



TAKE

BALKAN ALTERNATIVES

For clients who have ticked off the classic Balkans hotspots, suggest these lesser-known alternatives, says **Lina Molloholli**

The Balkans is fast becoming one of Europe's must-visit regions, but with its signature hotspots getting busier – and pricier – than ever, now is a good time to steer clients to a more sustainable stay by highlighting the region's lesser-known areas and off-season appeal. They'll get all the sunshine and scenery they'd expect of the Balkans, but without the crowds, queues or sky-high summer rates.

Stretching from Slovenia's short but scenic coastline down to the sun-bleached bays of Albania, this region is full of places that feel refreshingly 'new' to British holidaymakers, yet tick all the boxes for a year-round break. ➤

Accessibility is also improving with operators such as Intrepid Travel, Olympic Holidays, Trafalgar, Travelsphere, Cosmos, Just Go Holidays and National Geographic-Lindblad Expeditions introducing Balkan destinations for the first time. Flight routes from Jet2.com, Tui, Ryanair, Wizz Air and easyJet are also growing.

If clients love the Croatian coastline, but want somewhere quieter; go wild for the Greek islands, but prefer a tamer price tag; or want old towns dripping with Venetian charm, the Balkans offer plenty of smart alternatives that have the added benefit of helping to drive tourism to less-visited areas. ➤

DESTINATIONS

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SARANDË, ALBANIA

Sarandë remains one of the Albanian Riviera's most recognisable spots with its white-washed hotels, lively promenades, green hills and aquamarine sea. It is beloved for its Instagram-famous, Maldives-like beaches and for being just a short boat ride from the Unesco-listed Butrint ruins and The Blue Eye Spring, with the outline of Corfu on the Aegean horizon.

VLORË, ALBANIA

The vibe: Only a two-hour drive from the capital, at first glance Vlorë feels more like a functional hub than a resort-like town. "For agents, key selling points are Vlorë's value for money, uncrowded beaches and appeal to both adventure-seekers and those looking for a relaxed seaside break. It's ideal for couples, solo travellers and families wanting something a little different," says Leanne Edwards, head of sales at Olympic Holidays.

The highlights: The revamped Lungomare promenade (expanded pedestrian zone and beach) is perfect for leisurely strolls, while Zvërnec Island, reached by a wooden causeway, is a great day trip to visit lakeside St Mary's Monastery. Nature fans can hop over to Narta Lagoon to spot flamingos, or to Karaburun Peninsula or Sazan Island to visit sea caves and quiet coves. There's also plenty of history woven in, with Ottoman and Byzantine touches around town and the ancient ruins of Apollonia within easy reach.

Book it: Olympic Holidays offers a seven-night stay at the Abi's Hotel & Spa from £718 per person sharing a Double Room Inland View room with breakfast. Includes luggage and flights from Heathrow departing on May 9. olympicholidays.com



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DUBROVNIK, CROATIA

Dubrovnik needs little introduction. Medieval terracotta rooftops and *Game of Thrones* filming locations set against the shimmering Adriatic draw crowds in droves. The Old Town is encased by dramatic ramparts, which surround baroque churches and historic quays, while cable-car rides to Mount Srd, waterfront walks and boat trips to nearby islands add to its classic coastal appeal.

HERCEG NOVI, MONTENEGRO

The vibe: Think leafy squares, sea views and an Old Town that still feels authentic. It's also easy to reach, only an hour's drive from Dubrovnik or Tivat. Natasha Marson, head of trade distribution at easyJet holidays, says: "Holidaymakers seeking a picturesque old town setting away from the hustle and bustle of Dubrovnik will find their perfect match with a package holiday to Herceg Novi, a destination where easyJet holidays has seen strong year-on-year growth."

The highlights: Herceg Novi's history is a big part of its appeal. Clients can wander between the old fortresses of Forte Mare and Kanli Kula, or head to Savina Monastery, an 11th-century complex overlooking the water. For something a bit different, Marson says: "I'd recommend a catamaran cruise to the Blue Cave, one of Montenegro's natural landmarks."

Book it: EasyJet holidays offers a seven-night stay at Lazure Hotel & Marina from £1,106 per person sharing an Annexe Standard Room with breakfast. Includes luggage, transfers and flights from Luton departing May 22.

easyjet.com



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LJUBLJANA, SLOVENIA

Slovenia's capital and largest city, Ljubljana, is lauded as one of Europe's most liveable capitals. It's beloved for its elegant bridges, baroque houses and the gentle curve of the Ljubljanica River threading through its compact, walkable streets. It's a cultural hub with a traditional feel, yet wildly contemporary, packed with leafy parks, cafes and food markets.

PIRAN, SLOVENIA

The vibe: Just under two hours' drive from the capital, this small coastal town on Slovenia's Istrian peninsula has a real Venetian feel thanks to its narrow lanes, pastel-hued buildings and a harbour framed by alfresco restaurants.

The highlights: "Piran is the perfect addition to a twin or multi-centre itinerary in Slovenia," says Andrea Godfrey, head of Regent Holidays. "It shows how this stunning country delivers, with lakes and mountains, vibrant cities and a bustling coastline. It's lesser explored than Lake Bled and Ljubljana, which makes it a quieter alternative to the Italian or Croatian coasts."

Piran's position also makes it ideal for a day trip to Postojna Cave, one of Europe's largest. The town itself offers Tartini Square (named after the famous composer, Giuseppe Tartini), his birthplace Tartini House, the atmospheric Minorite Monastery and old stone walls with scenic lookout points.

Book it: Regent Holidays' eight-day Slovenia Fly Drive trip costs from £1,485 per person including seven nights' bed-and-breakfast accommodation, with stays in Ljubljana, Piran, Goriška Brda and Bled. Includes transfers, car hire and return flights from London.

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