NEW FOR SUMMER 2010!

A BALKAN TREASURE

YOU CAN'T HELP BUT BE CHARMED BY THOMSON'S NEW SUMMER DESTINATION, MONTENEGRO, WITH ITS UNSPOILT COUNTRYSIDE, WILD MOUNTAINS AND RIVIERA-STYLE COASTLINE, SAYS **JACQUI PATERSON**



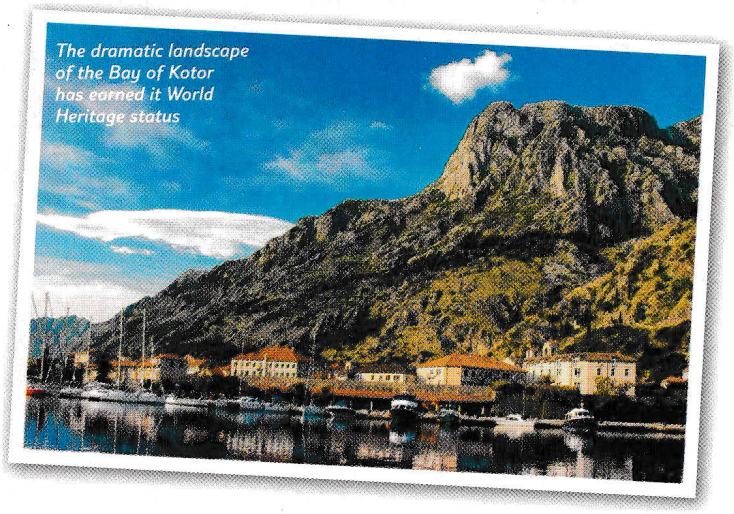
THERE ARE SOME places that just stir something inside you – and that's how I felt the moment I arrived in Montenegro. With its rugged mountains, walled medieval towns, and emerald sea, there is something unique and so fresh about this small Balkan country, ringed by Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia, and Albania.

Perhaps it's the location: the mountainous northern region is planted firmly in Europe, while the coastal area has a distinct Mediterranean flavour. In just a few hours you can literally go from scaling a 2000m-high peak in the Dinaric Alps to swimming in the Adriatic Sea.

Montenegro's burgeoning tourist trade was completely destroyed by the Balkan War of the 1990s. It's only now that the industry is beginning to blossom again, as people rediscover the delights of this picturesque part of the Balkan Peninsula.

For me, that's a big part of the country's charm. It's not overly slick or commercialised, as some popular European and Mediterranean destinations have become, or so crowded that you can't possibly unwind.

Along the popular **Budva Riviera**, the beaches are clean and well equipped, but still retain their natural beauty. Granted, there's an increasing number of apartment complexes in some of the more developed areas but you don't see rows of gaudy chain hotel signs, soulless shopping malls, or clusters of generic fast-food outlets.


The dramatic landscape of the Bay of Kotor has earned it World Heritage status

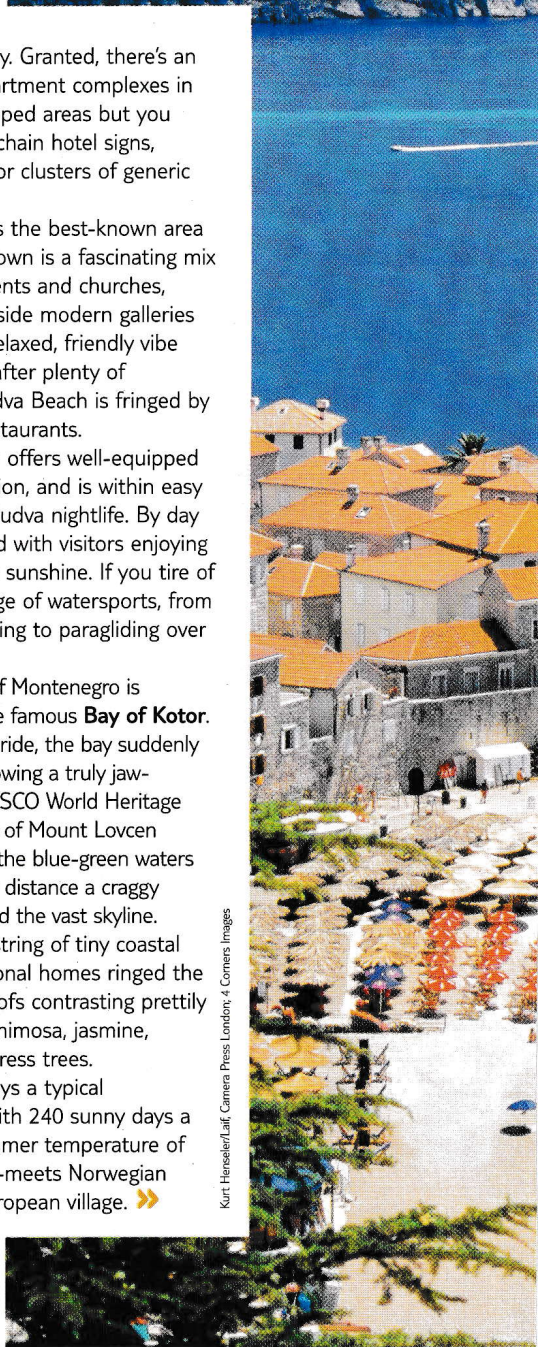
Budva itself is perhaps the best-known area on the Riviera. The Old Town is a fascinating mix of centuries-old monuments and churches, sitting comfortably alongside modern galleries and boutiques. It has a relaxed, friendly vibe during the day. If you're after plenty of atmosphere at night, Budva Beach is fringed by funky beach bars and restaurants.

Similarly, **Becici Beach** offers well-equipped resort-style accommodation, and is within easy walking distance of the Budva nightlife. By day the popular beach is filled with visitors enjoying the warm waters and the sunshine. If you tire of sunbathing, there's a range of watersports, from snorkelling and scuba diving to paragliding over the glistening Adriatic.

My favourite memory of Montenegro is travelling west towards the famous **Bay of Kotor**. After a picturesque coach ride, the bay suddenly opened out before us, allowing a truly jaw-dropping view of this UNESCO World Heritage Site. The steep rocky cliffs of Mount Lovcen plunged dramatically into the blue-green waters of the bay, while in the far distance a craggy mountain range dominated the vast skyline.

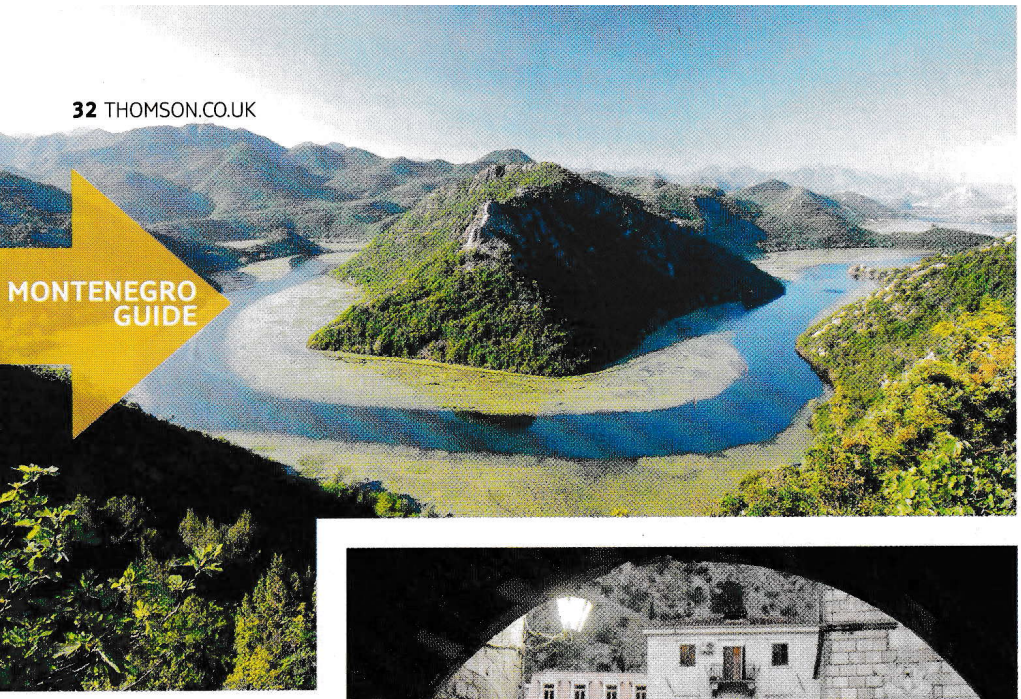
We passed through a string of tiny coastal towns. Clusters of traditional homes ringed the water's edge, their red roofs contrasting prettily with the thick foliage of mimosa, jasmine, oleander and soaring cypress trees.

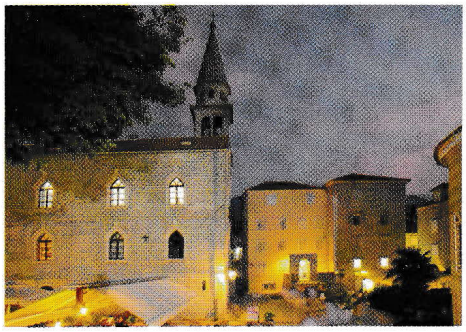
The sheltered bay enjoys a typical Mediterranean climate, with 240 sunny days a year, and an average summer temperature of 27°C. It's like Lake Como-meets Norwegian fjord-meets charming European village. »

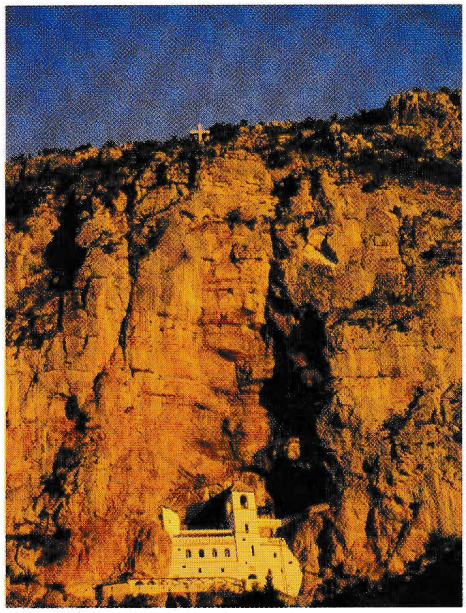

Kurt Henseler/Laif, Camera Press London; 4 Corners Images



Budva is a head-turning combination of stunning natural beauty and centuries-old architecture









Clockwise from top left: stunning Skadar Lake; fascinating Budva Old Town; the imposing Ostrog Monastery; atmospheric Kotor

From the waterside town of **Perast** I boarded a small boat to reach another quirky Montenegrin attraction. Near the narrowest part of the bay you'll find two tiny islands – St George Island, where an old Benedictine monastery sits nestled among cypress trees, and Our Lady of the Rocks. The latter is an artificial island built around a small crag, created by sinking decommissioned ships and reinforced with rocks.

Perched on the tiny patch of reclaimed land is the Church of Our Lady of the Rocks. It's believed that a Serbian church was first built on the site in 1452, but the Roman Catholic Church that stands there today was built in 1632, and upgraded in 1722.

From the island I soaked in the most breathtaking views of the bay, the picture-postcard coastal towns, and the rugged mountains.

The city of **Kotor** itself is another memorable highlight. Sometimes referred to as Little Dubrovnik, it's one of the Mediterranean's best-preserved medieval towns. Its most famous landmark is the Cathedral of Saint Tryphon. First consecrated in 1166, the Roman Catholic cathedral was badly damaged by earthquakes in 1667, and again in 1979, but was carefully and faithfully rebuilt each time. I wandered inside to admire the 14th-century frescoes, then stopped at one of the outdoor cafés to refuel, and admire the stunning architecture of the exterior.

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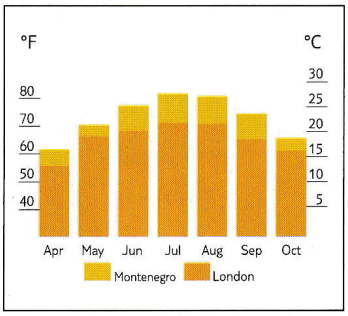
Returning in an easterly direction past wide, open beaches and secluded coves, you'll reach the town of **Petrovac**. While a popular tourist spot, Petrovac is less developed, and more laid-back than its trendy neighbour Budva. It also offers several picturesque beaches, clear swimming waters and a charming village atmosphere. The small islands just offshore are also great for scuba diving.

Keep travelling eastward, and you'll arrive at the southernmost town of **Ulcinj**. Although it's been settled since the 5th century BC, it remains one of Montenegro's best-kept secrets, and is a favourite holiday spot for locals. Its unspoilt coastline is renowned for its beauty; perhaps its most outstanding feature is the 13km-long Velika Plaza, or Big Beach, the longest beach to fringe the Adriatic. Ulcinj is also home to a man-made river island, Ada Bojana, with sweeping beaches, a relatively untouched landscape and restaurants that will serve up fish caught that very day from the waters of the Adriatic. There are plans underway to further develop both the island and Velika Plaza, so now is a great time to visit, before this peaceful little oasis is discovered by the masses.

The great thing about Montenegro is its wonderfully diverse scenery, which has earned it the nickname 'land of six continents'. Travel inland and the landscape is verdant and rugged. The Durmitor National Park is a World Heritage Site, and home to the Tara River Canyon. Carved over millennia by glaciers and the unrelenting rush of the Tara River, the gorge is the largest in Europe and the second largest in the world – beaten only by the Grand Canyon. In winter you can ski the slopes of Mount Durmitor and in summer you can walk through 400-year-old black pine forests and admire the crystal-clear glacial lakes. There's truly something for everyone.

Kurt Henseler and Barth/Laif, Camera Press London, 4 Corners Images

RIP IT AND CLIP IT: MONTENEGRO



Average daily maximum temperatures

WHEN TO GO

Montenegro enjoys mild winters and sunny, warm summers.

HOW TO GO

Thomson Airways flies from London Gatwick to Tivat. You can expect to pay around £169 for a return flight departing 5 May 2010. The flight takes around three hours.

WHERE TO STAY

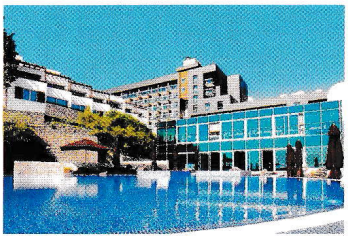
Thomson has many hotels in Montenegro to choose from:

ULCINJ

4T Iberostar Otrant Beach

A one-week holiday for two worth up to £1500 at this cool and stylish hotel right on the beach at Ulcinj is our competition prize. For more details, please see also page 34.

Seven nights start from **£445** per person all inclusive based on two adults sharing with return flights departing 5 May 2010 from Gatwick.



▲ BUDVA

4T+ Avala Resort and Villa

Just a few minutes' walk from Budva Old Town and right on the seafront, this hotel looks like a minimalist work of art on the outside. The cool mood continues inside with clean lines and plenty of glass. For some proper pampering retreat to the spa or go for a swim in the amazing infinity pool. Seven nights start from **£475** per person B&B based on two adults sharing with return flights departing 11 May 2010 from Gatwick.



▲ BECICI

5T Splendid Spa Resort

A beachfront retreat set in landscaped gardens, this Thomson Platinum hotel has one truly splendid feature: the spa, one of the biggest in Europe with 45 types of massages and three types of sauna. There is an 8km promenade between hotel and beach for cycling or walking.

Seven nights start from **£695** per person half board based on two adults sharing with return flights departing 5 May 2010 from Gatwick.



▲ BECICI

4T Hotel Montenegro

A friendly and relaxed hotel, ideal for couples and families. You can lounge by the pool, set in pretty gardens, or walk the 50m to the sand and shingle beach where you can enjoy a range of watersports. Budva resort with its characterful Old Town is just 2km away and well worth a visit.

Seven nights start from **£435** per person half board based on two adults sharing with return flights departing 11 May 2010 from Gatwick.

PRICES

Expect to pay around €2 for a beer or a glass of wine, €1.50 for a bottle of water and a meal for two with house wine is €10-€25.

FOOD AND DRINK

Traditional dishes include baked carp and delicious smoked meats and cheeses. Try the lamb cooked in milk, or *popeci*, crumbed pork fillets stuffed with cheese. Montenegrin red wine is very good and the local Niksic beer and grape brandy are popular.



GETTING AROUND

Buses run regularly between the coastal towns during the summer months. But if you want to explore Montenegro more fully, then your best bet is to hire a car.

SHOPPING

Good buys include old nautical maps and artefacts, original Montenegrin artwork, ceramics, wooden models and toys, dolls in national dress, handmade tablecloths, and embroidered traditional hats.

DAYS OUT

Situated between Budva and Petrovac, Sveti Stefan was once a tidal island, but is now permanently linked to the mainland by a narrow sandbank. Originally a medieval fisherman's village, it was converted in the 1950s to an exclusive hotel resort. Guests have included Marilyn Monroe, Sophia Loren and Claudia Schiffer. Although it is currently closed to visitors, due to planned redevelopment, it's still a must-see, and a great photo stop.

Ostrog Monastery is perched on the cliffs between the capital, Podgorica, and Niksic and is visited by hundreds of thousands of pilgrims every year. Built against a vertical rock face 900m above sea level, the monastery offers sweeping views across the Bjelopavlic Plain.

Skadar Lake is the largest lake in the Balkan Peninsula. Fed by rivers and natural springs, it is one of the last freshwater marshes in the Mediterranean and one of the biggest bird reserves in Europe.

BRIEF HISTORY

Montenegro (which means 'black mountain') was in turns ruled by Byzantium, Serbia and the Ottoman Empire, while the Venetian Republic dominated the coastal region. It broke away from the Ottoman Empire in 1871. From 1918 it formed part of the various incarnations of Yugoslavia, before joining with its Balkan neighbour to become the state of Serbia and Montenegro. After the majority of citizens voted for full independence, Montenegro became a sovereign country in June 2006.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The official tourism website is montenegro.travel.

During your stay, you can call Montenegro Customer Care free, just dial '1300' for 24-hour tourist information.

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