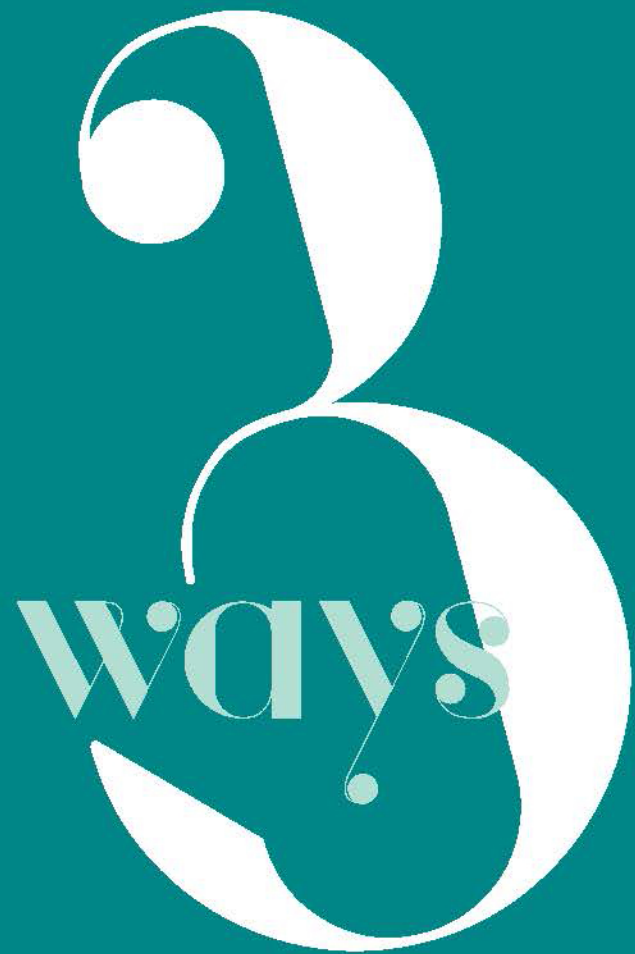


BALKANS BEYOND THE BEACHES



Plan a holiday to the Balkans to explore the region's cool cities and gourmet gastronomy, says **Alice Barnes-Brown**

The Balkan countries are coming into their own, and not just for budget-friendly beach holidays. Croatia – named Europe's best country to visit at this month's ITB Berlin trade show – is a "standout" for Prestige Travel, which saw an 81% increase in Croatia bookings during this year's peaks period, compared with last year. Other Balkan states are becoming better known not only for quiet coastlines but also city stays, adventure tours and active trips.

For those willing to get off the beaten track and into the mountains, hills and lakes that define this region, these countries offer history and hospitality by the bucketload. *Travel Weekly* selects three different ways for clients to get up close and personal with this riveting region.



Meneghetti Wine Hotel & Winery, Croatia

Istria

Visitors don't have to venture too far from Croatia's coastline to discover the epicurean appeal of this region, which prizes many of the same ingredients as neighbouring Italy but with a fraction of the crowds.

Set in vineyards that roll towards a quiet section of the Istrian peninsula's coast, the Meneghetti Wine Hotel & Winery is a foodie fantasy: guests are treated to a flavoursome five-course tasting menu, and each plate can be

accompanied by a glass of one of the estate's 14 varieties of wine.

With a car, clients can explore the sun-baked villages in the surrounding area. Medieval Motovun is famed for its truffles – both black and white – so suggest clients drive over for a hearty lunch of truffle-infused pasta. Budding historians can lose themselves in the gilded mosaics of the Byzantine Euphrasian Basilica, situated in the heart of Porec.

Back at Meneghetti, olive-oil

tastings give guests a variety of flavour profiles, from earthy to spicy. And for those desperate for some beach time, Meneghetti's private beach is a short shuttle ride away.

Book it: Regent Holidays offers a four-night Meneghetti Estate Escape, from £1,795 per person, based on two sharing on a B&B basis. The price includes car hire, wine and olive-oil tastings, a five-course dinner and flights to Pula. regent-holidays.co.uk

Albania regularly hits the headlines as Europe's hottest new beach destination, but capital Tirana is also jam-packed with artsy attractions, buzzing bars and thought-provoking museums. It's now even easier for agents to sell, as Tirana has recently been added to Tui's city-break programme.

Clients can start in Skanderbeg Square, a vast marble piazza named after Albania's national hero, who fought against the Ottoman incursion in the 15th century and

is commemorated with a statue depicting him on horseback.

From there, they can visit the 18th-century Et'hem Bey Mosque, which features gorgeous botanical paintwork throughout its interior.

For something more modern, the Bunk'Art museums, set in decommissioned Cold War bunkers, offer an overview of life under the communist regime. Other architecture from that era includes the quirky Pyramid of Tirana, which is now an exhibition space. Or visit a much more recent addition to the city

skyline at Namazgah Mosque, the largest in the Balkans, which was inaugurated last year.

To escape the city, a 40-minute bus ride will take clients to the Dajti Ekspres cable car, from where they can journey to Dajti's mountain summit to enjoy glorious views of the thick forests embracing the city.

Book it: Tui offers three nights' B&B at the Hotel Teatro from £329 per person, based on two sharing. The price includes 20kg of hold luggage and flights from Stansted on July 1. tui.co.uk



Namazgah Mosque, Tirana, Albania

DESTINATIONS

CROATIA & THE BALKANS | INTERIOR

Ohrid

ASK THE
expert

Emiliyan Stoyanov,
sales and marketing associate,
Balkan Holidays

"The Balkans are a hidden gem for travellers seeking adventure close to home. Away from the coast, they'll discover majestic mountains, vibrant local culture and year-round activities. In winter, Bulgaria's ski resorts such as Bansko boast excellent slopes, while summer brings opportunities for hiking through Pirin National Park, home to crystal-clear lakes and breathtaking views."



BEST OF
THE
rest

Serbia: It remains a little off the tourist trail, but those who visit will be rewarded with fascinating fortresses and astonishing natural beauty – the emerald-hued Uvac River's impressive canyon is home to 130 bird species.

Kosovo: Up-and-coming Kosovo is best explored by escorted tour. Most itineraries visit uber-cool capital Pristina and the ancient city of Prizren, inhabited since the Bronze Age.

Bosnia: Mostar's Stari Most bridge – destroyed in 1993 during the Bosnian War then rebuilt in a sign of reconciliation – is the country's most famous landmark. But allow time to visit lakes, waterfalls and the streets of Sarajevo, which combine Ottoman design and European elegance.

Church of Saint John the Theologian, overlooking Lake Ohrid, North Macedonia

Getting into the Balkan hinterlands can be tricky due to the winding roads and lack of public transport infrastructure, so an escorted tour is one of the easiest ways to access remote places. Explore's two-week Ancient Macedonia tour is an in-depth look at the kingdom of Alexander the Great, taking in three Balkan nations.

After kicking off in Bulgaria's capital, Sofia, the tour spends a night in a monastery in North Macedonia. It then moves on to one of the world's oldest lakes, Lake Ohrid, presided over by a picturesque town filled with cobbled streets, Byzantine churches and Roman archaeology. Active travellers will love swimming in the crystalline waters or going paddleboarding.

From there, the tour takes in archaeological sites in northern Greece, including Philippi, the first European city to adopt Christianity. After a quick rest day on Thassos island, it's back to Bulgaria to take the fresh air in Bansko, a winter ski resort that's surrounded by wildflower meadows in summer. Clients finish back in Sofia with a head full of history, a camera full of gorgeous photos and a belly filled with Balkan food.

Book it: Explore's 14-night Ancient Macedonia tour starts at £2,195 per person, based on two sharing. The price includes B&B accommodation, some other meals and listed excursions, but not flights or transfers. explore.co.uk **TW**