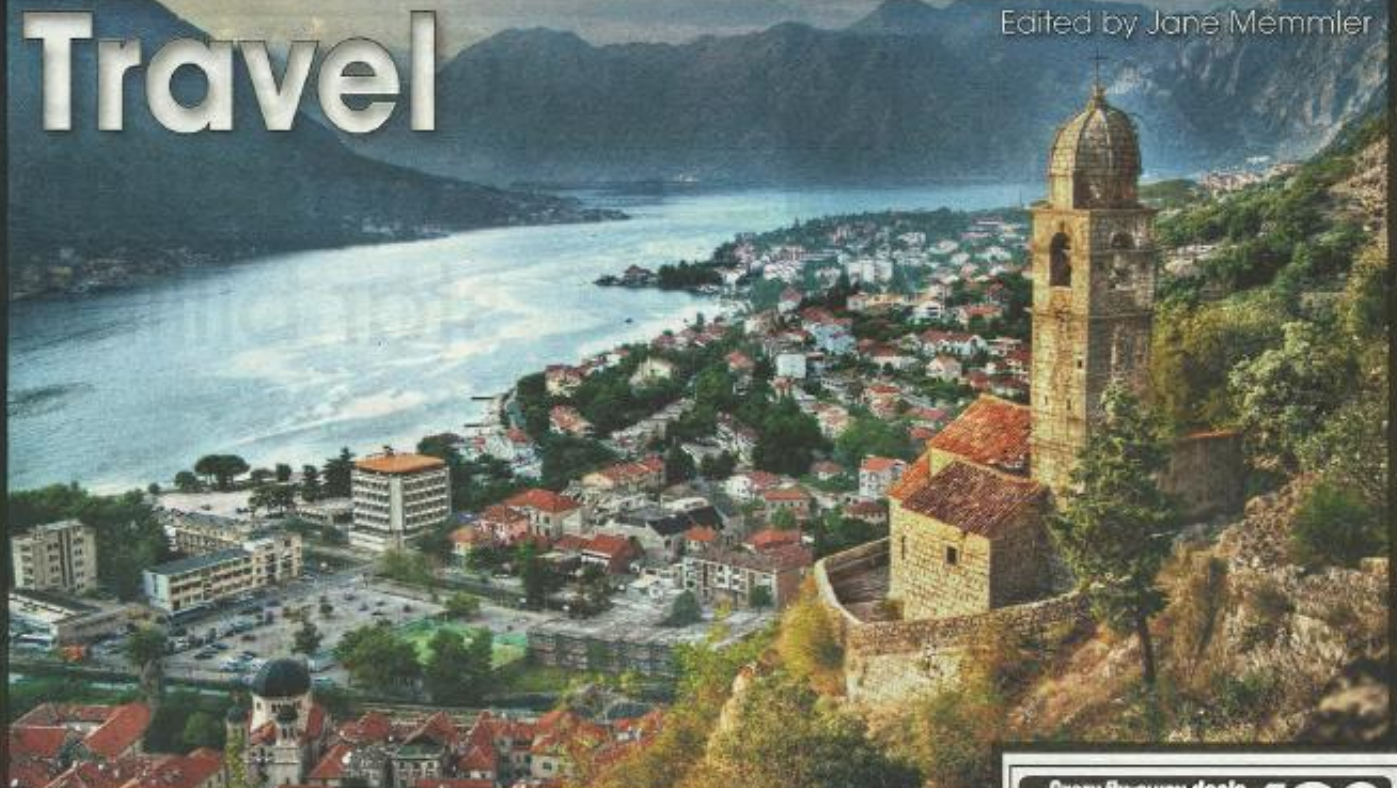


Travel

Edited by Jane Memmler



TOWERING VIEWS: Surrounded by magnificent mountains, Our Lady of Health church sits high on the cliffside looking down over the Bay of Kotor

Adriatic idyll that offers the full Monte

THERE are two kinds of secrets in this world: those that ought to be kept and those that are just too good not to share. Montenegro falls firmly into the latter camp.

Until now, anyone craving sun, sea, adventure and culture on the Balkan Peninsula made an immediate beeline for Croatia but new direct flights from London to Montenegro now offer travellers an alternative devoid of crowds and inflated prices.

Montenegro is not a big place (about the size of Northern Ireland) but it packs a lot in. Wild national parks, canyons and white-water rivers dominate the untamed north while the south impresses with miles of beaches, mountains and sapphire lakes.

I headed straight for Montenegro's star attraction: the Bay of Kotor. If Dubrovnik, just 45 miles away, is the Pearl of the Adriatic, then this is its diamond necklace: a chain of towering mountains sprinkled with medieval towns. Stepping beyond the Sea Gate and into the walled Old Town of Kotor, I travelled back several centuries. The Venetians arrived in the

New direct flights are set to open Montenegro up to the British holiday market. **NICK BOULOS** explores the Balkan Peninsula's best-kept secret



HISTORIC STREETS: Alleys in Kotor Old Town take travellers back in time

1400s and little has changed. Stone archways lead to a maze of narrow alleys that widen to reveal cobbled piazzas of grand palaces and Romanesque clocktowers.

The only thing missing are the canals. Tables spill out from cafés, washing hangs from the wooden shutters of the higgledy-piggledy buildings

and the bells of St Tryphon's Cathedral chime languidly.

While Kotor is frozen in time, Montenegro itself has seen decades of turbulence. Subsumed into Yugoslavia after the First World War, it broke away with Serbia when the country disintegrated in the early Nineties, before gaining full independence following a referendum in 2006. Today, the fourth youngest country in the world is on the cusp of being the next big travel destination.

"Everyone knows about Croatia," said my flamboyant guide, Neso, with a slight sigh. "But it's expensive and crowded. You can't move in Dubrovnik in summer. We don't have that problem here."

Good value is everywhere in Montenegro. You can enjoy a fresh seafood dinner of black cuttlefish risotto with a glass of crisp Montenegrin vino and still have change from €10. What's not to like?

Neso pointed up at Mount Lovcen, the 5,700ft peak that lords over the town. According to some, it's this mighty massif that gave Montenegro (meaning "black mountain") its name. Zig-zagging across one

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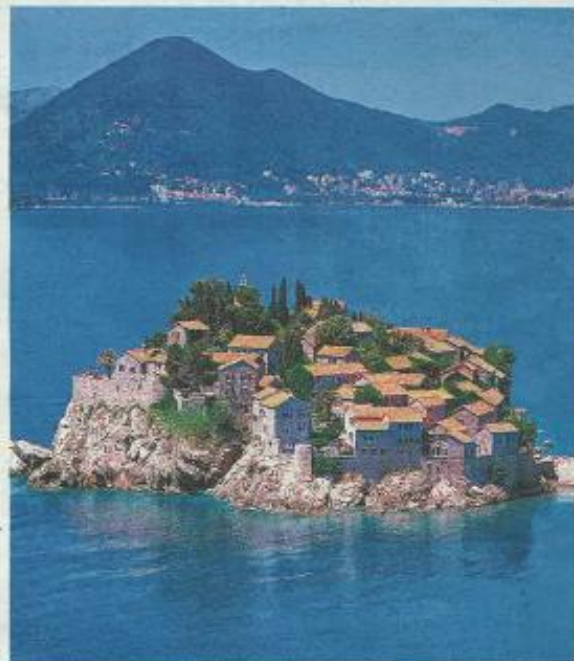
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Travel



ISLAND RETREAT: Sveti Stefan was popular with Hollywood icons such as Sophia Loren

FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

hillside is a steep ascent of 1,350 crumbling steps leading to a fortress. Struggling under the intense sun, I only made it as far as the small church half way.

The exertion, however, was worthwhile. Below was a bird's eye view of Kotor, its moat and bastions, and the mountains beyond draped in thick forest.

Docked in the marina were a number of gleaming yachts – evidence that Montenegro's natural beauty has already caught the eye of the super-rich. A then unknown Brad Pitt was so taken with the country after filming here in 1986 that he recently returned to show it off to Angelina.

Come nightfall, Kotor comes to life with music from street bands and chatter from the outdoor restaurants reverberating along the otherwise silent streets.

After a Dalmatian feast of grilled squid at Cesarica restaurant, housed in an old stone cellar, I returned to my cosy accommodation, the Kotor Wine Rooms.

Tucked away above a Montenegrin winery in the heart of the Old Town, this former merchant's house has been transformed into atmospheric apartments retaining the original honey-coloured stone walls.

Kotor is the perfect base to explore the surrounding area and the variety it encompasses.

Heading south-east towards the former capital, Cetinje, I enjoyed what is billed as one of the world's great drives. The road gradually snaked higher towards Lovcen National Park – a popular hiking spot – through tunnels blasted into the limestone cliffs.

Careering around hairpin bends, I tried to ignore the sheer drops to toy-like towns hundreds of feet below. The seemingly infinite expanse of mountains finally gave way to sea as the Adriatic appeared, sparkling bays cradled by the rugged coastline.

No visit to this part of the world would be complete without a little beach time. I couldn't resist the allure of Sveti Stefan, a small

Glistening coast with star billing



BEACH BELLE Marilyn was a visitor

walled island once frequented by the likes of Sophia Loren and Marilyn Monroe. Its red-roofed houses are tightly clustered and seemingly hewn directly from the rocks in places.

The island is only accessible to residents, sadly, but on either side of its narrow causeway are sublime pebbled beaches lapped by balmy waters.

My final stop was equally alluring. Perast is a bite-sized village north-west of Kotor fringed by mountains and the



narrow channel connecting the Bay of Kotor to the Adriatic.

I wandered among the slender church towers and medieval properties, discovering shady backstreets alive with the noise of birdsong.

Perast is home to 350 lucky souls – and two famous A-listers, Catherine Zeta-Jones and Michael Douglas.

The super-rich are not always noted for their taste but, on this occasion, it was impossible to find fault.

THE KNOWLEDGE

Explore Montenegro (0207 118 1002/www.montenegro-holidays.com) offers seven nights of the Kotor Wine Rooms from £705pp (two sharing), B&B. Price includes return flights with Montenegro Airlines from Gatwick and car hire. Montenegro tourism: www.montenegro.travel

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Get packing

ARRESTING CITIZEN

Stylish, relaxed and ever so slightly quirky, London's newest hotel is everything you expect of the Dutch.

citizenM, whose first hotel opened in Amsterdam in 2008, brings its award-winning concept to the capital with the opening of its Bankside branch (0203 519 1111/www.citizenm.com/london-bankside) next week. Befitting its location

a short stroll from the Tate Modern, the 192-room hotel is packed with contemporary art and high-end design, including video installations and floor-to-ceiling murals.

Other memorable touches include a room adorned with lanterns, a striking spiral staircase, lobby terminals for checking in and out and in-room tablets for controlling everything from movies and

lighting to the window blinds. Doubles from \$99 per night (two sharing), B&B.

SMASHING BREAK

Inspired by the Wimbledon Championships to step into the tennis shoes of the likes of Maria Sharapova?

Champneys (01442 291000/www.champneys.com) is offering an ace tennis break.

Tennis Angels founder and ex-circuit player Kate Barthwick has created the Wimbledon Fever spa experience which will ensure you have fun and get fit at the same time. It combines match play with life skills such as mind-body balance and relaxation.

The one-night break of Champneys in Tring, Herts, includes tennis-based drills and activities, coaching sessions and a lifestyle evening talk and Q&A session with Kate. Players can also unwind with a soothing Thalassotherapy Pool session in



STYLISH BREAK: Award-winning citizenM combines great style with comfort