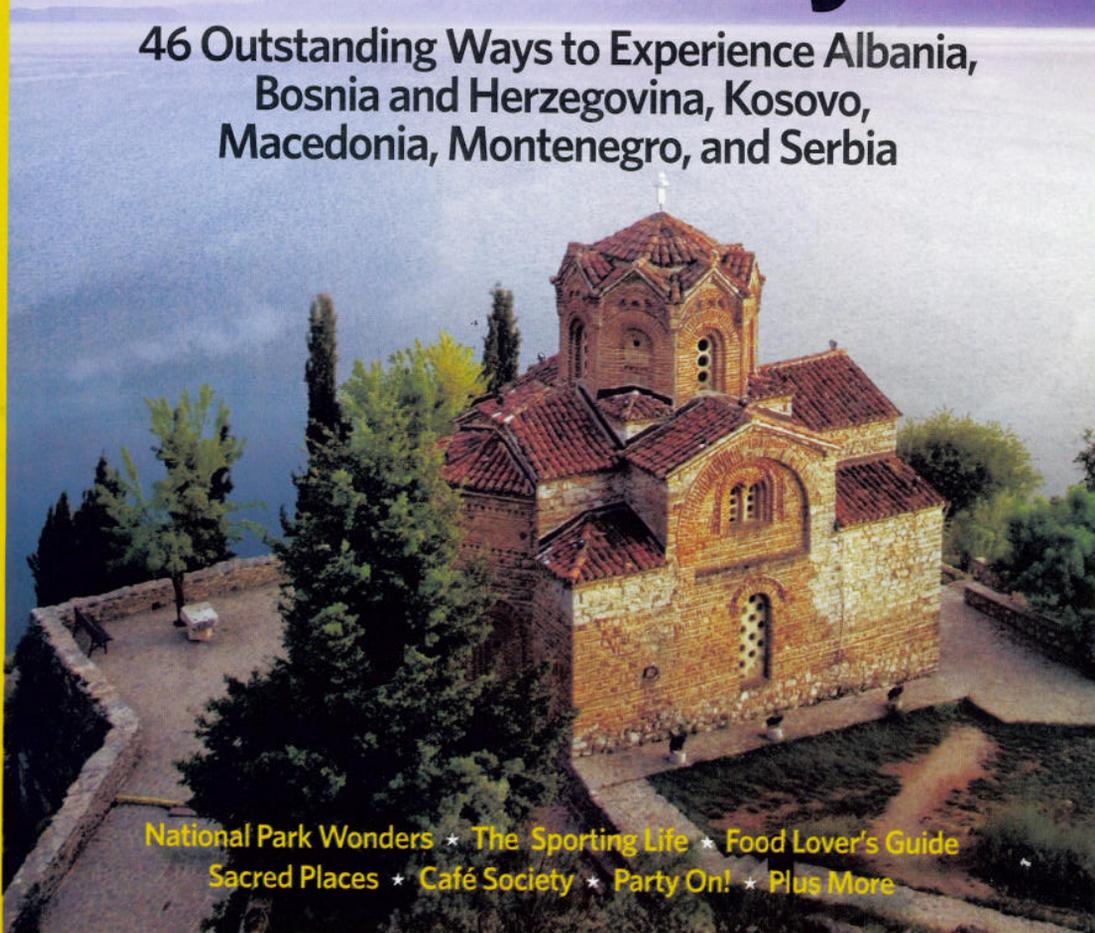




THE WESTERN BALKANS

Land of Discovery

46 Outstanding Ways to Experience Albania,
Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo,
Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia



National Park Wonders ★ The Sporting Life ★ Food Lover's Guide
Sacred Places ★ Café Society ★ Party On! ★ Plus More

INTRODUCTION

DISCOVERING THE WESTERN BALKANS



A PALE STONE BRIDGE spans a narrow gorge. A snow-capped peak glows in the morning light. Bells ring from within a medieval monastery, and a muezzin's call echoes from an ancient mosque. You're in the Balkans. A decade after the end of wars in the region, the doors have opened again on one of the most magical places in the world. Whether hiking western Albania's wild mountains or wandering the colorful Sarajevo bazaars in Bosnia and Herzegovina; breathing the Ottoman atmosphere of Prizren, Kosovo, or exploring the mystical shores of Macedonia's Lake Ohrid; dining on grilled squid at a seaside café in Montenegro or sampling the nightlife in the Serbian capital of Belgrade—visitors can't help but marvel at the richness of culture and the vibrant weave of people, history, and nature in this crossroads of Europe. —*The Editors*



Montenegro's Kotor Bay remains a major Balkans draw. *Top:* A girl wears traditional garb for an August celebration in Serbia. *Left:* In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Mostar's narrow streets beckon. *Cover:* Lake Ohrid, Macedonia.



Balkans Roundup

VINES, GRAPES, AND WINES

Winemaking in the Balkans is an ancient tradition that is just beginning to re-emerge after years of political upheaval. Today, each of the Balkan countries makes wine, but regional, economic, and cultural differences account for variations in quality, which can range from rustic to ultrasophisticated.

While some wineries are not set up to receive visitors, others are eager to show off their wines and Balkan hospitality. International grape varieties are found everywhere, but each region also boasts wine made from unique indigenous grapes. Margaret Rand, award-winning co-author of the book *Grapes & Wines*, puts it this way: “It’s the



In Albania's Vjosa Valley, white wine grapes cross the Vjosa River with some old-fashioned help. Right: A retired electrician, Mehmeti Egerem (top) is a highly respected wine-barrel maker; grapes (bottom) thrive near Skopje.

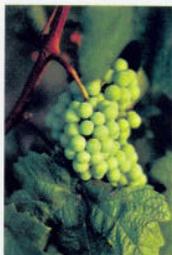
indigenous grapes that will be most interesting in the future; the world already has plenty of Chardonnay. A nice glass of Blatina, anyone?"

■ **Albania** has vineyards along the Vjosa River in the Permet district and around picturesque wine towns such as Berat and Gjirokastra. Boukas is a winery known for its Cabernet-Merlot blends and native Shesh. Some production at family-run Cobo takes place in traditional *kullas* (stone houses).



■ **Bosnia and Herzegovina's** wine country is centered in its southwest, where the climate is often compared to California's. Obiteljski Podrum Brkic is one of the principal estates along the wine route. Seek out Zilavka and Blatina grape varieties.

■ **Kosovo** has a wealth of grape varieties, including the widely grown Prokupac, followed by Gamay and Smederevka. Wineries to check out include Muja, Old Cellar, and StoneCastle.



■ **Macedonia** has 38 wineries. Tikves is the largest winery in the Balkans, producing 24 types of wine that range from bone dry to marvelously sweet. Vranec, the most important Macedonian grape, yields dark red, fruity table wines with full body and complex aromas. Worthy Macedonian estates include Bovin, Popov, Popova Kula, Skovin, Grkov, Tristo, Pivka, and Chateau Kamnik.

■ **Montenegro** is a tiny country producing a handful of fine wines, mostly in the southern and coastal regions. Chardonnay and Cabernet can be exceptional, and high-quality dry white wines are being made from Vranac grapes. Plantaze, Alessandrovic, and Kovacevic are among the region's most impressive wineries.

■ **Serbia** has a grape-growing history that dates to Roman times. One of the country's oldest and most famous vineyard regions is Zupa, 129 kilometers/80 miles south of Belgrade. Prokupac is Serbia's chief red grape; Tamjanika (a Muscat variety), a popular white. —Marguerite Thomas

FAST FACT

It's an exciting time for Balkan wine. Vineyards are being replanted, wineries are undergoing much-needed modernization, and large state-owned facilities are becoming privately owned, entrepreneurial wineries competing for gold medals.



ALBANIA

BIG, RARE BIRDS IN QUIET PLACES

The gray-white **Dalmatian pelican**, native to southeastern Europe, is the least common of the eight species of pelicans. What's more, the region's largest bird has a grand wingspan of 3 meters/10 feet and can weigh up to 15 kilograms/33 pounds. They tend to settle in isolated islets rich with fish. But with the decrease in wetland areas due to hunting, farming, industrialization, and pollution has come a decrease in the Dalmatian pelican population.

The species is now endangered. The bird still

breeds, though, in the **Karavasta Lagoon** in Divjake National Park, on the central Adriatic coast—the largest wetland area in Albania and an important site for wintering waterbirds. The lagoon plays

host to a wide range of wildlife, including 228 bird species, 25 mammal species, and 29 amphibian species.

Because of Karavasta Lagoon's rich natural diversity, international organizations have stepped in to help protect the ecosystem, resulting in a reverse in the trend of faunal decline, pelicans included.

—Laurie Werner



Flocks of Dalmatian pelicans can sometimes be seen flying in and out of the Karavasta Lagoon (top), not far from the village of Divjake.

SKADAR LAKE: GETTING AROUND THE WATER

In the midst of steep mountains, hidden villages, churches, and ruins, the clear waters of **Skadar Lake**—the Balkans' largest and part of a national park of the same name—are best appreciated from a boat or a cabin along the southern shore. Numerous walking trails, some better marked than others, wind their way around the dolphin-shaped lake.

The trail from the village of **Vranjina** up the mountain offers a pleasant hour's walk past a 15th-century monastery and culminates in sweeping views of the big water. Those who brave the park's most challenging hike, to the top of 1,600-meter/5,250-foot **Mount Rumija**, are, weather permitting, rewarded with a peek at the Adriatic Sea. —*Kristina Stefanova*



Shared by two countries, Montenegro and Albania, vast Skadar Lake draws boaters, birders, fishermen, and others. It is part of a national park established in 1983, with a diversity of landscapes, including wetlands (below).



ALBANIA

DINE ON TRADITION

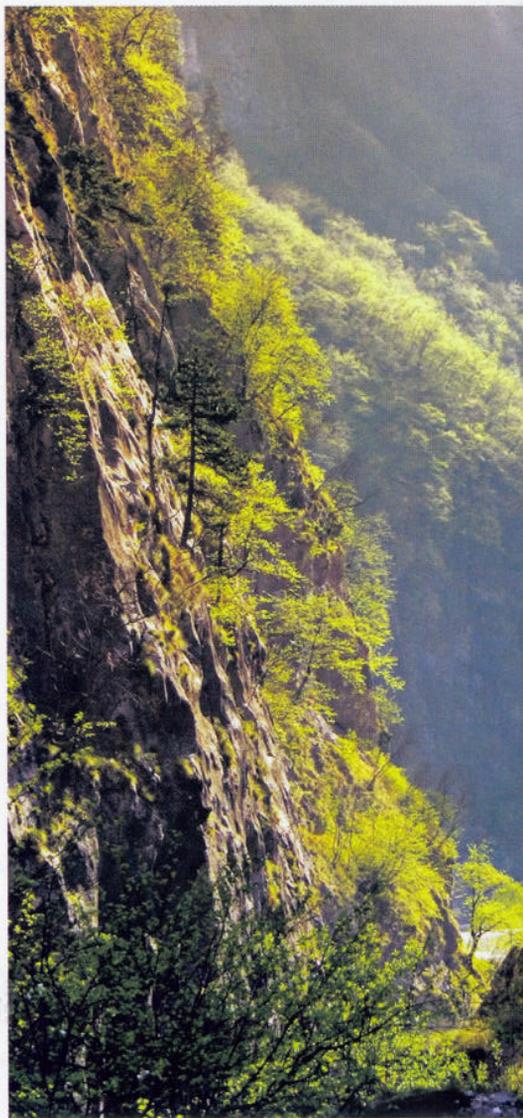
From the moment you enter **Tradita G&T**, a rustic restaurant in the mountain town of Shkoder, you're immersed in the culture and warmth of Albania. Gjon Dugilaj, the jovial owner, greets everyone with a broad smile and then proudly shows off his museum-worthy collections of traditional costumes and artifacts. Musicians play, dancers (including some diners) perform the local steps. And at one end of the stone room, a fire roars, roasting the most succulent lamb you'll ever taste.

Dinner is a feast of the vibrant flavors of the countryside, presented by formally dressed waiters (white shirts, dark pants, red cummerbunds), course after course. All ingredients are local; the dishes, seasonal. A salad of lettuce, cabbage, and tomato bursts with flavor. Roasted farmer's cheese in bubbling olive oil arrives melting, ready to be scooped up and spread on crusty bread. Meats and potatoes follow. To finish it off: pastry with almonds and honey along with glasses of fruit brandy, *rakija*. Fortunately, the restaurant has a small hotel attached.

—Laurie Werner



Tradita's authentic southeastern Albanian fare: white bean salad and ripe tomatoes with basil, for starters.



KOSOVO

TAKE THE HIGH GROUND

In the far western corner of Kosovo, beyond the town of Peja (or Pec, as it is known to Serbs), a narrow road enters one of the most spectacular areas in the Balkans. Welcome to the **Rugova Gorge**, where granite walls vault 609 meters/2,000 feet above the Drini River.

ALBANIA

WHERE CIVILIZATIONS LEFT THEIR MARKS

The Roman poet Virgil wrote of ancient Buthrotum [Butrint], “I saw before me Troy in miniature,” and his words conjure the sense of concentrated majesty in one of the most remarkable, complex archaeological sites in the world. Amid the ruins of **Butrint**, at the head of the Straits of Corfu, remain compelling whispers of civilizations that rose and fell over a span of some 2,500 years. “Butrint is almost a gateway to the Be-

yond,” says Oliver Gilkes, an archaeologist who has worked on the site. Butrint began as an Epirot city. Later, as was the case with numerous settlements, it was Hellenized. Farther on, Byzantine Christians created one of the most elaborate baptistries of the ancient world. On the floor of the baptistry unfolds a tale of salvation, with mosaic animals. Here, the faith of a lost world truly comes alive.

—John Marks

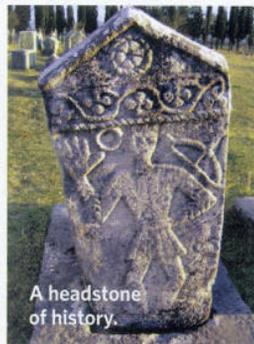


Ruins of Butrint's baths glimpsed from the upper fortress.

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

PEACE AND HARMONY

Strolling among artfully crafted, centuries-old headstones—*stecci*—can be a, well, heady experience. The graveyard of **Radimlja** brings together peoples of various beliefs and social classes—for eternity. It's a peaceful place, nice for wandering and pondering the charmingly decorated 15th- and 16th-century stones and the lives of the people who lived so long ago. —John Marks



A headstone of history.

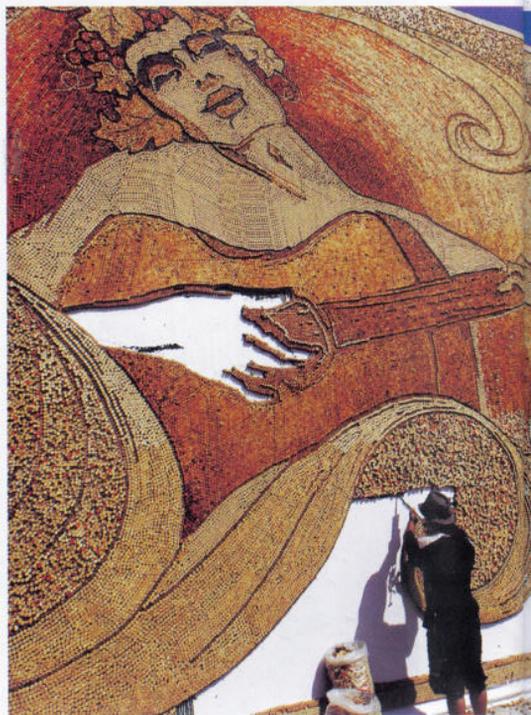


MONTENEGRO

BALKAN FJORDLAND

Kotor's Old Town is a diminutive, cobbled confection brimming with right-now energy. It's anchored by Sveti Tryphon Cathedral, a 12th-century haunt whose reliquary contains the remains of its patron saint. Kotor rocks with song and dance on summer evenings, not unlike Dubrovnik but looser and more dynamic. Recognizing its tourism potential, the Montenegrin government has poured money into infrastructure improvements since the country's independence in 2006. Still, it's the mountains above that give this place (often referred to as Europe's southernmost fjord) its credentials as a stunner. So what if the bay is not a fjord but rather a *ria* (drowned river valley)? Kotor's backdrop is majestic and rivals Norway's most dramatic fjords. Hardy hikers will have one goal: to ascend to the bay's famous fortification system, which is about a three-mile hike—spread out over 1,500 steps—from town. The walk features great intermediate vistas. Except for summer, there will be few fellow hikers sharing the path. Watch out, however, for the grazing goats. —Alex Robertson Textor

Accounting in part for Kotor's magnetic charm (top): No vehicular traffic is allowed in the city's medieval center.



ALBANIA

ARTFUL RESILIENCE

Tirana has had a front seat at Albania's evolution from isolationist dictatorship to up-and-coming European nation. The Albanian economy surged after 2000, and the country joined NATO in 2009. Under the leadership of artist-turned-mayor Edi Rama, Tirana is becoming a vibrant capital. Artists and musicians congregate in the fashionable Bllok neighborhood, near the National Academy of Arts, and Tirana's creative types have their choice of cafés to inspire their muses. One favorite is Kuki. Jeroen van Marle, editor and co-publisher of the *In Your Pocket Tirana* guide, says it's "like a small gallery, with artwork on the walls for sale."

Pamela Griffin, executive director of the Foundation for Albanian Visual Arts (FAVA), steers travelers to artists' studios. "Many artists," she notes, "were jailed or directed to manual labor in the 1970s if their art did not conform to the prescribed dictates." FAVA publishes a small list of studios open to visitors.

—Alex Robertson Textor

Clockwise from top: A statue commemorates Albanian national hero Gjergj Kastrioti Skanderbeg (1405-68), who successfully challenged armies of the Ottoman Empire. Edi Rama, elected Tirana's mayor in 2000, enlivened what was a drab cityscape. Albanian artist Saimir Strsti works on *The Guitarist*, a sweeping mosaic crafted with corks.



ALBANIA

FOLK CAPITAL IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Novelist Ismail Kadare wrote of his childhood in **Gjirokastra**, “Everything was...old and made of stone,” covered with “gray slates like gigantic scales.” The image evokes a living creature, and it fits. Gjirokastra, named a World Heritage site in 2005 for its perfectly preserved Ottoman urban center, bustles with culturally vibrant energy.

One recent visitor was delighted to hear Balkan a capella in the streets. “People were practicing polyphonic [contrapuntal] singing,” says Gwen Al Sawi, “and the following evening there was folk dancing.” Gjirokastra is arguably the folk culture capital of the Balkans. Every five years, the city hosts a National Folk Festival with hundreds of performers from around the region, though you



can be treated to great music and dance any weekend. After the show, head for the restaurant on the ramparts of the Kalaja fortress for a great view, a drink, and a bite to eat. —*John Marks*

BLAND ASHIKU (TOP), TIM DIRVEN/PANOS (BOTTOM)



Two faces of Gjirokastra: An everyday moment—a haircut and conversation at a small barber shop—unwinds in a city whose buildings are protected as a UNESCO World Heritage site. Dancers take the spotlight (top) at a lively festival.

STONES OF THE DISTANT PAST

About 8 kilometers/5 miles from the southwestern town of Fier, a center of Albania's oil and chemical industries, are the vestiges of the grand city of **Apollonia**. Founded, according to ancient writers, by Greeks from Corinth and Corfu in 588 B.C, it later became a Roman city, siding with Julius Caesar in the civil war with



Pompey. It flourished until the third century A.D., when an earthquake changed the path of the Vjosa River. The harbor dried up and the city declined.

By the 13th century, after the city's swampland had expanded, resulting in outbreaks of malaria, the city's residents had moved elsewhere. Over time, movements in the earth buried the city. Austrian archaeologists began to excavate during World War I, a process that continues today; it is believed that most of the city is still deep below Apollonia's hills.

Among the most striking remains are the six columns and facade of the Monument of Agonothetes (once part of the city's administrative center), from the second century A.D., and the Odeon, a 300-seat theater where the Roman Emperor Augustus studied in his younger days (today, it is occasionally the setting for concerts). The 13th-century Monastery of St. Mary keeps the past protected, housing statues and other artifacts discovered in the process of excavation. —*Kristina Stefanova*

Excavations at the site of Apollonia (top) began in the early 20th century; much still remains buried.





Balkans Roundup

A WEALTH OF NATIONAL PARKS

Talk about an embarrassment of riches. There are 32 national parks in the six countries featured here, so whether you're looking for a pocket of some of the continent's last primeval forest, mountain-biking trails through limestone karst, or a hike in a countryside paradise still teeming with wildlife, you won't be disap-

pointed. Albania offers perhaps the largest stretch of pristine national parkland for hikers. Lots of it is quite wild. Feeling adventurous? Hire a guide and head to **Llogaraja Pass**, which has overnight accommodations. In Bosnia and Herzegovina's **Sutjeska National Park**, ancient stands of black pine and beech tower high above unspoiled rivers in one of



Biogradsko Lake
is one of seven
glacial lakes in
Montenegro's
Biogradska Gora
National Park.

the continent's last ancient forests. **Sara Mountain National Park** in Kosovo is remote—one of the only places in Europe where wildlife lovers might actually see a bear or a wolf. **Biogradska Gora National Park** in Montenegro is a magnet for mountaineers eager to test their skills on the sheer rock faces of Mount Bjelasica. At **Mavrovo National Park** in Mace-

donia, mountain bikers can take a challenging 34-kilometer/21-mile spin around Mavrovo Lake or a ride up into the dairy-farm-dotted hills. **Fruska Gora National Park** in Serbia beckons visitors to its Orthodox monasteries. Wander the hills, and you'll think you're in a century long, long gone.

—John Marks

COUNTRY FACTS AND RESOURCES

This corner of the world rewards the traveler in many ways. From treasures of the past to fine food and wine, pleasures await in six countries whose total size is less than half that of Spain. Herewith, some details and sources so you can find out more.

ALBANIA

COUNTRY STATS

Capital Tirana
Population 3,639,453
Area 28,748 square kilometers/11,100 square miles
Highest point Mount Korabit, 2,764 meters/
 9,068 feet
Currency the lek

ONLINE RESOURCES

National Tourist Organization of Albania
www.albaniantourism.com
Outdoor Albania
www.outdooralbania.com
Albania Holidays
www.albania-holidays.com

DID YOU KNOW?

- In Albania, nodding the head up and down is a way to communicate “no.” Shaking the head from left to right signals “yes.”
- Mother Teresa is Albania’s most famous person. She was baptized in Skopje in 1910, when Albania was part of the Ottoman Empire.

KOSOVO

COUNTRY STATS

Capital Pristina
Population 1,804,838
Area 10,887 square kilometers/4,203 square miles
Highest point Mount Gjeravica/Deravica,
 2,656 meters/8,713 feet
Currency the euro

ONLINE RESOURCES

Visit Kosovo
<http://visitkosovo.org/?page=2,4>
Experience Kosovo Blog
<http://experiencekosovo.wordpress.com>

DID YOU KNOW?

- Kosovo, entirely surrounded by mountains, is about one-fourth the size of Switzerland.
- Loosely translated, the name Kosovo means “field of blackbirds.”

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

COUNTRY STATS

Capital Sarajevo
Population 4,613,414
Area 51,197 square kilometers/19,767 square miles
Highest point Maglic Mountain, 2,386 meters/
 7,828 feet
Currency the convertible mark

ONLINE RESOURCES

Tourism Association of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina
www.bhtourism.ba/eng
Exploring Bosnia and Herzegovina
www.exploringbosnia.com
Green Visions
www.greenvisions.ba/gv/

DID YOU KNOW?

- The city of Tuzla gets its name from “tuz,” Turkish for “salt.” Tuzla’s salt comes from saltwater springs.
- Residents of the village of Lukomir, high in the mountains, maintain one of Europe’s oldest lifestyles, wearing traditional clothing and opting to live without running water and electricity.

MACEDONIA

COUNTRY STATS

Capital Skopje
Population 2,066,718
Area 25,713 square kilometers/9,928 square miles
Highest point Golem Korab (Maja e Korabit),
 2,764 meters/9,068 feet
Currency the denar

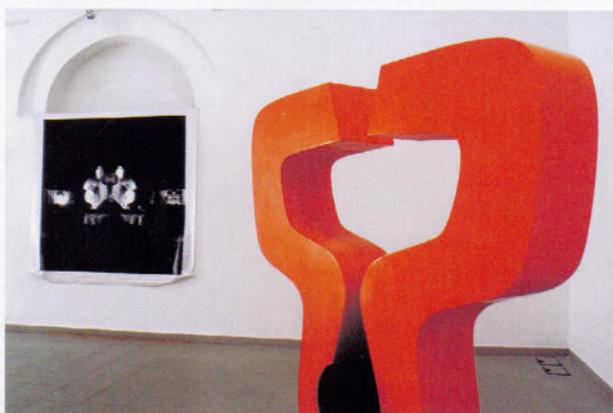
ONLINE RESOURCES

Exploring Macedonia
www.exploringmacedonia.com
Macedonia Timeless
www.macedonia-timeless.com



DID YOU KNOW?

- Half the population of Macedonia is under 35 years old.
- What’s all the buzz about? There are more than 80,000 beehives in Macedonia.



Clockwise from left: In Montenegro, "A raft trip down the Tara River is a dreamlike spree," says Richard Bangs, co-founder of Mountain Travel Sobek. In Tirana, Albania's Skanderbeg Square is the place to be on a sunny day. Skopje, Macedonia's National Art Gallery was originally Turkish baths. Opposite: Marshal Tito in Cyrillic on a Macedonian street sign.

MONTENEGRO

COUNTRY STATS

Capital Podgorica
Population 672,180
Area 13,812 square kilometers/5,333 square miles
Highest point Bobotov Kuk, 2,522 meters/
8,274 feet
Currency the euro

ONLINE RESOURCES

National Tourism Organization of Montenegro
www.montenegro.travel/index_en.html
Montenegro Adventures
www.montenegro-adventures.com

DID YOU KNOW?

- The country's name ("black mountain") doesn't begin to reflect Montenegro's 117 beaches.
- Tara River Canyon is Europe's longest and deepest.

SERBIA

COUNTRY STATS

Capital Belgrade
Population 7,379,339
Area 77,474 square kilometers/29,913 square miles
Highest point Midzor, 2,169 meters/7,116 feet
Currency the dinar

ONLINE RESOURCES

National Tourism Organization of Serbia
www.serbia.travel/
Serbia Travel Guide
www.serbia-travel-guide.info

DID YOU KNOW?

- Belgrade is one of the oldest cities in Europe, first settled in the third century B.C. by the Celts.
- The Roman emperor Constantine the Great was born in Nis, Serbia, sometime after A.D. 280.

A RESOURCE FOR THE ENTIRE REGION Balkan Travellers, www.balkantravellers.com, is an inspiring e-zine that offers cultural, historical, and culinary tidbits on 11 Balkan countries.



A NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC TRAVELER & USAID SPECIAL SUPPLEMENT