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# RIDING THE WAVE

Exploring Montenegro from the comfort of a luxurious yacht, **Lucinda Baring** is captivated by the culture and spectacular scenery in this as yet undiscovered corner of the Balkans

Montenegro is experiencing a renaissance, and everybody seems to be talking about it. Yet this recent spate of curiosity is not unprecedented - it's a renewed interest. 'When the pearls of nature were sown, handfuls of them were cast on to this soil,' wrote Byron, an early fan. In the Fifties it was feted as a sort of Balkan Riviera, attracting glitterati including Sophia Loren and the Queen. Later still, it was Budva, with its combination of beaches and open-air nightclubs, which drew the crowds.

But the Balkan wars of the Nineties put paid to the party and everything went quiet. Having declared its independence from Serbia as recently as 2006, Montenegro is only now witnessing a resurgence of foreign attention. Even Hollywood has returned - Michael Douglas owns a house in Perast - and it's easy to see why. Two new developments, the sparkling Porto Montenegro marina and the Aman resort on the island of Sveti Stefan, have received huge amounts of press coverage.

And yet serious publicity should be superfluous. The breathtaking scenery speaks for itself. From the monasteries glimpsed through trees on hills that plunge dramatically to the Bay of Kotor to the glassy, carp-filled deeps of Lake Skadar, I was enchanted. Nothing prepared me for the intoxicating

combination of the staggering landscape, wealth of architecture - from Venetian to Ottoman - and turbulent history that shape Montenegro. And best of all, it all feels so secret, so undiscovered, so raw. A feeling, I suspect, that won't last long.

My journey began in Dubrovnik in Croatia. I've decided there are two ways to explore Montenegro - and the first is by boat. Local expert and founder of Dalmatian Destinations Michael Bird explained that while the Croatian coast is peppered with islands, Montenegro's short coastline is dominated by open sea and not ideal territory for gentle sailing. But the Bay of Kotor - or the 'bride of the Adriatic', as it is also known - is. As you glide through its calm, clear water surrounded by high, tree-covered hills fringed with villages and churches, it seems more like a mountain lake than an inlet of the sea. And in its midst is the pièce de résistance - two little islands side by side, Sveti Djordje and Our Lady of the Rock. While the first is private - initially Perast's cemetery, it was later given to the Benedictine monks, who are still in residence - you can hop off at the second to visit the tiny church with its striking, turquoise dome.

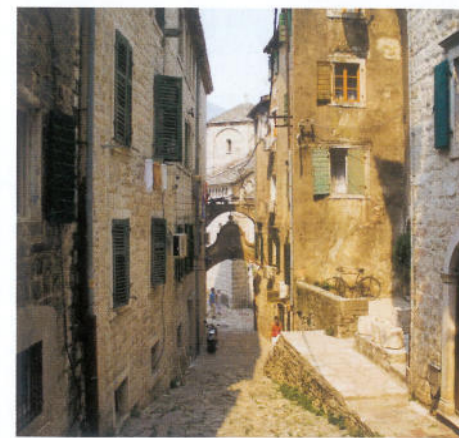
Kotor itself is brimming with artefacts, from the imposing grandeur of the relic-filled cathedral to the more understated beauty of the Franciscan cloister.

The winding streets of the old town are reminiscent of Venice, and an extensive wander, past palaces and grand old houses adorned with delicate carvings and armorial bearings, is essential. And so is the climb up the old city walls that frame Kotor; at the top you'll find the remains of the fortress, an old Illyrian settlement and magnificent views of the bay.

Though there are some moderate hotels in Kotor, it was a relief to retire to the splendour of the boat each evening. *Libra*, a glorious wooden gulet and the pride of Michael's fleet, was not only comfortable, with luxurious cabins, but spectacularly spacious, with plenty of spots to sprawl out and read a book, and a huge, polished table for extended dinners on deck. Unsurprisingly, the country's yacht culture is growing, hence the birth of Porto Montenegro marina, the biggest project of its kind in the area. Though not due for completion for another five to eight years, with apartments and a Four Seasons hotel part of the package, it is already open for business. It occupies a former naval base, where the water is deep enough to accommodate even the biggest boats, some of which are already in evidence, and the sheer scale of the place is staggering. With Martin Lane Fox in charge of landscaping, it's a glamorous outfit promising five-star service.

However, if seafaring is not for you, the other way to visit Montenegro is to base yourself at the Aman resort. Sveti Stefan, a fortified fishing village developed in the fifteenth century to shelter citizens trying to escape Turkish invasion, is set to reopen later this year. While the exteriors of the beautiful, terracotta-roofed stone cottages will remain untouched, the interiors are undergoing a full Aman makeover. In the meantime, Villa Miločer, Tito's former summer residence on the beach across the sandy isthmus, has been transformed into a six-suite hotel, the grounds and setting of which are exquisite. Meals are served beneath an ivy-covered pergola against a soundtrack of waves, and through the trees is a private beach - a quiet, rocky cove with the greenest of seas. Once you have rested, Aman's own boat is ready to spirit you away to the Bay of Kotor, and drivers are on hand for inland explorations of Lake Skadar and the black mountains from which this lovely little country takes its name □

CLOCKWISE FROM THIS PICTURE Sveti Djordje is an island in the Bay of Kotor. The bay is ideal for sailing. Winding streets characterise Kotor's old town. Villa Miločer is part of the new Aman resort



## Ways & means

Lucinda Baring travelled as a guest of Dalmatian Destinations (00-44-333 700 8007; [www.dalmatiandestinations.com](http://www.dalmatiandestinations.com)) which organises tailor-made holidays to Montenegro and Croatia, specialising in fully crewed yacht charters. One week on a 30-metre gulet, for a party of 10, with six double cabins and four crew, costs from £1,700 per person, full board, excluding flights. Villa Miločer (00-382-33 420 000; [www.amanresorts.com](http://www.amanresorts.com)) costs from €450 per night for a Garden View suite (for one couple and one child up to 12 years), including return transfers from Tivat airport (30 minutes) or Podgorica airport (one hour). For information on Porto Montenegro, call 00-382-32 674 660, or visit [www.portomontenegro.com](http://www.portomontenegro.com). Hotel Bellevue Dubrovnik (00-385-20 330 000; [www.hotelbellevue.hr](http://www.hotelbellevue.hr)) costs from €225, B&B.

