



# Black Mountain

Fancy exploring the lesser-known Mediterranean? Tracey Croke takes a cross-country mountain bike trip through Montenegro to give us chapter and verse on the land that inspired the works of Byron.

Words: Tracey Croke

Photos: Zoran Tepavčević & Tracey Croke



Montenegro is a conundrum of a country. On one hand, its 240 kilometres of seacoast lined with beaches and old stone buildings has long attracted the culture conscious sun-seeking set. On the other hand it's feels wild, untouched and unexplored.

Even the finest of Montenegro's historical coastal gems (think ancient cities à la kings landing if you're a game of thrones fan) are not trampled to the usual Mediterranean standards. It goes some way to explaining why this relatively unknown part of Europe is lauded as the "hidden pearl of the Mediterranean." Or as the poet Byron put it: "The most beautiful encounter between land and sea."

As romantic as that sounds, I'm reserving judgment. It wasn't just words that Byron had a way with. By most accounts, he cavorted around the Balkans indulging in all manner of excesses. It's likely he wrote his prose through opium-tinted glasses. Either way, I'm not here just to enjoy the beach-fringed hotspots - it's the lesser-known Montenegro I want to explore.

Montenegro screams bike adventure. I'd hazard a guess that 95% - the 'bit' most of the 1.5 million annual visitors don't bother with - is mountainous. Great swathes of thick green forest give the landscape a dark appearance and Montenegro its name, which literally translates to "Black Mountain".

Local mountain biker and guide, Zoran, meets me at Dubrovnik airport. On the drive into Montenegro, he briefs me on the week's ride - a mix of tarmac, rugged military roads, disused railway lines, old wagon trails, and bits of singletrack.

Along the 280-kilometre route, we'll stay in vibrant Budva, the former royal capital of Cetinje and rejuvenated Tivat with its swanky new Marina. We'll pop in and out of National Parks and catch the best views all they way across the Adriatic to the Italian coast.

An hour later, we arrive at our start point and homely stay for the night. Family run guesthouse, Villa Margot, is a postcard picture of blue and white overlooking the azure waters of Herceg Novi, 'the quietest

town on the coast," Zoran tells me.

The following day, the owner is keen to know if I'm enjoying my breakfast. My mouth is stuffed to the gills with fruit, various smoked hams, and local cheeses. Unable to respond without the scene getting messy, I nod enthusiastically and make my best yum-face. Omelette follows.

Overindulgence sends me burping up the first 11-kilometre climb. At the top, I'm surprised that our only companions are a couple of goats. It's not that Montenegro doesn't have plenty to bleat about. For such a small country it packs a lot in. Outside the stone walls and weathered doors of beach-fringed historical towns, it's cracked by Tara Canyon - the deepest in Europe - and pockmarked with 40 eye-popping pure water lakes. Add to that the only virgin forest left in Europe, 330 species of birds and a quarter of the entire European flora, and I'm getting the bigger picture that there's enough uniqueness here to allure active adventurers galore.

"It's so quiet. I expected more people," I say, splitting my attention between the mountain top vista and two eagles silently soaring above my head. "Maybe people still think of the war," Zoran says.

Once part of the former Yugoslavia, Montenegro has left behind 40 years of communist rule and a decade of Balkan conflict. Although no battles actually



took place on Montenegrin soil during the Yugoslav wars, the whole region understandably lost its getaway appeal. In May 2006, Montenegro once again became an independent democratic country.

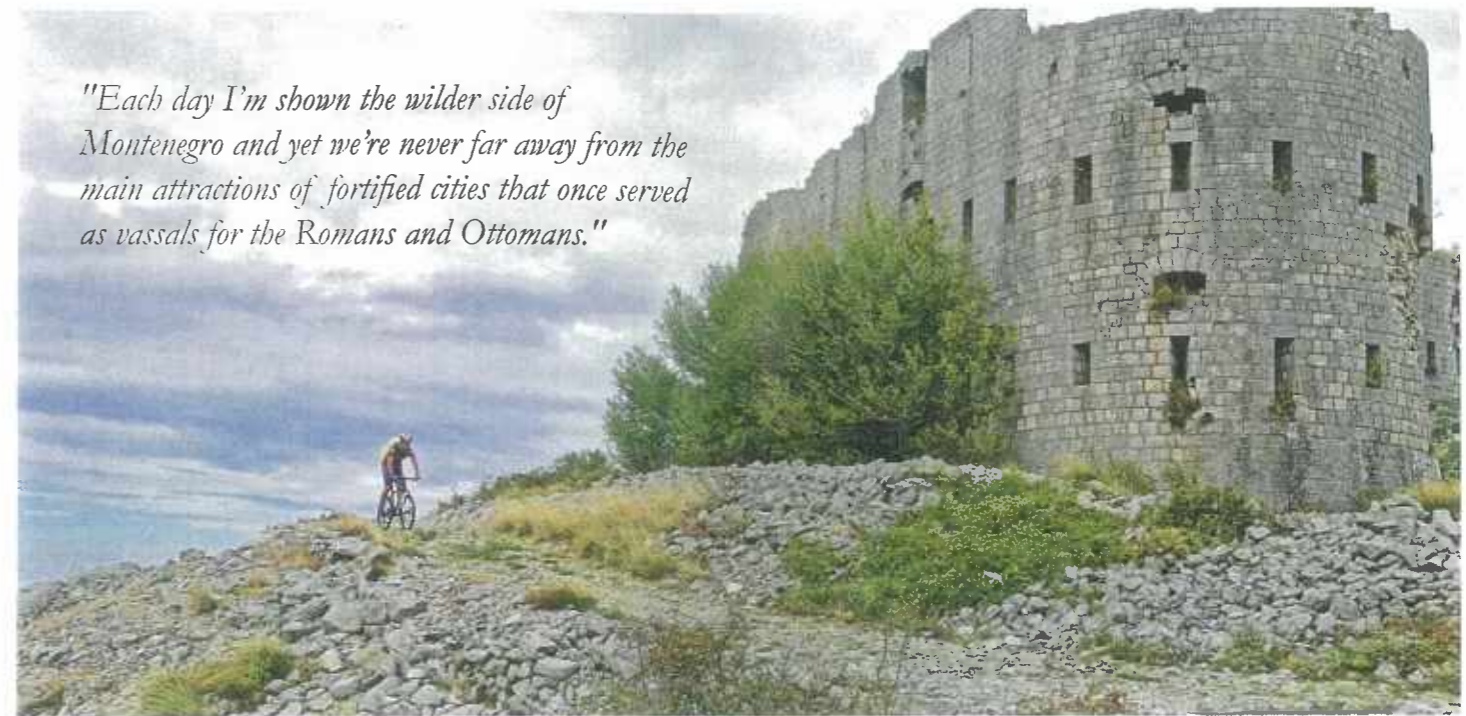
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It's not unusual to breakfast in a Venetian village, tuck into a lunch of sandwich slabs (the size of my own head) in a mountain hut above the clouds, then speed down to the beach through alpine mist for a cold beer or ice cream by early evening. A seafood dinner with a coastal view often rounds off the day. With daily plus-20 kilometre climbs, I don't worry about my waistline.

We ride through verdant forests with



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bronze leaf-littered floors and cross over streams on stone bridges that I imagine were built by a gang of hobbits. At alpine level, it’s as if a team of landscapers designed wild rockery gardens as far as the eye can see. The air is constantly infused with a mix of mint, sage and thyme.

Back down again at beach level, a ‘must-see’ attraction I wouldn’t be upset to skip is the tiny island of Sveti Stefan; a rocky outcrop a couple of hundred metres off the mainland. Unless you want to part with 1,000 to 4,500 Euro for a night’s stay, you’re not welcome to look around this 15th century fishing village turned luxury resort.

Just as I’m wondering ‘why bother?’ buses pull up and curious tourists file off to snap the high walls and locked gates which once contained the bust-ups and make-ups between Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor.

But all told, I should eat my cynical words. A solid six days of riding through this hidden pearl has proved that substances didn’t influence Byron’s prose after all. And the most spectacular encounter between land and sea is saved for the last descent.

First it’s the fiord-like mountains that draw my wind-streaming eyes. Slate grey and dark green tinged with lavender abruptly plunge into a blue-green glassy bay. At the foot nestles the UNESCO heritage Kotor, one of the world’s finest preserved medieval cities.

A cruise ship anchored in the bay is



brazenly shouting for attention. “The shops and restaurants are all they see,” shouts Zoran. For thousand’s of years, the majesty of these black mountains has served as a natural defence from invading forces. Maybe Montenegro’s lesser-known wild beauty is the way it’s meant to be.

#### NEED TO KNOW

- The author was a guest of Spice Roads Cycle Tours. Cost of the eight-day tour (six cycling) including accommodation and most meals is \$1,675 USD. Details at: [www.spiceroads.com](http://www.spiceroads.com)
- The trip is supported and would suit a moderately fit mountain biker with basic skills.
- You will need to carry a daypack with your personal belongings such as extra

layers, wet gear, water, lunch, and snacks.

- You can rent a hard-tail mountain bike from Spice Roads (\$195 USD) or bring your own bike. Check with the airline for rules and cost of bike fees when booking. Renting may be cheaper.
- How to get there: Flights from Vancouver, Toronto, Montreal and Calgary to Dubrovnik (Croatia) with one stop in London from \$1,050 CAD. Airlines: Lufthansa, Air Canada, British Airways and Croatian.
- Best time to go: April to October
- Currency: Even though Montenegro is not a member of the EU its official currency is the Euro.
- Please note: All details and prices correct at the time of writing. ☺

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