



THE TRAILBLAZER OF MONTENEGRO

WORDS AND PHOTOS BY TRACEY CROKE

ZORAN TEPAVČEVIĆ IS AN EX-CHAMPION WHO SUPPORTS HIS TRAIL-BUILDING VISION BY LEADING BIKE TOURS AND CALLING BINGO. TRACEY CROKE JOINS HIM ON A SIX-DAY ADVENTURE TO EXPLORE THE LESSER-KNOWN MONTENEGRO.

"I wish I'd brought my trail axe," says Zoran. He has one of those faces that sticks in smile mode even when he summons all his strength to break off a branch that's blocking our way. We've been pushing through an overgrown singletrack for an hour or so. "I do a bit more every time I pass through here," he explains.

Zoran is showing me around the trails above tourist-rich Budva, a historical coastal town (think Kings Landing if you're a Game of Thrones fan). He multitasks his way through, unfazed by the enormity of the mission; leading me, stopping at points of interest to talk history, fun facts and dig out a troublesome sharp rock here and there. It's a characteristic that will serve his vision well.

"My friends and I are planning a network of dedicated mountain bike singletrack further north where we live," the 29-year-old explains. "There's so much potential there, it's more beautiful and peaceful, away from the crowds." I wonder what that northern beauty must look like considering the spectacular show I've enjoyed around the country so far.

At 13,812 square kilometres, Montenegro is just a little bigger than Greater Sydney. Most is mountainous and a whopping 60 percent is over 1000 metres high. In short, it screams mountain bike adventure, yet in European terms it's largely unexplored.

ADVENTURE AWAITS

We started our six-day 280-kilometre loop in the pretty coastal gem of Herceg Novi close to the Croatian border. We'll finish in the jewel in Montenegro's crown and one of Europe's finest preserved medieval cities; the UNESCO heritage city of Kotor.

On a typical day, we start with a climb from a pretty Venetian influenced village. The tarmac soon turns to old military trails from the time of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, which deliver panoramic views of an unspoiled Mediterranean. From there, we get everything thrown into the mix from singletrack to disused railway lines. It's all ride-able for anyone with basic mountain bike skills and a good level of fitness.

At alpine level, it's as if a team of landscapers designed wild rock gardens as far as the eye can see. The air is constantly infused with a mix of wild mint, sage and thyme. Above the clouds, we tuck into sandwich slabs the size of our heads. Afterwards, we speed down into misty verdant forests with bronze leaf-littered floors and over moss-covered stone bridges that I imagine were built by a gang of hobbits.

More beautiful than this would be hard to beat, but Zoran insists the North is

even more stunning, "and more singletrack," he says noticing the pickup in my enthusiasm every time the double track narrows.

The crowds Zoran refers to are absent in the mountains. They tend to confine themselves to a few tick-box tourist pockets of Montenegro. It goes some way to explaining why this relatively unknown part of Europe is lauded as the "hidden pearl of the Mediterranean." But even here, a short distance outside Budva's popular medieval walls, with a little elevation thrown in the equation, we share the trails with only mountain goats and a couple of shepherds.

We emerge out of the thicket and make our way up exposed rocks to the highest point of today's ride. "It's so quiet. I expected more people," I say splitting my attention between the mountain top vista and two eagles soaring silently above my head. "Maybe people still think of the war," Zoran says.

A DELICATE HISTORY

Once part of the former Yugoslavia, Montenegro has left behind forty 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, after a short three-year union with Serbia, Montenegro once again became an independent democratic country.

Over the days, my humble guide reveals how a young lad, who lived in a country with no bike shops, started mountain biking and became the first XCO National Champion of Montenegro.

Aged 16, Zoran spotted a couple of intrepid mountain bikers passing by Lake Krupac, a local beauty spot near his home in the city of Nikšić. "I hadn't seen a bike like it before, so I researched it and built a bike from waste parts."

In the beginning, he developed his skills riding down steps, "doing tricks" and racing with his friends around town until the pine forests and rocky terrain of nearby Mount Trebjesa became their playground. Two years later in 2005, Zoran bought his first 'mountain bike' – it had no suspension.

Zoran recalls his first race. "Just before the start, someone gave me a suspension fork. I put it on but had to tighten the headset after each circuit." He was happy with fourth place but knew without the fork-faffing he could do better.

He worked extra jobs, saved up, and another two years later he had enough money to buy a KTM Ultra Sport bike. At that time it cost 800 Euros. It was all the money he had. Zoran entered the 2007 National XCO Championships with his new bike at the same time his country was entering a new era as an independent democratic country.

The 20-year-old beat the elites in the 35km race (including Demir Mulic and Goran Cerovic who still dominate the field today) to take the overall cup. But for Zoran, the significance of that moment in history was bigger than the win itself. He officially became the first National Champion of the newly independent Montenegro. "My family and friends were so happy to hear our country name without Serbia or Yugoslavia mentioned. It made the moment even more special," he says swelling with pride.





Sadly, he didn't gain any deserved support or sponsorship from the Cycling Federation. I ask why? "I gave up racing because I couldn't afford the entry and travel," he says trying to hide his disappointment. I sense there is more to it but decide it's not in his interest to dig any further.

On a brighter note, he caught the attention of some international adventure cycling and mountain-biking companies such as Spice Roads, KE Adventures and Saddle Skedaddle, who hire Zoran to lead bike tours connecting the popular spots in Montenegro. It only pays the bills in the summer season, so he works in a bingo hall during the winter to support his mountain biking and trail-building dream.

Nine years after becoming the first XCO National Champion of Montenegro, Zoran's still got the same bike he won the race with, which is literally coming away at the seams. During this journey his seat cover came off and a split appeared in his front rim. "It's nearly the end of the season, I'll fix it in between calling bingo," he laughs through wind-streaming eyes as we plunge down to our journey end at the glassy blue-green bay of Kotor.

Inside the ancient city walls, we grab beer to

celebrate the journey. I suspect Zoran might be secretly celebrating that his bike made it through the journey. I'm secretly saluting a spirit who keeps fixing his bike and getting on with it.

The ex-champion reveals where his heart lies nowadays. "Discovering trails where probably no one has taken a bike and where the quiet and wilderness is constant." He dreams of turning the north of Montenegro into a mountain bike destination with "mixed and more challenging" mountain bike dedicated trails built by him and his friends. For that he'll need recognition and support. He knows it's a big climb.

Zoran drops me off at Dubrovnik airport in neighbouring Croatia. As I say goodbye, I can't resist a question that's been burning all the way to the airport. "Would you go back racing?" I ask, "I mean... if you could get a better bike?" At first, he looks away with hands in pockets as if he's moved on, but the glint in his eye gives him away and his huge smile cracks even wider. "Yes, I know I'm better than them."

It seems this bingo-calling ex-champion mountain biker isn't ready to give up on that part of his dream yet. Hopefully his number will come up soon.

MORE INFO:

Where is it? Montenegro in south-eastern Europe. It shares borders with Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo, Albania. Montenegro translates to "Black Mountain" named after the dark forests that cover the slopes.

How to get there: Fly from Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane to Montenegro's capital Podgorica. Alternatively, fly to Dubrovnik in neighbouring Croatia (Flights from Perth, Sydney and Melbourne). The Montenegrin border is a thirty-minute drive from there.

Best time to go: April to October. The coastal hot spots are packed July and August, when temperatures reach their peak. Accommodation rates double in some places.

Climate: The coast has typically Mediterranean weather, with very warm summers (35 – 40 deg C) and mild winters. The interior has a sub-alpine climate, characterised by warm summers, but bitterly cold winters with occasional heavy rainfall and much snow.

Currency: Even though Montenegro is not a member of the EU its official currency is the Euro.

Visa: There is no visa requirement for Australian citizens in either Croatia or Montenegro for stays less than 90 days.