

Sinjska Alka

Sinjska Alka is a 300-year-old knight's tournament annually taking place in Sinj, Cetinska krajina region, since 1715. It was recognised by UNESCO in 2010, when it became a part of its Intangible Cultural Heritage List. But for locals, it carries an even more important meaning - it is a symbol of freedom.

Alka is related to the battle for Sinj, when 700 defenders of Sinj fought against a large Ottoman army in 1715, while the tournament itself has probably taken place since 1718. According to legend, they defeated the army with the help of the Miraculous Madonna of Sinj. To remember and honour this victory, the Alka tournament takes place on the first Sunday every August. This UNESCO intangible heritage has a complex history and rich cultural heritage.

The Alka tournament has a set of rules codified in 1833 statute which promotes fair play and ethics. In order to be an Alkar (the knight), you need to be honourable, hawk-eyed and strong, but you also need to be born in Cetinska Krajina region.

Before the competition, Alka has a festive procession in Sinj town centre. The participants are Alka knights, their commander, tournament master, Alka squires and their commander. The procession is surrounded by a large public and it is a festive introduction for the competition.

In the Alka tournament, Alkars (knights) aim for the alka ring (the word comes from the Turkish word *halqa*, which means "ring") in order to get the points and win. When an Alkar aims for the alka ring with the wooden lance during full gallop, they can either aim for the smallest, central circle (3 points), two lower fields (1 point) or upper field (2 points). Each time Alkar scores the central circle, the audience hears cannon balls and the brass band. The winner is the one who gets the highest number of points during the course of three races. In the event they have a tied score, they play again until someone wins the tournament.

Alka is the only knights' tournament in Croatia and Europe which has not become extinct and it has been played continuously for more than 300 years. The tournament is also the only one of the past European tournaments which involved local people, not only the nobles – it presents not only the knight heritage, but also local folklore and festivities. It is in correlation with the religious traditions, since Alka is played to honour the Miraculous Madonna of Sinj. People of Sinj are extremely proud of their tradition – it is an enormous honour to be Alkar knight and to have the chance to participate in this tournament. The tournament itself has not changed much in comparison to the times when it was first played – it even hasn't changed its location – it has always been played in Sinj, except for three times when it was played in Split, Belgrade and Zagreb, due to special events. The recent celebration of the 300th anniversary of Alka tournament was marked by the opening of a new interactive Alka museum and various events.

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