

Montenegro magic

This Balkan beauty spot packs an astonishing array of activities into a small space, finds **Olly Beckett**

Montenegro is fast becoming the Balkan destination du jour and it's not hard to see why. It offers exceptional value, superb beaches and a surprising variety of landscapes packed in between its mountains, canyons and Adriatic coastline. Demand is on the rise too: visitor numbers increased by 3.4% year on year this February.

Most visitors fly into Tivat – accessible from Stansted, Birmingham and Manchester with Jet2.com – and base themselves on the Bay of Kotor, lured by its mix of medieval architecture, pristine seas and sun-kissed beaches.

Hiring a car is a good way to get around this compact country, only two-thirds the size of Wales, though clients who are nervous about driving abroad will find plenty of organised excursions on offer too.

TIMELESS CHARM

Kotor, the country's best-known tourist destination, is the perfect place to start. If clients are familiar with Croatia, they'll recognise the touches left behind by the once-mighty Venetian Empire that stretched to this part of the Adriatic – from red-roofed bell towers to piazzas filled with gelaterias.

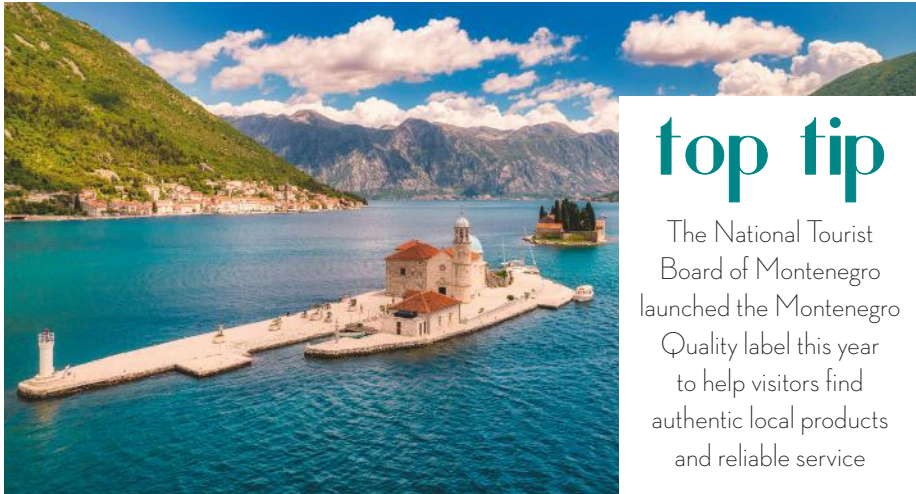
On a tour around the Old Town (from £25 per person when booked >

The historic town of Perast, Bay of Kotor

PICTURE: Shutterstock/Coradalek

DESTINATIONS

GREECE, CYPRUS & BALKANS | MONTENEGRO



top tip

The National Tourist Board of Montenegro launched the Montenegro Quality label this year to help visitors find authentic local products and reliable service



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Our Lady of the Rocks was built on a man-made island; Kotor is a tourist hotspot; the upmarket town of Tivat; hillside landmark Kotor Fortress PICTURES: Shutterstock/Dmitrii Sakharov, xbrchx, demirbaslperen

via Jet2holidays), I stepped inside hushed and hallowed churches dating from the 12th century. Then walked streets with stone slabs worn smooth over several hundred years and explored a three-mile medieval city wall as well preserved as the one encircling Dubrovnik, all only two hours' drive from Kotor.

Those who have a little extra time – and a lot of extra energy – may wish to follow those fortifications 1,350 steps all the way up to St John's Fortress to admire this grand feat of medieval engineering up close. The views over Kotor from there are splendid too.

COASTAL WONDERS

My own base, the Hyatt Regency Kotor Bay, offers short boat trips to the two tiny monastic islets near Perast, including Our Lady of the Rocks. The tiny island, dominated by its namesake Catholic church, was artificially constructed in 1630 after a local fisherman claimed to have

“The island was bustling with tourists, but I felt a sense of serenity in the blue water and steep-sided mountains that surrounded me

found an icon of the Virgin Mary on a sea rock and vowed to build a church on it. If clients are here on July 22, they can see how he did it: a festival known as *fašinada* takes place at sunset on this day every year, with local people hurling stones onto the shoreline from fishing boats in a symbolic effort to expand the island.

Although it was bustling with tourists, I felt a sense of serenity in the clear blue water and steep-sided mountains that

surrounded me. Kotor Bay is sometimes described as Europe's southernmost fjord, which, although not geographically accurate, fits the scenery.

HERITAGE STAYS

Back on land in Perast, I toured the Heritage Grand Hotel, part of which once housed a clothes factory. Style is clearly important both inside and out: the small collection of buildings is architecturally gorgeous.

In addition to Kotor and Perast, Tivat and Herceg Novi make up the quartet of must-see destinations dotted around Kotor Bay. In Herceg Novi – best accessed via a scenic car ferry trip – I was charmed by cafes and restaurants serving local beer and wine at street-side tables, plus the wealth of fresh seafood on every menu. The town was founded in 1382, and a guided tour revealed its medieval fortresses and characterful streets. Like the

ASK THE operator



**Jade Evers, travel agent
relationships general manager,
Jet2holidays**

“Montenegro is extremely popular with independent travel agents. For this summer, we have added some new hotels to our portfolio plus new resorts in Sutomore and Dobra Voda, meaning we are offering an even greater selection to choose from. As well as being on sale for this summer, we already have holidays available for summer 2027, giving customers the chance to get their Montenegrin sunshine booked in.”

rest of Montenegro, Herceg Novi is becoming increasingly popular. "People usually book their holidays long in advance," says my guide, Sandra. "If booking last-minute, they are increasingly finding they can't stay where they want."

Part of the former Yugoslavia, Herceg Novi was once connected by train to Belgrade in Serbia. That line closed in the 1960s, and a four-mile promenade was installed where the rails once ran. It makes for a blissful stroll with waves lapping gently below and beaches attracting sunbathers, even in April.

At the end of my delightful jaunt, the beachside infinity pool of historic Lazure Hotel beckoned. Built by the Venetians to quarantine foreign merchants suspected of bringing disease, the Lazure is now a sublime set of 24 rustic-chic rooms, with a modern building holding a further 104 rooms, plus a spa with views over the bay and the Orjen Mountains.

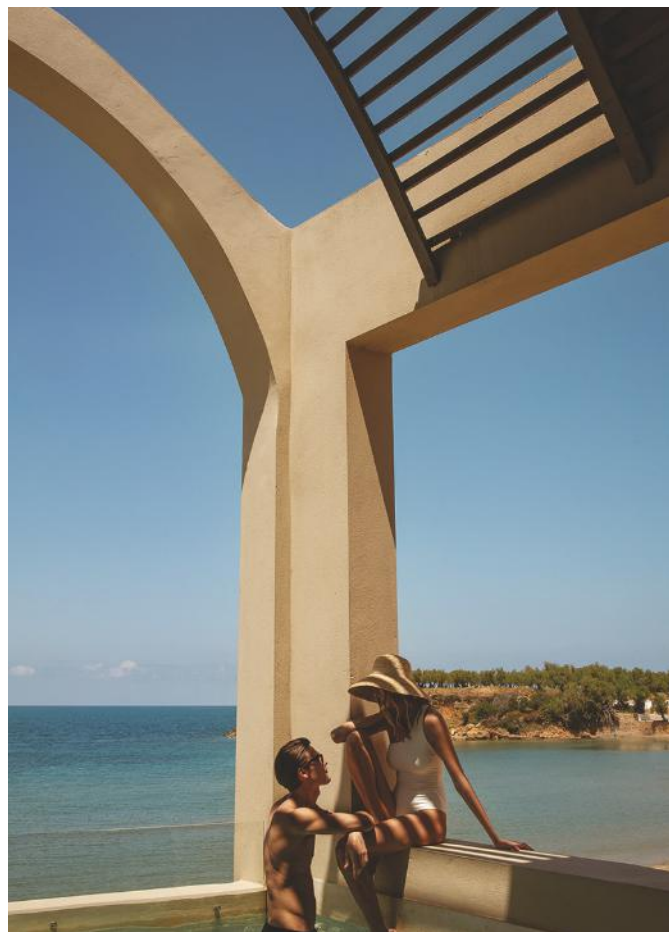
“Goran and his two donkeys looked on passively while I explored an olive grove filled with more than a thousand trees

Just a half-hour drive from Tivat airport, olive groves speckle the Luštica Peninsula's arid landscapes. At Moric Farm – Montenegro's only certified producer of organic olive oil – I met Goran and his two donkeys, who looked on passively while I explored an olive grove filled with more than a thousand trees, some up to 300 years old, then sampled a few local varieties in the small mill.

Over an olive-oil-drizzled apple cake in the adjacent building –



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Forte Mare in Herceg Novi; locally made olive oil; Goran, owner of Moric Farm PICTURES: Olly Beckett; Shutterstock/Alexandre.ROSA,



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where eight generations of Goran’s family have worked – I was told about the arduous process of producing extra virgin olive oil, which involves taking a batch of freshly harvested olives, grinding them then cold-pressing them to perfection. Or, as Goran puts it: “Extra virgin, extra stress.”

MOVING MOUNTAINS

Something repeatedly emphasised wherever I went is how short the distances are here, though mountainous terrain makes up more than 80% of its land mass. “Iron it flat and we’d have the world’s largest country,” Goran quipped.

Montenegro’s mountainous heartland is well worth a day trip from the coast. In Lake Skadar National Park, for example, large river systems course between forested hills and nearly 280 bird species fly against a backdrop of blue skies. There aren’t many fishing communities set deep inland, but

Dodoši is such a village. Dating from the 16th century, the settlement is scenically placed along the Karatuna river, filled with carp and eel that clients can tuck into in its waterside restaurants.

LIVING IT UP

“Polako, polako,” is a favourite phrase of Montenegrins. It translates as “slowly, slowly” and fittingly describes life in Porto Montenegro, where a naval arsenal once stood, close to the city of Tivat. Now, instead of battleships, you’ll find elegant types sporting the latest fashions as they stroll between even more elegant feats of architecture.

This new superyacht marina encapsulates Montenegro’s ambition to attract big spenders, yet there’s plenty of appeal for clients with smaller budgets: just steps from high-end MayaBay restaurant (serving outstanding sushi and strong cocktails), Al Posto Giusto bakes pizzas costing just €14.



Porto Montenegro

PICTURE: Zoran Radonjic – ZOGAN Photography

Montenegro is impressive in so many ways. My road trips from Kotor Bay didn’t cover vast distances, yet having visited everything from mountains to lakes, ancient cities to modern marvels in the space of just a few days, I felt as though I’d seen a dozen countries in one neat little package. **TW**

BOOK IT

Jet2holidays offers seven nights at the Hyatt Regency Kotor Bay from £1,759 per person (based on two sharing), including 22kg baggage, breakfast, transfers and flights from Manchester on June 25. jet2holidays.com

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