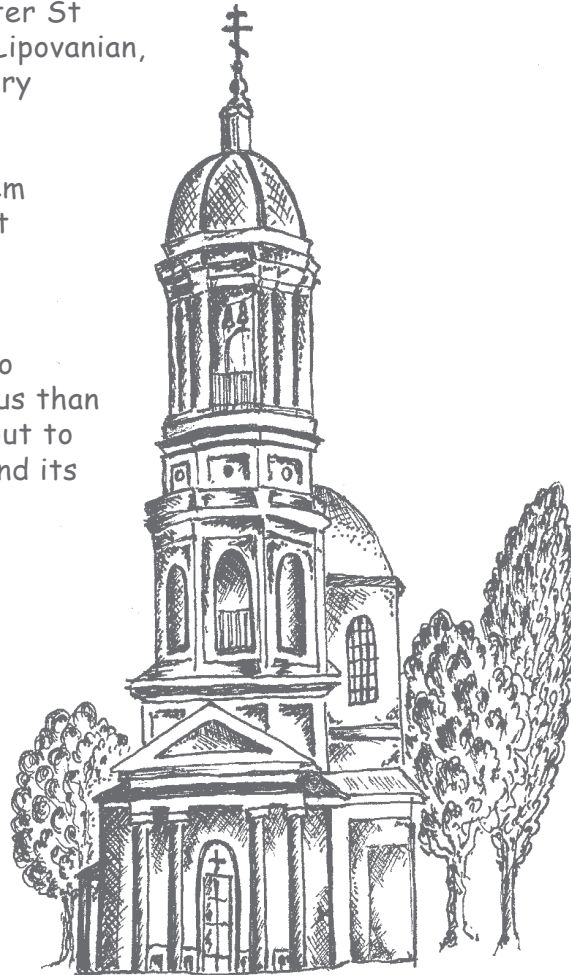
Lipovans in Vilkovo speak an archaic form of Russian, preserved for 300 years. The men have beards and wear their shirts over their trousers, tied up with the belt. They have maintained their old religious practices, such crossing themselves with two (instead of three) fingers, they bow to the floor when praying, and parade around the church for christenings and other holy events. In public worship, Lipovans sit on special cushions and use a rosary.

Nicholas the Miracle-Maker

There are two churches and one chapel in Vilkovo: all of them named after St Nicholas. One of the churches is Lipovanian, and the other follows contemporary orthodox practice.

This focus on St Nicholas may seem surprising until you realise that St Nicholas is the patron saint of fishermen, sailors and travellers.

In the past, when the boats had no motors, it was even more dangerous than now to go fishing (especially far out to sea). So, no boat set out until it and its crew had been blessed.



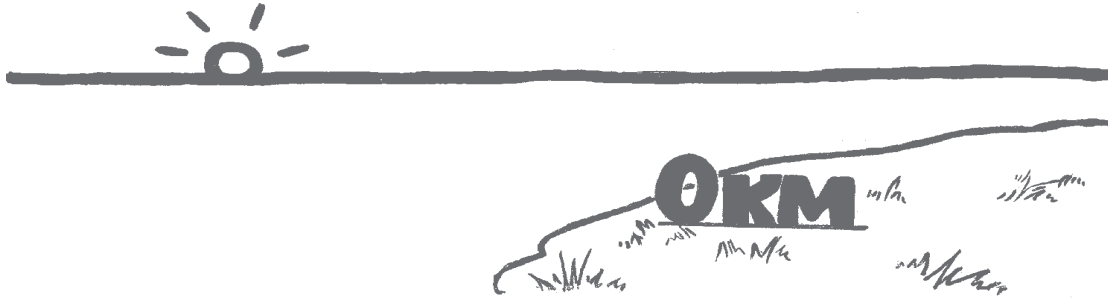
Danube Biosphere Reserve

Because of the very active delta-forming processes, the Kilia delta supports a flora and fauna of worldwide importance. For example, the delta is home to over 950 plant species and nearly 260 bird species, many of which are listed in Red Data books.

Any visitor to the delta in spring or summer will quickly appreciate the natural wealth of the Danube Biosphere Reserve: vast reedbeds stretching to the horizon, lily-coated lakes, and islands of willows and poplars.



There are flocks of pelicans, cormorants, ducks, geese and spoonbills while an occasional sea-eagle soars overhead. In the water there is a myriad of aquatic plants, with millions of frogs and toads jumping and splashing. And the angler can have a rewarding day trying his luck to catch a giant carp or catfish.



In 1967, a 1 km-wide coastal strip of the Kilia delta was declared a reserve.

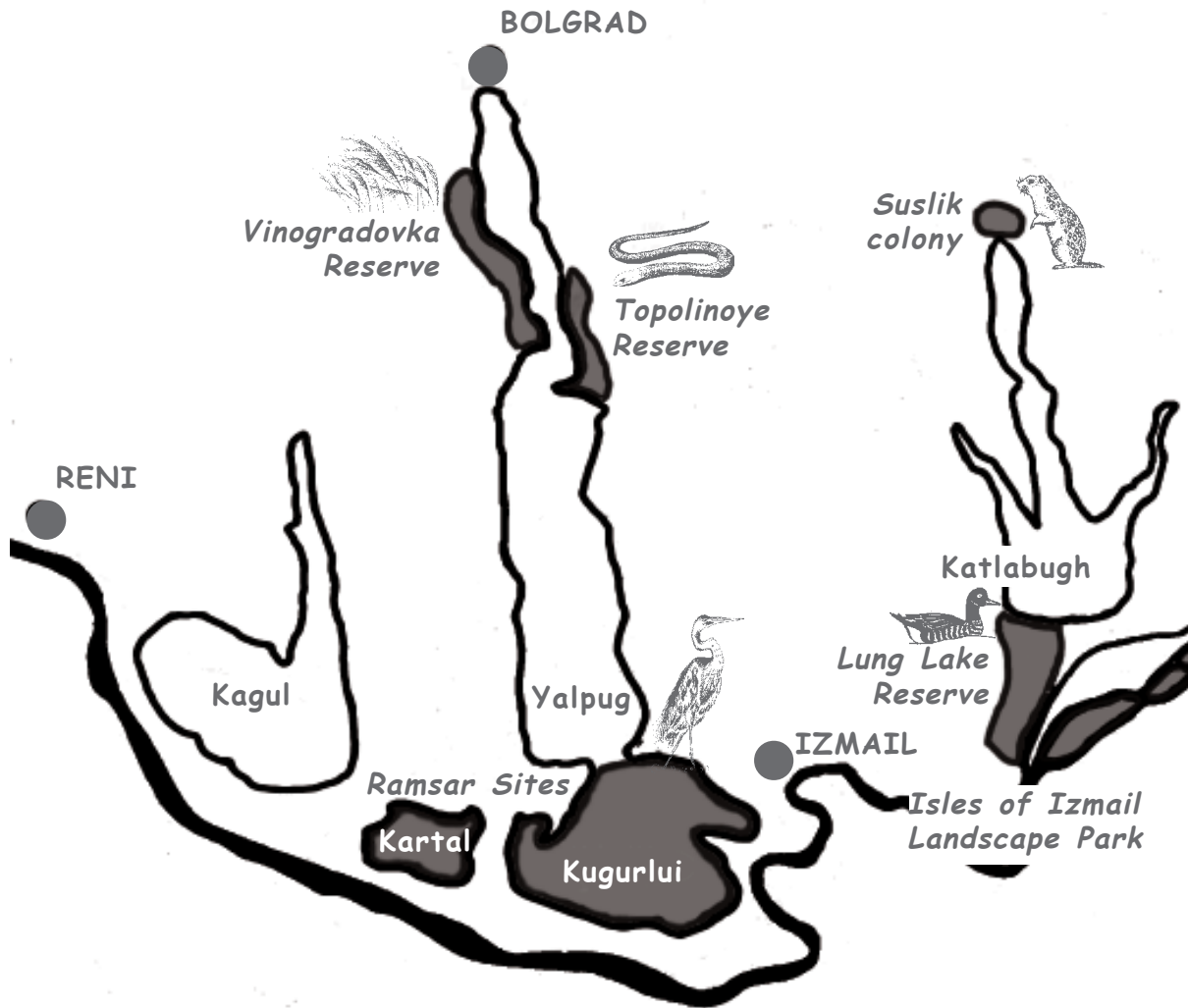
Between 1973 and 1978, the reserve area was increased to 14,851 ha as part of the Black Sea State Reserve.

In 1981, the protected area of the delta became a reserve in its own right, known as "Dunaiski Plavni".

By a Decree of the President of Ukraine in 1998, Dunaiski Plavni became a biosphere reserve and in February 1999 UNESCO included the Danube Biosphere Reserve in the global network of biosphere reserves; it also formed a component part of the Danube Delta Cross Border Biosphere Reserve Romania-Ukraine.

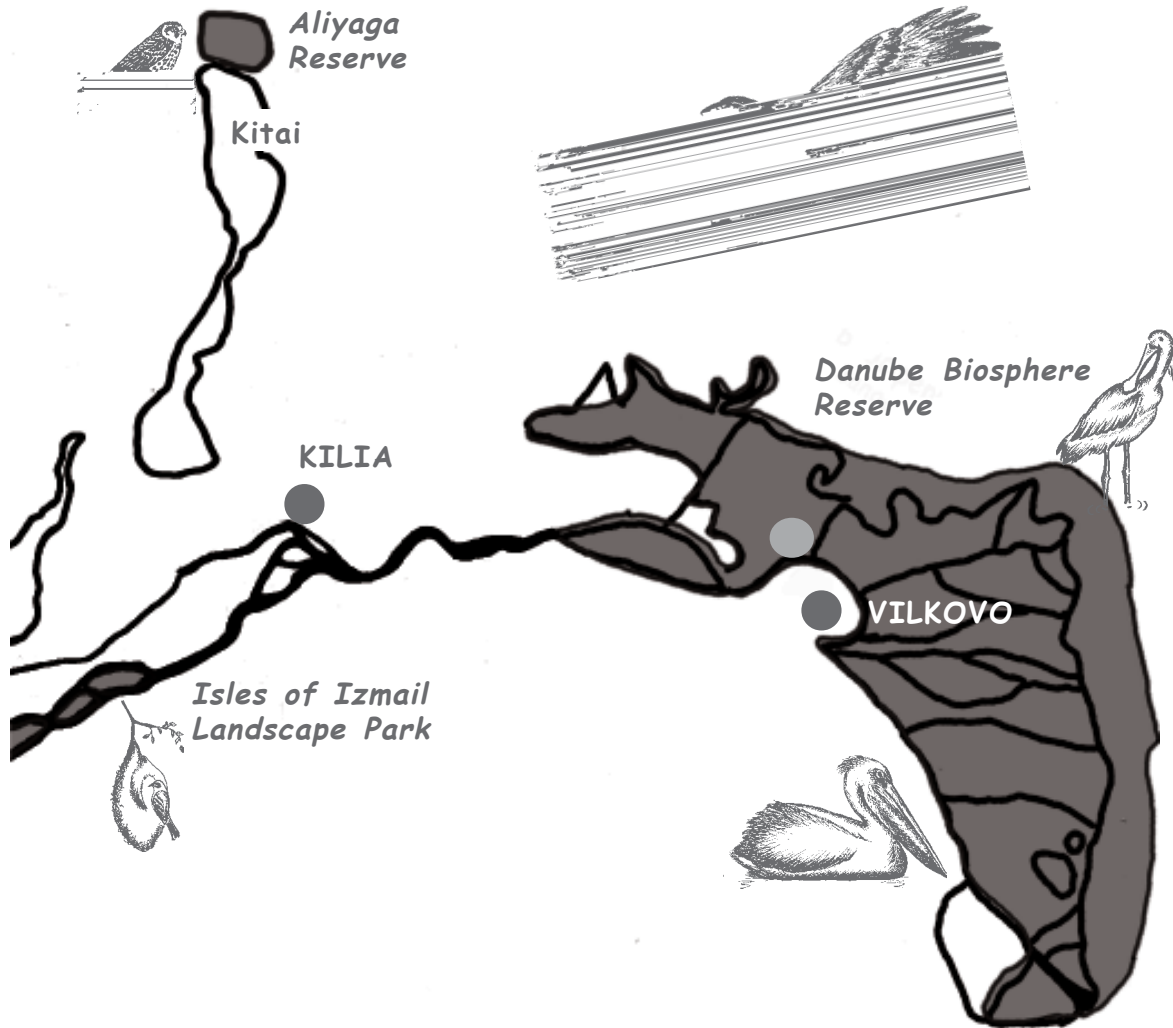


Nature reserves in the Lower



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Danube region worth visiting!



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This guide was produced by Salix Ltd, an Anglo-Ukrainian company specialising in high quality heritage, fishing and nature tours in Odessa province.

We adhere to the principles of responsible tourism of the World Tourism Organisation, and involve local communities in our work.

Our tours takes place in the Lower Danube Region of south-west Odessa province, still known locally by its medieval name of Bessarabia.

The region has hosted significant Greek, Roman, Ottoman and Slavic civilisations, forming an intricate tapestry of distinctive cultures, religious practices and a diverse cuisine featuring fresh fish, and a range of locally produced wines.

Bessarabia is also recognised as a place of global ecological importance. It holds the largest complex of wetlands, riverine forests and steppes in Europe.

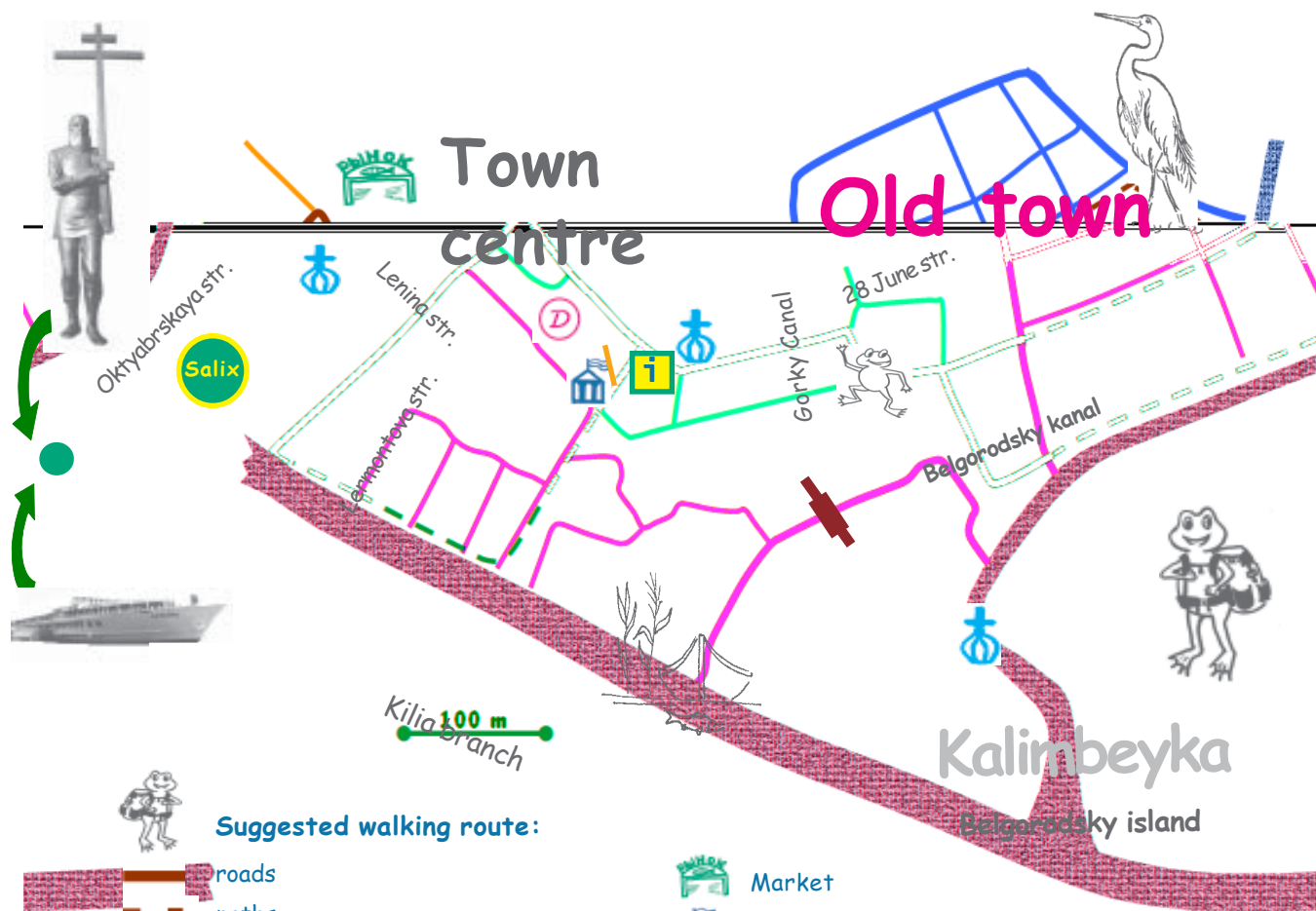
There are over 1,000 species of flowers and more than 200 birds including pelicans, herons and eagles. These sights are experienced by taking quiet boat tours on the Danube Lakes and in the Danube Delta.

The Lower Danube also offers outstanding fishing, featuring some of the largest catfish and wild carp in Europe.

We can plan tours to meet your own requirements: from two to ten days, for two to ten people. For further information, please visit our web site, or send us an email.

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Vilkovo



Suggested walking route:

