

Prekrasno Montenegro





Montenegro offers a bang-for-your-buck, fulfilling, exciting and stimulating experience that can be as active or as laid-back as you want it to be.

BY ALICE THESEN

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he brief was very specific: the destination had to be somewhere in Europe that none of us had been before (we were a group of 10), with beaches for swimming, mountains for hiking, a bit of nightlife – and, most importantly, a place we could all afford. A chance encounter at a braai with a globe-trotting motorbike enthusiast/property mogul (he said that, next to South Africa, Montenegro was the most beautiful country he'd ever seen) led us to 10 days in Montenegro, and we never looked back.

If you're anything like me, you're probably realising round about now that although you definitely know the name, you have no idea where Montenegro actually is. Well, it's in Southeast Europe, where it shares a border with its better-known and more popular cousins Albania, Serbia, Bosnia and Croatia. Formerly part of Yugoslavia, Montenegro became a sovereign state in 2006. And it shows: there's still a strong sense of baby-country newness and pride about the place. In the capital, Podgorica, there are flags everywhere. And I mean *everywhere*: in windows, strung from balconies, hanging from lampposts, lining the streets, fluttering on cars and covering the entire facades of some of the high-rises.

We flew into Podgorica and rented cars from a man who looked like a Montenegrin Eben Etzebeth, which we took as a good omen despite the lack of anything that actually resembled official papers (which the affordability of the hire more than compensated for).

TRAVEL

Perhaps the only person who would have made us feel safer would have been a Montenegrin Handré Pollard, but you can't always get what you want.

Podgorica has a sprawling industrial centre with a tiny Old Town curved along a river, and it's worth a stop – but for tourists the city is really just a landing point on their way to the more spectacular destinations, of which there are many.

Kotor

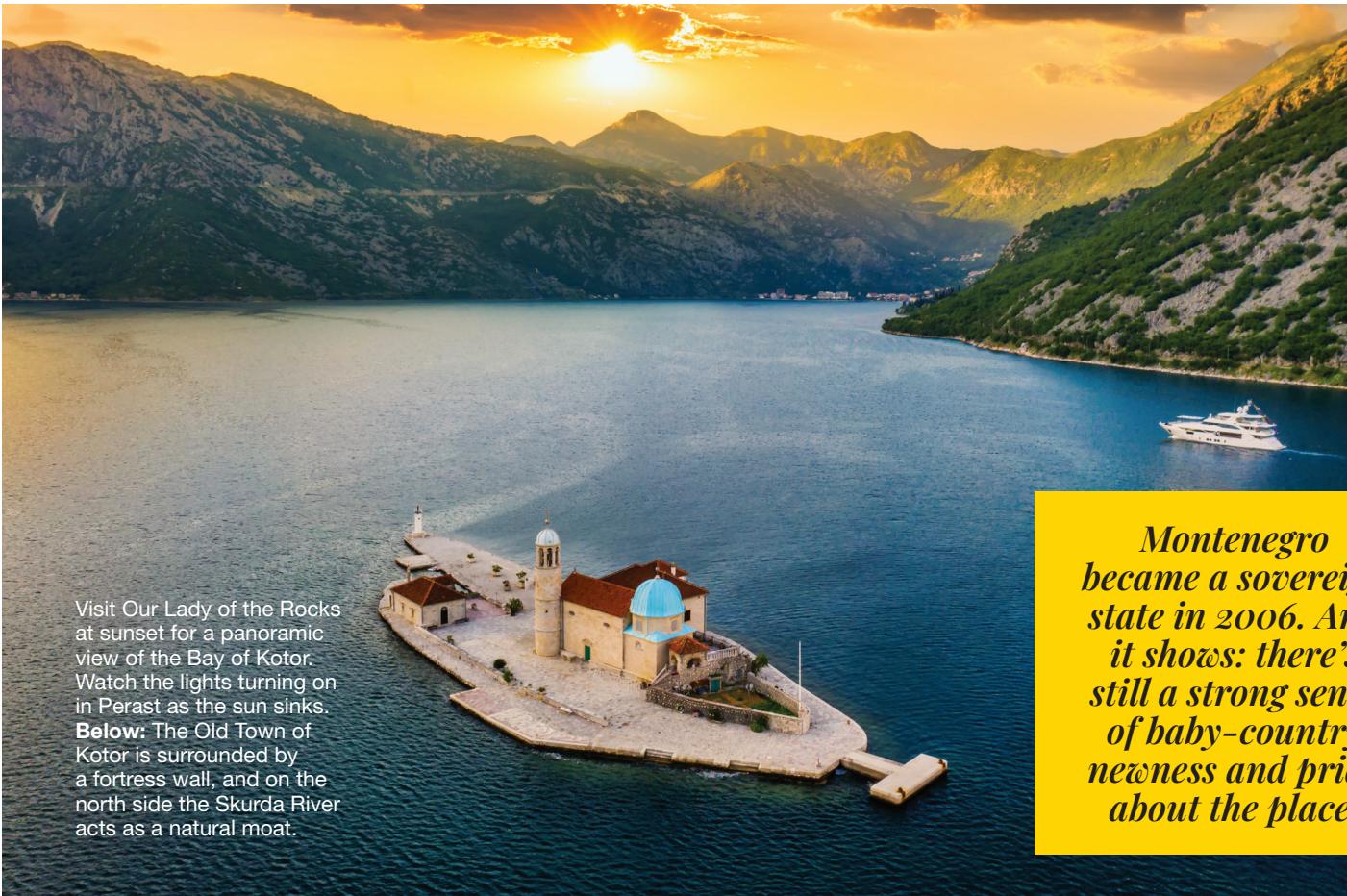
We set off on the first leg of our trip to the Bay of Kotor, a picturesque cove enclosed by dramatic mountains. The coastline has an array of beautiful jetties from which to swim, and if you visit in the summer months, regular submersion is essential: Kotor can get incredibly hot. We spent a lovely few days there, relaxing, reading and swimming while we waited for the rest of our party to join us. It was a joy: there are many restaurant options along the water's edge, and there's something particularly luxurious about taking two steps from your lunch to dive into a warm sea for dessert. The seafood in Kotor is an absolute must, especially the grilled bream.

A popular tourist activity is the stunning two-hour drive along the coastline from Kotor to Dubrovnik in Croatia – just make sure that your visas and car paperwork are sufficient to cross the border and (most importantly) to come back.

If you're feeling too chilled for any such exertion, a 20-minute drive up the coast will take you to Perast, a seaside town with a population of 300. You will have to park your car some way away from the village and walk in as they don't allow tourists

Three views of Kotor, which is lined with jetties much like this one. Pack swimsuits and find your spot to set up for the day. The locals do it properly, with lilos and deck chairs, which are advisable if you can get your hands on them!





Visit Our Lady of the Rocks at sunset for a panoramic view of the Bay of Kotor. Watch the lights turning on in Perast as the sun sinks.

Below: The Old Town of Kotor is surrounded by a fortress wall, and on the north side the Skurda River acts as a natural moat.

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to enter in vehicles to avoid overcrowding. Perast has an exquisite seaside walkway, which makes for a beautiful sunset drink location. The town is tiny and beautiful, taking just about an hour to explore, which is perfect for a non-overwhelming day trip.

From Perast, you can take a water taxi to Our Lady of the Rocks, a man-made island in the bay. Legend has it that the island was created after sailors saw an image of the Madonna and Child on a large rock in the bay on 22 July 1452. They started to deposit rocks (and sink old boats weighed down with rocks) where the image had appeared, and gradually the islet emerged from the sea. The tradition



is still alive, with locals throwing rocks into the water near the island at sunset on 22 July every year to increase the surface area.

Kotor's well-preserved Old Town is worth exploring in the cool evenings. We loved the nightlife and

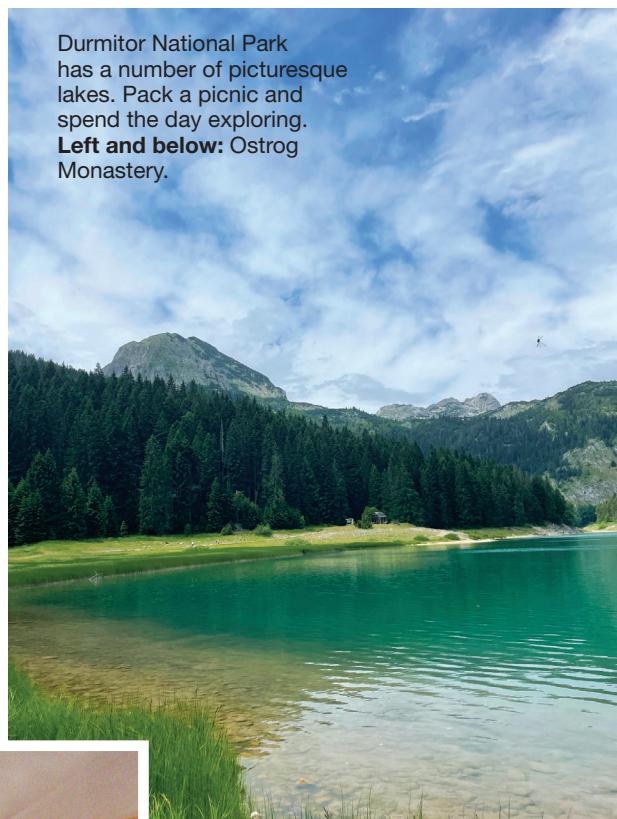
bustling activity inside the walls. The curving, narrow stone passages lit up by warm yellow lamps make it easy to imagine the mediaeval city it once was. Although, one night, we rounded the corner of an ancient street to find a packed dance floor, blasting – of all things – ‘Waka Waka’! It seems that 2010 is still alive and kicking in Montenegro.

► Žabljak

After five gorgeous days in Kotor, we headed inland to Žabljak, a town in the north that borders Durmitor National Park. On the way, we took a detour to visit the incredible Ostrog Monastery, carved into the rock of Ostroška Greda. Named after Saint Basil of Ostrog,



Durmitor National Park has a number of picturesque lakes. Pack a picnic and spend the day exploring. **Left and below:** Ostrog Monastery.



who is buried there, the monastery is small and pristine, with intricate paintings and mosaics set into the mountain wall. The walk up is steep and not for the faint of heart, but the magnificent views more than make up for it. Shoulders and legs need to be covered to enter; luckily, we were an enterprising group of South Africans with kikoi's on hand.

In Žabljak, we stayed in a secluded little cabin in a pine forest reminiscent of the Goldilocks tale. Our minds naturally went to bears, but when we asked our lovely host, he laughed and said the only bear we'd be seeing was the one depicted in the mosaic on our porch. For the first (and hopefully last) time, I could relate to those bumbling tourists who ask South Africans if we see lions on our commute to work.

The food of inland Montenegro leans towards fire-cooked-meat-and-sausage cuisine. A dish I'd highly recommend is cevapi: a skinless sausage cooked on the fire that's often served with potatoes, greens and a flatbread – kind of the Montenegrin equivalent of a kebab.



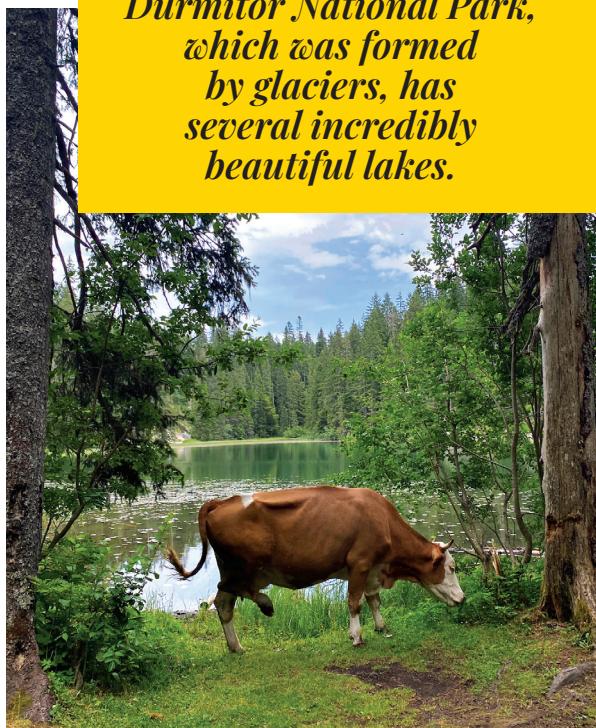
Durmitor

Durmitor National Park, which was formed by glaciers, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The park has several incredibly beautiful lakes

as well as more than 50 peaks reaching over 2 000 m above sea level – including the famous Bobotov Kuk (more on that later).

On our first day in Durmitor, we visited the park and hiked to three lakes. The first – and most popular – is the Black Lake, or Crno Jezero. A five-minute drive from Žabljak will take you to the nearest parking area; then there's a 10- to 15-minute walk into the park that will bring you to the shores of the lake. It's huge and peaceful, with magnificent teal water and plenty of space to lay out a picnic spread. You could stay here and be blissfully happy, but if you're looking for more adventure, you could hike to Snake Lake, or Zminje Jezero. Serene and

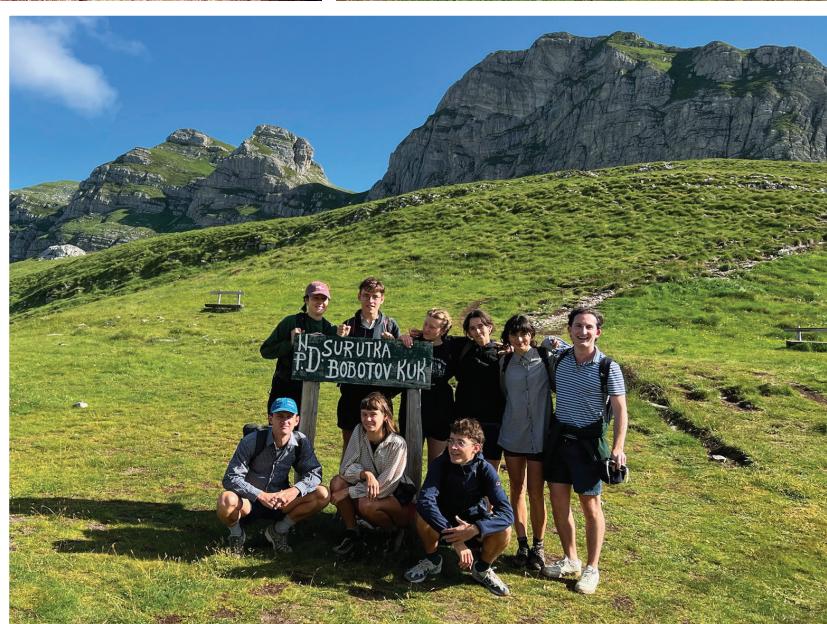
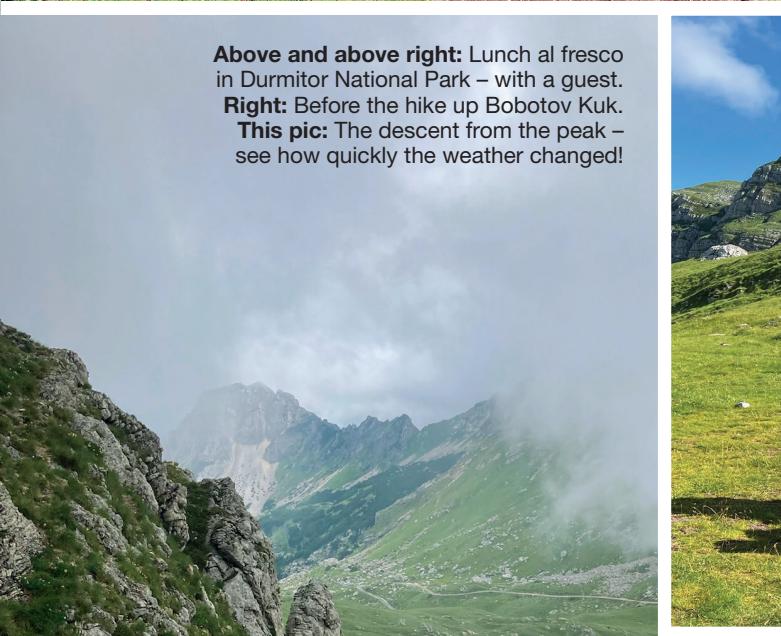
Durmitor National Park, which was formed by glaciers, has several incredibly beautiful lakes.



Above and above right: Lunch al fresco in Durmitor National Park – with a guest.

Right: Before the hike up Bobotov Kuk.

This pic: The descent from the peak – see how quickly the weather changed!



secluded, it is surrounded by dense woods. There are lovely picnic benches, which is where we had our lunch. It was also here that we encountered our first wild cow. (We later discovered that the reserve is heaving with them.) The cow pulled the old switcheroo and proceeded to herd us around for a while – and you know what? Good for her!

After lunch, we headed to our third lake of the day: Jablan Jezero. This section of the hike is longer and more challenging, but undeniably worth it. As you ascend, the dense forest clears and you're treated to incredible mountain views and remote clearings filled with wildflowers. The scenery is so picture-perfect that it wouldn't be a surprise to discover Julie Andrews and



the Von Trapp family frolicking in a field – about 1 500 km south-east from where they actually did.

You cannot leave Montenegro without seeing Tara River Canyon, which is purported to be the second-deepest canyon on the European continent. A great vantage point is the Durdevica Tara Bridge, spanning one of the wider sections; it offers incredible views of the gorge and the sparkling ribbon of water that snakes through the middle. Get a drink on the patio of Tara Bridge Guesthouse – it may be the most scenic beer of your life.

If you're feeling brave, you can zipline across the canyon, or drive

to the base and join one of the river-rafting tour groups. The water is an otherworldly green and makes for a spectacular swimming destination.

As in the rest of Montenegro, there are several scenic hikes in the area. The most famous is the hike to the summit of Bobotov Kuk, the highest peak in Durmitor. It's quite a trek, but the dynamic landscape offers ever-changing views as you climb. The final section has a challenging – and fun! – chain-and-ladder bit, but don't let that put you off.

Bobotov Kuk is home to a pack of famously friendly stray dogs, which we encountered, with one

Follow the valley pass across from Tara Bridge Guesthouse down to the river for a pristine swimming spot that doubles as a launch point for the river-rafting tours.

of them walking with us from base to summit and back again.

If Bobotov Kuk doesn't sound like your thing, there are plenty of other astonishingly beautiful trails in the region, all offering their own special features. We found and navigated all the hikes on this trip via the AllTrails app, a really useful resource on hiking tracks all over Europe (and South Africa). ♦

In the know

- **Cash is king.** Businesses often don't accept card payments. In fact, every restaurant, national park and even our accommodation only took euros. ATM withdrawal fees can be prohibitive, especially with the conversion rate, so it might be best to arrive in the country with a decent wad of cash in hand. Thankfully, petrol stations and larger grocery stores reliably accepted cards.

- **Rent a house.** We found all our accommodation on Airbnb and Booking.com. The rates were extremely affordable, bearing in mind that we were a party of 10. Our most expensive spot cost R326 per person per night – for an apartment in Kotor, 20 paces from the sea. It really was otherworldly.

- **Rent a car.** Public transport in Montenegro is not great. There's a serviceable bus line running between the major cities, but you will mostly have to rely on rented cars or taxis. The coastal roads and mountain passes are scenic, and having your own car gives you a lot of freedom – but the roads are narrow, so be prepared for some relatively tense driving that requires concentration. For this reason, I would also strongly recommend renting a small car. The roads are pretty good, so you don't need a 4x4.

A few good words to memorise:

- *Zdravo* – hello
- *Da* – yes
- *Ne* – no
- *Hvala* – thank you
- *Molim* – please, or 'it was a pleasure'
- *Prekrasno* – amazing