



# Honeyland

**Directors:** Tamara Kotevska, Ljubomir Stefanov

**Country:** Macedonia

**Date:** 2019

A review by David Sims for *The Atlantic*:

Honeyland is the story of an ecosystem. In its initial moments, Tamara Kotevska and Ljubomir Stefanov's documentary about a rural beekeeper in the mountains of Macedonia seems like a singular, focused tale: a portrait of a woman performing a near-forgotten art. Indeed, the work that the protagonist, Hatidze, does, following ancient honey-harvesting traditions largely unknown to modern audiences, is fascinating enough. But this is the kind of nonfiction film that gets at much bigger truths about the tragic ways in which any environment, no matter how remote, can be thrown off balance by greed.

The first section of Kotevska and Stefanov's documentary is extremely intimate. Hatidze, a Turkish immigrant in her 60s living in Macedonia, climbs up a mountain in a mostly uninhabited part of the country to collect honey from beehives that naturally form within the rocky outcrops. Exactly how the process works, or how she came to live in Macedonia, isn't clear; the directors favor a naturalistic approach, letting little details slip out as Hatidze talks about her daily routine. But what could have been a simple exploration of agrarian bee harvesting turns into something bleaker, and more compelling, when a family moves in next door to Hatidze and tries to ramp up production.



Hatidze lives with her mother, a half-blind 86-year-old who barely leaves their dwelling. Kotevska and Stefanov's camera captures the duo's nighttime bickering with remarkable intimacy, as Hatidze's mother frets that she's a burden to her daughter while also rhapsodizing about her own longevity. "I've become like a tree. I'm not dying. I'm just making your life a misery. And I don't intend to die. I eat bread, I drink water, I eat whatever I want," she says. Much like the bees that nestle within the Macedonian mountains, Hatidze and her mother

are a vital part of the local ecosystem, collecting half of the honey from the hives to sell and sustain themselves, but always leaving enough for the bees to keep their production cycle going.

Because Bekirijia, the region Hatidze lives in, is cut off from the nearest roads, the filmmakers could shoot for only a few days at a time before having to leave and restock their food and supplies. Despite this isolated existence, Hatidze's careful routine is eventually shattered by the arrival of a family that has less respect for her way of life. At first, the appearance of Hussein Sam, his wife, and their seven kids is a salve for Hatidze's loneliness; they're new companions for her to talk with, who are more engaging than her mother. But while Hussein is interested in Hatidze's business, he's not swayed by her warnings that taking too much of the honey to sell at local markets will end up destroying the beehives; her rule of taking only half is ignored, and things begin to spiral into chaos.

promo image

Honeyland is not a didactic documentary—there's no voice-over narration, no explicit explanation for how bad things are getting, and no clarification on just how long a time period is being covered. But as the editing gets choppy and the visuals less majestic, the directors suggest that Hatidze's world has been thrown into disarray. The comforting day-to-day ritual of her honey harvesting is gone; instead, Hussein presses her on how to speed things along and wring more from the mountains, as he's desperate to

provide for his own family. Kotevska and Stefanov are unyieldingly detached in their depiction of this brewing conflict, which never escalates into an all-out fight. The film doesn't try to slant the viewer against the intruding newcomers, but rather seeks to show the ways in which even the seemingly peaceful, untroubled corners of the planet are being destabilized by human interference.



A sensitivity to both petty human concerns and striking natural beauty is what makes *Honeyland* a particularly enthralling documentary. Nature filmmaking that focuses only on the environment can feel a little dry, while so-called human-interest storytelling can be cloying; *Honeyland* succeeds by combining the two, telling a personal tale with the sweeping, aloof grandeur of a David Attenborough series. It's worth going to the theater for, not just to soak in the extraordinary world Hatidze lives in, but also

to be immersed in the unusual rhythms of her life and to witness how the macro and the micro can function in concert

*From: <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2019/07/honeyland-review/594685/>*