

BALKANS FOR EVERY BUDGET



The Balkan Peninsula holds many charms – reliable weather, fabulous food and drink, sandy beaches and ancient sites aplenty. Plus the wide choice of accommodation, dining and add-on experiences means this crowd-pleasing region can cater to almost any budget.

For money-conscious travellers, Bulgaria's expansive beaches, lively cities and majestic landscapes provide plenty of bang for their buck. Meanwhile, mountainous Montenegro (which saw an 18% increase in UK arrivals in 2023, to 89,000 visitors), beckons with exclusive luxury resorts, artsy historic towns and marinas packed with designer shops. Whether clients are looking for a budget-friendly escape or want to splash out, there's a Balkan destination to suit everyone.



Sunny Beach, Bulgaria

Bulgaria's 235-mile Black Sea coast is small on cost but big on beaches lined with hotels, restaurants and other amenities that travellers on a budget will love. The most famous resorts – including Sunny Beach, Golden Sands and Sozopol – offer beaches brimming with activities, from watersports to cycling along the promenade or hopping on a catamaran cruise. For those seeking somewhere less lively, the smaller, quieter beaches in Obzor and St Vlas will hit the spot.

Not only that, but Bulgaria also offers great value. Sunny Beach has just clinched the top spot for Europe's best-value destination in this year's Post Office Family Holiday report, launched in partnership with Tui, which compares the cost of holiday essentials in popular resorts. A three-course dinner for four, including soft drinks and wine, will set parents back less than £60, according to the report.

Lynsey Jones, national sales manager at Balkan Holidays, says: "There's a wide choice of hotels and apartments from two to five-star, all offering exceptional value. The standard of hotels is very high, with international brands recognising this great location, as well as many properties having full refurbishments for summer 2024.

"Value for money in resort and for the cost of the holiday is a big selling point for Bulgaria – you will find that customers' budgets stretch further and what they pay for a three-star in other European resorts, they may pay for a four or five-star hotel in Bulgaria."

However, the country offers far more than just beaches, with enchanting ruins, medieval castles and Byzantine monasteries so well preserved that visiting them feels like stepping back in time.

The seafront city of Varna – where a new route from Gatwick was launched by Wizz Air earlier this year – has a wealth of Roman artefacts in the Varna Museum of Archaeology and an ancient thermae with 12 mineral springs. For those seeking adventure, the Rila and Pirin mountain ranges offer stunning hiking trails, crystal-clear lakes and breathtaking meadow scenes.

In capital Sofia, clients can marvel at the landmark Alexander Nevsky Cathedral and the Roman ruins of Serdica. The central city of Plovdiv is also home to an impressive first-century amphitheatre that still hosts performances today, while its vibrant Kapana district is filled with art galleries and cosy restaurants offering hearty local dishes such as banitsa (cheese pie with yoghurt and eggs) and shopska salad (roasted red peppers, cucumbers and tomatoes). ➤



SUNNY BEACH REFURBS



Four Points by Sheraton
This four-star hotel boasts two new restaurants – one à la carte – and rooms are now fully air-conditioned. Further facilities include two pools, a spa and a children's playroom. From £626 on a B&B basis.



Grand Hotel Sunny Beach
Reopened in May, the hotel offers fully revamped rooms and apartments, plus little guests will be treated to a new candy room and a daily cartoon-themed baby buffet. From £642 all-inclusive.



Hotel Zenith
A big renovation last year lifted this hotel's star rating from three to four. New features include a second double bed in some studios and suites, and an enhanced buffet restaurant. From £685 all-inclusive.

All prices are with Balkan Holidays, based on a seven-night stay with flights from Manchester on September 14. balkanholidays.co.uk

PICTURE: Shutterstock/Arbomax



Ksamil, Albania

PICTURE: Shutterstock/lukasmilena

Albania is undoubtedly an up-and-coming escape, with international visitor numbers rising by a third from January to June this year, compared with 2023. There are plenty of new ways to sell it too: Sunvil has expanded its Albania portfolio, Cyplon Holidays introduced the destination for the first time this year and Ryanair has added new routes from Birmingham and Bristol to capital Tirana.

The country is known for being affordable, home to seaside gems, lakefront towns and historical sites – all for a fraction of the cost of neighbouring Greece.

Albania’s riviera is not to be missed. In Sarande (a short boat ride from Corfu), silky sand meets emerald sea beneath Likurs Castle, built in 1781 during the time of the Ottoman Empire. South of Sarande, Ksamil is popular among locals and

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tourists – especially if they’ve seen the ‘Maldivian beach in Albania’ viral videos on social media. Visitors can upgrade their beach visit by renting one of the overwater bungalows or by hiring a jetski to visit one of Ksamil’s three small islands.

Albania is fast becoming a hotspot for escorted tours with established experts such as Regent Holidays and Intrepid Travel, joined this year by Cox & Kings – with a new 10-day tour that twins the country with Kosovo – and by Newmarket Holidays in 2025.

Many itineraries take in medieval towns close to the capital such as Kruje – famed for its castle, mosaic-tiled streets and old bazaar – and Berat, also known as the ‘town of a thousand windows’, which highlights Albania’s diverse religious heritage with minarets rising alongside Byzantine churches.

Other points of historical interest include Korce on the eastern edge, which has beautiful landmarks including the Resurrection of Christ Cathedral and the local bazaar, where visitors can pause for a bite of *tavë kosi*, a baked lamb and rice dish served with yoghurt. To get the best sunset view climb the stairs of the Panoramic Tower, a 360-degree observation deck overlooking the city.

City-break travellers will find something of interest too: Albania’s capital is set to receive a substantial makeover as part of the ‘Tirana 2030’ initiative to turn the city into a greener metropolis, complete with bike lanes and urban forests. For now, visitors can explore the marble and mosque-filled Skanderbeg Square, and the colourful Blloku district with its eclectic boutiques and cute cafes. ➤



Adriatik Hotel

BOOK IT

Cyplon Holidays offers a seven-night stay at Adriatik Hotel in Durres from £769 including breakfast, baggage, private transfers and return flights from Luton. Departing on October 1. cyplon.co.uk

AUTHENTIC ALBANIA

Jerome Downer, product manager at Cyplon Holidays, counters myths about the country

Myth: There isn’t much to do
Fact: Albania has so much to offer: immense natural beauty, rugged mountains, hiking and kayaking trails, rich history and quirky cities.

Myth: You can’t drink alcohol
Fact: Although predominantly Muslim, drinking alcohol is legal. Must-tries include the local raki made of twice-distilled grapes and aniseed, or a traditional red sparkling wine.

Myth: There is no public transport
Fact: It’s not famed for its public transport infrastructure, but private coaches, car rentals or chauffeur services can cost a fraction of the price of anywhere else in Europe.



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DESTINATIONS

CROATIA & THE BALKANS | ALL BUDGETS

Splurge



Perast, Kotor Bay

While luxury can mean Michelin-starred dining in Italy or lavish resorts in the Maldives, Montenegro is a fitting candidate for all-out opulence, with a One&Only resort opening to much fanfare in 2021 plus the Porto Montenegro development set to welcome more luxury hotels and high-end boutiques by the end of this year, starting with the Regent hotel, which has already opened.

These luxurious properties all enjoy views of the fjord-like Bay of Kotor, with six bays and two channels dominated by dramatic peaks. To explore the bay's hidden coves and secluded beaches, suggest booking a private yacht with a wine and dine experience

on board, complete with a private chef and sommelier.

Kotor town has plenty on offer too: clients can walk the city's Fortress Wall, the second largest in the world, stroll into the church of St Nicholas, get lost in twisted stone-built alleyways or simply browse for handmade trinkets. After exploring, suggest they make a reservation for a lavish dinner at Galion, a panoramic restaurant that offers delectable seafood dishes, or take a taxi over to Budva for livelier Miami-like vibes and high-end beach clubs.

Adventurous lovers of luxury may want to discover Montenegro's northern rocky massifs: Durmitor National Park's plateau and numerous scenic lakes are a

favourite among seasoned hikers. The Tara River Canyon, which slices through the area, is famed for white-water rafting, kayaking and an adrenaline-pumping 1,400-metre zipline across the gorge.

Close by is Biogradska Gora National Park, one of the three remaining rainforests in Europe. Exploring the peaks and valleys of this remote northern landscape on horseback is the way to go with a guided ride through the virgin forest reserve.

At the heart of this park is the glacial Biogradsko Lake, its sapphire surface resembling something out of Narnia, which transforms into a popular snowshoeing spot during winter. **TW**



Sophie Jones, product manager, Elegant Resorts

"The opening of Europe's first One&Only property has put Montenegro on the radar of the luxury traveller. The popularity of neighbouring Croatia has also contributed to Montenegro's success – this year it overtook Croatia in our figures for the first time, by 20%, mostly thanks to One&Only Portonovi, as travellers now want to experience Montenegro or combine it with Dubrovnik. Visitors can take a short break to enjoy shopping, dining or events such as at Regent Porto Montenegro, or a longer, more relaxed beach stay at The Chedi Luštica Bay. Montenegro boasts charming villages, vibrant marinas and incredible seafood and a boat trip in the Bay of Kotor is a must to see the mountain backdrop from the water, as well as visiting Our Lady of the Rocks."



One&Only Portonovi

BOOK IT

Elegant Resorts offers a seven-night stay in a Portonovi Room at One&Only Portonovi on a bed and breakfast basis from £2,765. Price includes private transfers, UK lounge passes and return economy flights from Gatwick departing on September 30. elegantresorts.co.uk

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