

## PERIOD POVERTY

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# TRAVEL & LIFE

## Mellow out in Montenegro



SUSAN WRIGHT PHOTOS THE NEW YORK TIMES

The Aman Sveti Stefan resort in Montenegro. In the 1970s, celebrities such as Elizabeth Taylor vacationed at Sveti Stefan, a peninsular village-turned-luxury-resort.



When planning a family trip to Montenegro last spring, I found myself telling perplexed friends who knew next to nothing about the Balkan country: "Imagine yourself in Venice, sail down the Adriatic coast, look east and stop before you reach Albania."

But since U.S. President Donald Trump described the country, in a Fox News interview in July, as likely to trigger a Third World War and Montenegrins as "very aggressive," the questions have trended from "Where is it?" to "What's there?"

For starters, there is dramatic natural beauty, including the imposing mountains that wall the coast and inspired Venetians in the 15th century to name it Monte Negro, or Black Mountain.

More invested in tourism — which accounts for more than 20 per cent of the economy — than war, Montenegro attracted two million visitors last year, more than three times its population, according to the national tourism office.

A statement from the government in reaction to the president's characterization cited Montenegro's "peaceful politics," noting that during the Balkan Wars of the 1990s, the country was "the only state in which the war didn't rage during disintegration of the former Yugoslavia," of which it was a part.

As the granddaughter of immigrants from Montenegro and a repeat traveller in the region, my experience of Montenegrin aggression is limited to receiving large portions of food and admonishments to clean my plate.

Trump wasn't wrong about the country's size though. NATO's newest member, which declared independence from Serbia in 2006, is indeed small. Slightly less diminutive than Connecticut, it's just right for a typically time-pinch American vacation, which, in our case, was eight days in May.

"You cannot imagine how such a small country has everything: national parks, mountains, beaches, night life, history, Orthodox monasteries," said Nina Batlak, a Dubrovnik-based product manager for Super Luxury Travel, which offers trips in Montenegro.

*Donald Trump called Montenegrins 'very aggressive' but one writer couldn't disagree more*



The Villa Milocer, at the Aman Sveti Stefan resort in Montenegro, is the summer residence of the former royal family.

"Everything fits in such small borders." Many travellers set out from Dubrovnik, the popular walled city on the southern Croatian coast, about an hour's drive from the border. But we found that flying into the capital of Podgorica put us within easy striking distance of a variety of attractions: the Dinaric Alps in the north, the Adriatic coast to the south and the cultural treasures of mid-Montenegro.

Most visitors come for the sea, a crowd-ehuding alternative that historically has been popular with Russians and Ukrainians seeking warm weather.

Compared with its neighbour across the Adriatic, it's "a more affordable Italy," said Joanna Millick, director of sales and private journeys at MIR Corp., which offers Balkan tours.

Ancient towns, from Herceg Novi on the edge of the Bay of Kotor to walled Ulcinj near the Albanian border, dot the 110-kilometre coastal drive. Construction is rampant, suggesting more, if not mass, tourism isn't too distant. We found crews restoring the Venetian palaces lining sea-front Perast.

Those, along with the Ottoman forts strung along the coast, testify to the centuries-long fight for control of this strategic region by the great seafaring powers of the 14th- through mid-19th-century. (Montenegro only began to gain its shore from the Ottomans and the Austrians in the late 1800s.)

Not that tourism is exactly new: After all, in the 1970s, celebrities such as Elizabeth Taylor and Sophia Loren vacationed at Sveti Stefan, a peninsular village-turned-luxury-resort, now run by Aman hotels and still favoured by the glitterati (Serbian tennis star Novak Djokovic was married here in 2014). But more recent foreign investment has fuelled its expansion, with luxury developments like Porto Montenegro in Tivat, home to a Regent hotel and a yacht marina, and the Miami-like high-rises that surround the walled heart of Budva, now filled with restaurants and cafes.

As you push farther south, and mosques begin to mingle with monasteries, time and tourism seem distant.

MONTENEGRO continued on T2

partner of 20 years died 18 ... after losing the love of their ... loved one would've wanted you ... Jimmy and friends ... "I suspect he might need it," support there for him ... "She blamed him for every-



» TRAVEL

# A new country but with an old soul

MONTENEGRO from T1

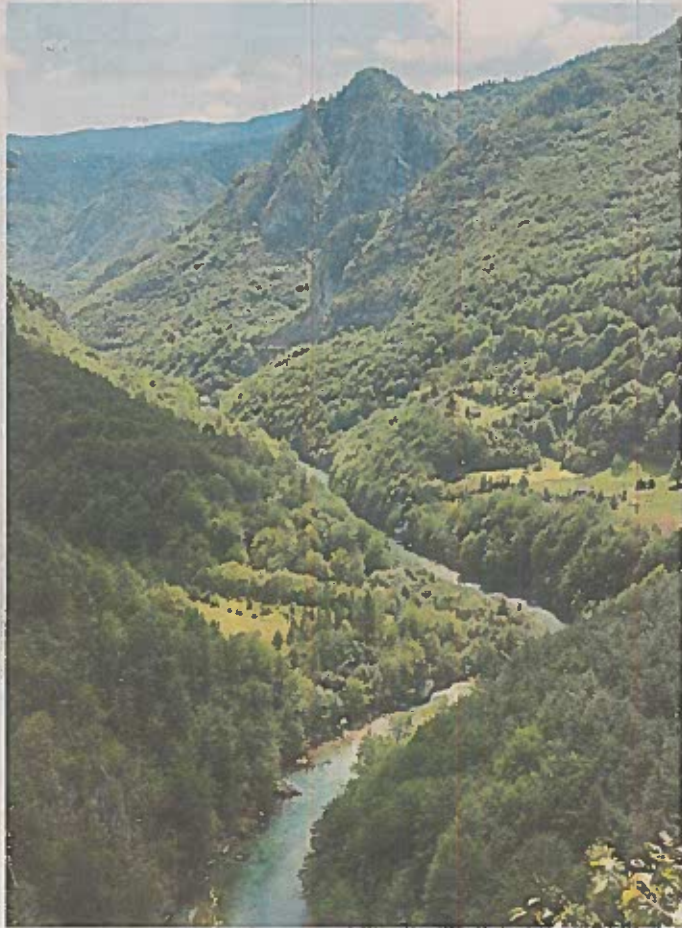
At Stari Bar, an 11th-century ghost town that was once traded between the Venetians and the Turks, we scrambled around the deserted ruins and found a cat nurturing a litter of kittens in an ancient urn.

By the time we got to southernmost Ulcinj, we had the walled city virtually to ourselves, from the archaeology museum, filled with ceramics, coins and carvings from the Romans through the Ottomans, to the new Pirate seafood restaurant overlooking the sea.

Behind the coastal mountains of Montenegro, via a dizzying switchback road, lies an entirely different country that is rugged, largely undeveloped and a real bargain, as epitomized by the 6-inch-high *cevapcici* sausage sandwich at Kole Restaurant in Cetinje, which costs 2 euros, or about \$2.30 (U.S.).

Cetinje, the former capital of the Montenegrin kingdom, established in the 15th century, remains the country's cultural heart. A cluster of pedestrian-only lanes, where art students paint en plein-air, surrounds a series of national museums devoted to art and history. A joint ticket (10 euros) provides entry to six museums, including the Biljarda, the 19th-century residence of Montenegro's favourite king, the poet and philosopher Petar II Petrovic Njegos, and named for his billiard table, the country's first. He died in 1851 and is buried in a monumental mausoleum on Mount Lovcen outside town.

Its last king, Nikola Petrovic Njegos, inhabited a modest palace across from the Biljarda until he fled the country in 1918, as Austrian forces invaded during the First World War. Now known as King Nikola's Museum, it is filled with treasures,



SUSAN WRIGHT PHOTOS THE NEW YORK TIMES

The Tara River Canyon in Montenegro is the deepest canyon in Europe and a big draw for white-water rafting enthusiasts.

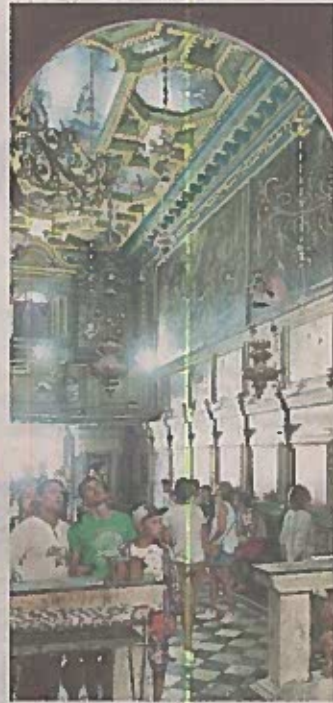
including antique Chinese urns, Persian carpets, Venetian mirrors, Indonesian furniture and royal portraits from families across Europe. That the royal collection survived the Second World War occupation of Montenegro by Italian forces is miraculous.

"He was known as the father-in-law of Europe," said our guide proudly, explaining that five of the king's daughters had married into royal families across the continent, including Princess Elena, who wed an Italian royal and earned an in-law's respect. "Because they were family, the Italians pre-

served the home."

From coastal isles to Alpine valleys, Orthodox monasteries are strewn across the country, many covered in vivid frescoes of elongated, big-eyed saints depicting stories from the Bible. But the most impressive are in central Montenegro.

The Ostrog Monastery, for example, is shallowly built into a cliff face at nearly 3,000 feet, and reached from the highway between Podgorica and Niksic by a slim, shoulderless, zigzagging road that we nervously shared with intrepid bus drivers. Barefoot pilgrims walk an even more vertical path there,



Visitors take in a church on the Our Lady of the Rocks islet.

culminating in a dark, rock-hollowed room in the monastery housing the tomb of St. Basil, where a priest blessed each visitor individually. The faithful kissed an icon, offered coins and walked from the room backward — so as not to turn their backs on the holy site — past radiant mosaics placed into the cliff walls.

In the Alpine north, we encountered even fewer visitors, heartier food — including a cheesy potato entree called *kacamak* — and zealous portions: an order of local trout at Kono-ba restaurant in Kolasin, the country's main ski town, delivered a pair of foot-long fish.

"The mountains of Montenegro are really an undiscovered part of the Balkans for most Americans," said Diana Poin-dexter, a Balkans specialist at Wilderness Travel, which offers a nature-focused trip to Mon-

tenegro. "You'll hike and not see anyone."

Many roads to the region are precipitous, narrow and distractingly scenic, including the stretch from Podgorica north along the Moraca Canyon to Kolasin. A new highway, expected to open in 2019, should expedite travel from the city to the slopes. Ample Airbnb inventory supplements the ski chalets of Kolasin and Zabljac, another nearby ski town and the gateway to Durmitor National Park, the largest of Montenegro's five national parks. We provisioned our rentals at frequent roadside stands selling homemade wine, honey and cheese.

The turquoise Tara River slices through these Dinaric Alps, creating Europe's deepest canyon at some 4,260 feet, and thrilling white-water paddlers. Overnight rafting trips take in the deepest section of the Tara Canyon, while popular day trips bump over roiling Class III and IV rapids, depending on the time of year.

The river curves through the northern section of Durmitor National Park, home to 50 peaks above 6,000 feet. Here, bare limestone crests shade pockets of snow, and scree slopes run down to glacier-carved lakes and wildflower-filled meadows. Over the May holiday celebrating Montenegro's 12-year independence, we hiked lightly travelled but well-signed paths, forded streams, crossed under waterfalls and picnicked on lakeside boulders in fragrant pine groves.

"New country," smiled the park attendant at the admission booth, granting us, like everyone else, free admission on the holiday. "But old place."

Populated, I might add, by people curious about outsiders, rather than aggressive toward them.

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