

Balkan beauties



For clients who have been there and done that with all the usual hotspots, switch-sell to the oft-underrated Balkans, writes **Laura French**

from the coastlines of Croatia to the mountains of Romania, the beaches of Bulgaria to the ski slopes of Slovenia, the Balkans pack in some impressive variety – and for clients who’ve already ticked off Europe’s better-known spots, this underrated group of countries offers a lot to discover.

That’s even more relevant now as many clients seek a socially-distanced, crowd-free escape, where they can have the undulating landscapes and azure seas to themselves, and bag a bargain too. So where should you start if you’re looking to switch-sell?

THE CITY BREAK

Where: Belgrade, Serbia

From Berlin to Budapest, Europe isn’t short of history-filled cities, but if clients have already ticked off the classic spots, it’s time to suggest Belgrade.

Split into Old and New areas, the former Yugoslavian capital combines Soviet architecture and Ottoman influences with a vibrant nightlife scene that sees eclectic bars spill onto its streets and moored river barges transform into clubs come nightfall.

But it’s not only about the partying. Attractions include the Kalemegdan Fortress, an old citadel where locals gather to watch the sunset; the Church of St Sava, one of Europe’s biggest Orthodox temples; and the Dorćol neighbourhood, once the city’s Jewish quarter and now home to quirky cafes, vintage shops and some of Belgrade’s best street art.

Book it: Regent Holidays offers four nights’ B&B at the three-star Hotel Argo from £820 per person, based on two sharing with flights, transfers, a city tour and two excursions.
regent-holidays.co.uk

THE FAMILY GETAWAY

Where: Bulgaria

For families after a beachy break away from the Med, Bulgaria’s Black Sea beckons with its sandy beaches, child-friendly attractions and excellent-value resorts – and it’s not only about Sunny Beach.

Alan Cross, head of trade at Jet2holidays, recommends Pomorie for an alternative resort that still offers plenty to keep families entertained, with accommodation options to suit every budget.

For a five-star property offering clients plenty of bang for their buck, Cross suggests Wave Resort, which backs on to its own private beach and boasts an on-site water park as well as eight pools, a spa, gym and gardens. “There’s a jam-packed daily entertainment programme including professional shows, water-based activities and team sports,” he says. “And when it comes to dining, the resort caters for the whole family, with four restaurants and five snack bars to choose from.”

Book it: A week costs from £799 per person, based on two adults and two children sharing, with transfers and flights from Stansted on August 6.
jet2holidays.com

THE HIKING HOLIDAY

Where: Albania

The Balkans boast endless options for active summer escapes, but for an especially underrated spot, look to Albania, where almost three-quarters of the landscape is made up of mountains.

For those wanting to take in the best of the peaks, suggest a guided tour. Wild Frontiers has an eight-day Walking in Northern Albania itinerary ➤

DESTINATIONS

CROATIA & THE BALKANS | SWITCH-SELLING

ASK THE expert

Robert Dee,
director, New Deal Europe

"We have had great feedback from operators and agents on this week's New Deal Europe marketplace event. The Balkans region not only offers every type of tourist experience, it is also a world leader in sustainable tourism.

The diversity of cultures, landscapes, languages, gastronomy, activities and authentic experiences means that it is now, quite rightly, appearing on many people's wish lists."



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Theth National Park, Albania; Kranjska Gora ski resort, Slovenia; Opatija, Croatia

PICTURES: Shutterstock; Balkan Holidays

combining remote villages, shimmering lakes and secluded valleys with a visit to Shkodër, one of the Balkans' oldest cities.

"This is a journey into a long-forgotten Europe," says Jonny Bealby, founder of Wild Frontiers. "Albania provides a perfect blend of mountain scenery, old-town charm and a bucolic way of life that is fast disappearing. It can deliver a truly rewarding, off-the-beaten-track experience, with excellent cuisine and wine along the way."

Book it: The tour starts at £925 based on two sharing, including accommodation, meals, transport and entrance fees.

wildfrontierstravel.com

THE ROMANTIC RETREAT

Where: Croatia

From beaches featured in *Mamma Mia!* to quaint cobbled streets, national parks to yacht-lined harbours, Croatia has plenty to lure – and for couples after an especially romantic escape, it's hard to beat Opatija, an upscale coastal resort known for its 19th-century villas, beaches and seven-mile promenade. "The town is stylish and sophisticated, fronted by an elegant waterfront and lido beach with delightful gardens," says Nicky Shafe, marketing manager for Prestige Holidays.

She suggests pairing it with a stay in Rovinj – a charming, Italian-style town on the Istrian peninsula home to twisting cobbled streets, eclectic galleries and traditional trattorias – for a culture-meets-beach escape in postcard-pretty surroundings.

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Book it: Prestige Holidays offers three nights at the five-star Amadria Park Milenij Hotel in Opatija and four nights at the Grand Park Hotel Rovinj from £1,295 per person, including breakfast, transfers and flights from Gatwick on September 14.

prestigeholidays.co.uk

THE SKI TRIP

Where: Slovenia

With Alpine ski trips off the cards this winter, demand for next year is likely to be high – so for clients seeking an escape from the crowds, suggest a Balkan resort instead.

Bulgaria, Romania and Macedonia all offer their fair share of slopes, but for those looking to replicate the Alpine charm of the big-hitters, Balkan Holidays points to Slovenia's Kranjska Gora, set in the Julian Alps.

"It's home to around 18 miles of runs, especially suited to beginners and intermediates, and you can extend into the evening with floodlit skiing," says Chris Rand, sales and marketing manager. "The après-ski is also really good, with bars and restaurants available at a fraction of the price of other European ski resorts."

Other activities in the area include cross-country skiing, sledding, snow biking and snowshoeing, while Triglav National Park is close by and offers snow rafting, winter paragliding and more.

Book it: A week's half-board at Hotel Spik costs from £528 per person, including flights from Gatwick on March 13, 2022. A six-day ski pack costs from £344. balkanholidays.co.uk **TW**