



Take a Ride on

THE WILD SIDE



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

WRITTEN BY TRACY 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 wild, untouched and feels completely unexplored.

Even the finest of Montenegro's historical coastal gems are not trampled to the usual Mediterranean standards. Think of Italy's Cinque Terre pre the paint job and ancient cities à la Kings Landing (if you're a Game of Thrones fan) or the fortified city of Dubrovnik in neighbouring Croatia minus the soccer-match-like throngs. 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: "At the birth of the planet the most beautiful encounter between land and sea must've been on the Montenegrin coast."

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. Out of its 13,812 square kilometres (just a little bigger than Greater Sydney) I'd hazard a guess that 95 percent - the 'bit' most don't bother with - is mountainous. It's a fact that a whopping 60 percent is over 1,000 metres high and covered in great swathes of thick green forest giving the landscape a dark appearance and Montenegro its name, which literally translates to "Black Mountain".

Of the 1.5 million yearly visitors, only a tiny fraction ventures into the mountains. I'm here to buck that trend with Spice Roads Cycle Tours, one of the few operators who really get into the heart of the country.

Zoran, a local lad, keen Mountain Biker

and my guide for the next week, meets me at Dubrovnik airport. He introduces me to my two other cycling companions, Tim and Cheryl, a couple of triathletes from the UK who humbly mumble (only after some probing) that they've completed a few Ironman races. They reassure me that they're here on holiday to take in the experience not train for their next race. I breathe a sigh of relief.

On the drive into Montenegro, Zoran briefs us on the six days of riding - 285 km on a mix of tarmac, rugged military roads, disused railway lines, old wagon trails and even a bit of single track. We'll stay in vibrant Budva and the rejuvenated Tivat with its swanky new Marina, take a boat across Lake Skarda which heaves with twittering wildlife, and head up to the former royal capital of Cetinje. Along the route we'll pop in and out of National Parks and catch the best views across the Adriatic to the Italian coast.

An hour later, we pull up at our guesthouse. "We're in Herceg Novi, the quietest town on the coast," Zoran announces. It immediately lives up to Montenegro's friendly unspoilt reputation. "Villa Margot" is a pretty blue and white building overlooking the azure waters of the Adriatic. An assemblage of paved terraces tumble down to a quaint pool.

The following day at breakfast, the owner is keen to know if I'm enjoying the food. My mouth is stuffed to the gills with various smoked hams and local cheeses, offered with almost every meal in Montenegro. Unable to respond without the scene getting messy, I nod enthusiastically and make my best yum-face. Omelette to order follows and pita - a puff pastry roll stuffed with goat cheese. It's just the ticket to kick me off on the first 11 kilometre climb.

The steep tarmac road soon turns rugged and loose. I'm surprised that our only companions at the top 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, photography enthusiasts, intrepid trekkers and nature lovers galore. Yet we're alone.

"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 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, Montenegro once again became an independent democratic country.

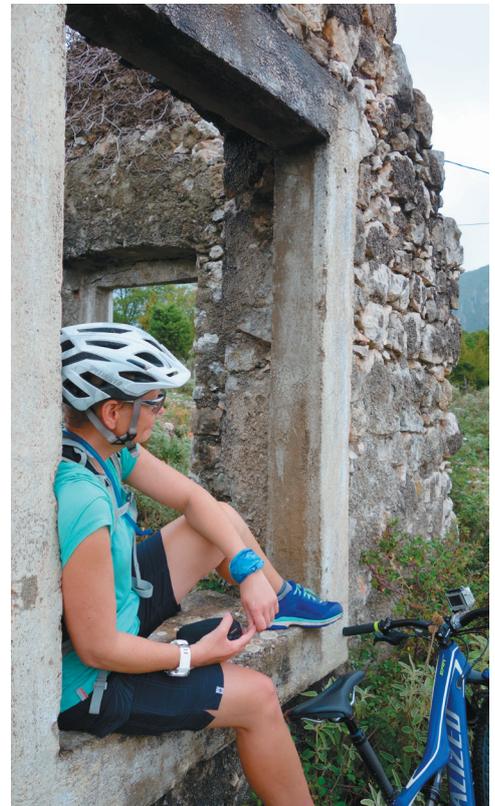
The fact that these lands have been continually invaded and defended throughout time adds to the beguile of modern-day Montenegro. The coast is littered with Venetian influenced villages and fortified cities that once served as vassals for the Romans and Ottomans. It seems every empire and his dog have all stuck their oar in Montenegro.

The beauty of exploring Montenegro is its size. It's not unusual to breakfast in a Venetian village, tuck into our lunch of fruit and sandwich slabs 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 before a fresh seafood dinner overlooking a Marina. With daily plus-20 kilometre climbs, I don't worry about my waistline.

In some places only goats and hikers can share the trail. Again, the latter are surprisingly absent; we see only a handful in the six days. Throughout the mountains, there is a strong sense of pride and spirit, which stems from clans and families that at



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one time maintained their own customs and values. In a mountain village restaurant, we tuck into the tastiest beef soup like grandma used to make. There's a genuine desire to please and a friendliness not tainted by tourism.

As the days go by the beauty of Montenegro is unrelenting. Verdant forests with bronze leaf littered floors have a natural orderly tidiness about them. Small hobbit-like moss-covered stone bridges cross over streams. The air is constantly infused with a mix of mint, sage and thyme. At alpine level, it's as if a team of landscapers designed wild rockery gardens as far as the eye can see. Every turn is a new wow, followed by that nagging question; why do we have this all to ourselves?

A must-see I wouldn't be upset to miss 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, this 15th century fishing village turned luxury resort is a look-but-don't-touch attraction.

While I ponder in the pointlessness of it all, the curious pile off buses in

disagreement to gawk at the spot where Richard Burton wrangled with Elizabeth Taylor and Tennis Player Novak Djokovic chose to tie the knot.

But other than that I should eat my words. It seems Lord Byron wasn't swayed by substances after all. The meeting of land and sea has been consistently spectacular since day one, but Montenegro saves the ultimate jaw-dropper for our 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 luxury cruise ship anchored in bay is brazenly shouting for attention. "Two or three ships a day come here," says Zoran. "The shops and restaurants are all they see." For thousand's of years, the majesty of the mountains have 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.

Author, Tracey Croke was a guest of Spice Roads Cycle Tours. Cost of the eight day tour (six cycling) is \$USD 1,675.00 It includes accommodation and most meals.

Details at: www.spiceroads.com

The trip is supported where possible and would suit a moderately fit cyclist with a few basic mountain bike skills. If needed, you can skill up at a one-day clinic. Check out our Online Adventure Directory for some suggestions.

You will need to carry a daypack with your personal belongings such as extra layers, wet gear, water, lunch and snacks.

You can hire a hard-tail mountain bike from Spice Roads (USD \$195) or bring your own bike. Check with the airline for rules and cost of bike fees when booking. Hiring may be cheaper.

How to get there: Flights to Dubrovnik (Croatia) from \$AUD 1677,00 Qantas, Austrian Airlines, Lufthansa, British Airways, Croatian Airlines.

Best time to go: April to October

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.

Insurance: Check your insurance policy carefully to make sure it covers any potential risks involved in a mountain cycling holiday.

Please note: All details and prices correct at the time of writing.



Tracey Croke ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tracey Croke is a travel journalist who writes about roughly-toughty travel, offtrack adventure and anything involving a bike. Her quest for a good story has involved venturing into post-conflict Afghanistan to join an expedition across the Pamir Mountains, being rescued by nomads in Kyrgyzstan's Talas Range, sleeping in a swag next to a croc-infested billabong and having her smalls rummaged through with the muzzle of a Kalashnikov. www.traceycroke.com