

The full Monte

Its natural good looks have escaped attention for decades. Finally, Mediterranean beauty spot Montenegro is ready for its close-up. Go now, says **Richard Green** – and enjoy it before the crowds arrive

I opened the expensively heavy curtains of my suite, barely resisting the urge to sing ‘Oh what a beautiful morning’ – and gazed out over the most perfect Mediterranean view. A smile-shaped beach. A giant yacht resting at anchor in the bay. And, rising to the right, a picture-book jumble of red roofs. If the Adriatic Coast is a beauty, this stretch was 24-carat supermodel-sensational.

Croatia? Not quite. Slovenia? You’re getting colder. Yet trust me when I tell you that you’ve seen those russet tiles in scores of brochure snaps and poster shoots over the years. This is Montenegro, and if that piece of information leaves you non-plussed, well, that’s the point – I wanted a holiday that would take me far from the Med-ding crowds. This tiny coastal country stands on the cusp of becoming a major Mediterranean player, as popular with tourists as its big-name neighbours; for the moment, though, it’s largely unknown. And it’s possible to have significant chunks of the place to yourself.

Nowhere is its cusp status clearer than here at Sveti Stefan. A miniature outcrop attached by causeway to the rest of the coast, the islet slumbered away 500-odd years as a fishermen’s village, barnacled with cottages like something from a child’s storybook – until the post-war years of Hollywood stars and voyaging royalty, when the Communist rulers of Yugoslavia reinvented it

as a resort for celebs on the Med. Holiday here in the ‘60s and ‘70s and you’d have heard the footsteps of Marilyn Monroe, Sophia Loren and Princess Margaret echo in the cobbled lanes – interspersed with the Vesuvian arguments of the Burtons, Richard and Elizabeth. This summer – after a scouring renovation by Singapore-based luxury hotel company Amanresorts – it’s ready to cast more glitter over Montenegro when it opens at the end of May, those cottages painstakingly reworked into 50 suites of sumptuous-but-muted Aman-appeal.

I got a taste of what it will be like (and took in its beauty from a distance) as I breakfasted at Villa Miločer, on the shores overlooking Sveti Stefan. Built in the ‘30s as a holiday home for Yugoslavia’s Karadorđević royals, the villa was later swiped by Communist president Tito as his summer pad. A couple of years ago, Amanresorts restored it as a bite-size preview of Sveti Stefan, out in the bay. As I quaffed egg-white omelette and guava juice, shaded by Miločer’s vine-covered terrace, insects whirring in the early morning heat, I concluded that Montenegro is perfection. But it’s the kind of perfection that costs – the villa’s 12 suites will knock you back upwards of £600 a night each – yet it’s so quiet in these parts that a feeling of exclusivity isn’t exclusive to those who are paying for it.

What you *do* get for your money is a sandy beach, 800 olive trees, and something that Sveti Stefan’s suites will never deliver: >



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a Flickr's-eye view of the island itself. Breakfast over, I strolled to the adjacent Queen's Beach ('for guests only'). There was just me, a lifeguard and a crisp-shirted chap to ferry out cold drinks from a little cabin. It's rare to find such a pristine slice of peaceful paradise in the modern Med – and who knows how long it will last in Montenegro? This diminutive country, home to just two-thirds of a million people, is beginning to appear on the world's radar, even if many of us couldn't place it on a map. Madonna has visited, Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta-Jones have been house-hunting, and a Monte Carlo-style marina is taking shape.

And beyond Villa Miločer and Sveti Stefan? I was keen to explore – but not in the Madonna-worthy black Mercedes S Class that the villa uses for airport transfers, and which would clearly mark me out as a tourist among the beaches and wilderness. On offer at the car rental company was a dented Chevrolet Spark with three hubcaps missing. Gingerly I signed along the dotted line.

I wound down the windows, slipped on sunglasses and fumbled for the radio. There wasn't one, but who cares? Remote, romantic expanses were mine from the first bend. Wide and cliff-hugging, the coastal road took me north, swooping into the town of Budva, which – dare I say it – already felt a tad commercialised, with bobbing yacht masts and a thronging walled Old Town, rather like a mini Dubrovnik. Soon I was happily back on my own, my next port of call Kotor, just a few kilometres from the Croatian border, but a world away from that country's manicured honeypots. Lying at the end of southern Europe's largest fjord, the town delivered glimpses of international invasion – a London-registered superyacht at the quayside dominated the Medieval city walls – but the cliffs flanking the town soared hundreds of metres skywards, rendering everything man-made fragile and fleeting.

It was quiet, but I wanted utter peace. In search of more isolation, I pointed the Chevy inland. A squiggle on the map traced four hairpin bends, which turned out to be 27, and as the tyres squealed on the bends, I realised how the hubcaps had gone missing. At the last curve I looked down: beyond the fjord and Kotor town, shimmering far off in the hazy Adriatic, was an armada of mega-yachts. This was Porto Montenegro. I'd read about it in glossy magazines. Touted by its billionaire backer as the 'Monaco of the Adriatic', the site is in fact a former Yugoslav naval base. Gazing at it now you see a swanky near-future. Transformations are ushering in a 600-berth marina, upmarket holiday homes and – for the benefit of the Michael Douglas/Madonna crowd – a shiny, pricey new hotel.

As quickly as the vision materialised, it vanished. One tunnel, three bends and the sea was out of sight, as Montenegro-beyond beckoned me back into a pretty, pine-scented Adriatic past: forests of evergreen, shady cypress trees and, suddenly, the entrance to the mountaintop mausoleum of Petar II Petrović-Njegoš. I parked the car and walked the last bit through needles of sunlight, to a soundtrack of my own scrunching feet.

Almost seven foot tall, Petar II Petrović-Njegoš made a big impact on Montenegrin history. Polymath, prince-bishop, poet and sharp-shooter, he had a great party piece – asking guests to lob a lemon into the air, which he then blasted to bits. His solemn, sculptured tomb is fittingly OTT, glinting with gold leaf and black marble, and set loftily atop the country's second-highest mountain. At 1,660m, it is huff-puffingly challenging to reach – many of its

461 steps (I counted!) have been tunnelled through solid rock. Once I'd made it, I drank in the views over the almost-treeless mountainscape, savoured the solitude and contemplated. This man was a singular Montenegrin, a very big fish in a very small pond.

There's more to discover about him 12km on, in the mountain stronghold of Cetinje. It is home to Biljarda, Njegoš's former palace-home, which translates as Billiard House and rolls out 25 rooms without losing its rustic appeal. The curious name alludes to the billiard table he ordered to be carted up here – and in the upstairs front room you can find the eponymous item. One careful owner, excellent condition.

You'll love little Cetinje if the Duchy of Grand Fenwick means anything to you. It was the name of a fictional alpine mini-state featured in comic novels by Leonard Wibberley. The tiny nation was pitched into ludicrous situations whereby it became a power-broker between the world's great nations – most famously in the 1959 film *The Mouse that Roared*, starring Peter Sellers, in which they come to own a bomb that can destroy the planet.

Untouched by modernity, Cetinje has a similar filmic, fairytale appeal. Its population is barely 20,000 yet, between 1878 and 1918, it was Montenegro's capital. It is a town that invites you to wander – past fading facades and along tree-lined avenues, all steeped in an ambience of sublime tranquillity. Before the country was swallowed up by Yugoslavia, the great powers wooed it with emissaries and embassies. The latter are still here – almost a dozen of them, cute and comical, pinpointed by helpful maps in the town centre. The French example is a rather grand *fin-de-siècle* affair (now part of the national library), the British (these days the University of Montenegro's music department) is a lovely pink-coloured building with a tarnished coat of arms above the door, and the Bulgarian is a modest restaurant.

I walked and walked and – a very happy hiker in this leafy corner of the Adriatic, keen to find the quiet heart of the place – continued to walk, through forest glades into the pretty town of Rijeka Crnojevica, where a splendid old stone bridge stepped delicately over the little river Crnojević in three loopy spans. It was impossible to stroll by the The Stari Most cafe/restaurant and not stop – even if the young waiter with the sculpted physique and impressive height wore a bored expression that suggested the Communists had never left. The outdoor tables and delightful view of the bridge implored me to stay awhile, as did the excellent food: a plate of local cheese and ham, then fish soup, made from lake-caught carp out of nearby Lake Scutari.

I could have idled for hours in this bucolic throwback, but I'd arranged for a boat to return me to the spot where I had parked the car. The said vessel arrived at the appointed time, and down the river I drifted, to the gentle thrum of the old tub's diesel as it followed a channel of water through a lake of giant lilies. With a mountainous backdrop and cormorants flick-diving in the foreground, it felt as if the 20th century had yet to arrive, let alone the 21st.

Suddenly a large hand grasped my shoulder, shocking me back to the present, and the old boatman wheezed, 'You want swim?' I had no bathing trunks – I was wearing khaki shorts – but I jumped at the chance and, my man having tied up at a landing stage,

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I leapt in. Lulled by the lunch, I bobbed about in waters that were deliciously cool and reviving, savouring a Montenegro that might not exist in a couple of years. The poet (and celebrated swimmer) Lord Byron called this part of the world 'the most beautiful encounter between the land and the sea' – and, for the moment at least, it very well might be. But go now, before boatmen stop offering unscheduled swims just because it's a beautiful day. ■

Get me there

GO INDEPENDENT

Montenegro Airlines (020 7864 4031, www.montenegroairlines.com) flies three times a week from Gatwick to Podgorica, with fares from £191 return. The most common route is via Dubrovnik, which is easier and cheaper to fly to, with flights from seven UK airports to the city, as well as from Dublin; the transfer to the Montenegro beaches takes about two hours. Airlines include **EasyJet** (www.easyjet.com) and **Jet2** (0871 226 1737, www.jet2.com), with fares from around £80 return. Or try **Charter Flight Centre** (0844 050 0100, www.charterflights.co.uk) for summer charter options.

WHERE TO STAY

The **Villa Miločer** at **Sveti Stefan** has eight suites from £604 a night, room only. Or on the island itself, rooms go for £518 a night. Contact Amanresorts (00 800 2255 2626, www.amanresorts.com). There's a range of hotels in Budva, nine kilometres along the coast, including designer-style **Hotel Astoria** (00 382 33 451110, www.budva.astoriamontenegro.com; doubles from £77, room only), or sedate **Vila Balkan** (00 382 33 403564, www.vilabalkan.me), which has five small apartments with sitting room and kitchen from £85, B&B.

GO PACKAGED

Original Travel (020 7978 7333, www.originaltravel.co.uk) has three nights on the **Sveti Stefan** island from £1,295pp, room only, with flights from Gatwick to Dubrovnik and transfers. Or try **Exsus** (020 7337 9010, www.exsus.com). For more modest beach breaks, try **Inghams** (020 8780 6680, www.ingham.co.uk) or **Balkan Holidays** (0845 520 1260, www.balkanholidays.co.uk).

TAKE A HIKE

Montenegro is an ideal place for a walking holiday; whether you are looking to be based at a beach resort with day walks in-between, or take on a series of more difficult treks through gorges, over high mountainous country, or even up to the top of the country's highest peak, at 2,523m. **HF Holidays** (0845 470 7558, www.hfholidays.co.uk) has seven nights from £679pp, visiting Kotor, Lovćen National Park and Lake Scutari, while based at the seaside town of Petrovac in the four-star Hotel Rivijera. The price includes half-board accommodation, flights from Gatwick to Dubrovnik, transfers and expert walking guides. For walks along the coastal tip, **Ramblers** (01707 331133, www.ramblersholidays.co.uk) has a trip based in the



resort town of Prcanj. Prices for seven nights half board start at £779pp, with flights from Gatwick, transfers and guided walking. Or **KE Adventure** (01768 773966, www.keadventure.com) has a new seven-day Monasteries and Mountains of Montenegro trip, from £795pp. It involves more strenuous walking and a new hotel/pension each night. You'll visit Dubrovnik, the Ostrog Monastery, the Durmitor National Park, Mrtvica Canyon and Kotor Fjord. Price includes

accommodation, all meals, guides and transfers but not flights. Or try **Explore Worldwide** (0845 013 1537, www.explore.co.uk).

FURTHER INFORMATION

Try the official www.visit-montenegro.com, and for information on Cetinje, www.cetinje.me. Rough Guides, Bradt Guides and Lonely Planet publish dedicated titles on the country, or for walkers there's the Cicerone Guide to *The Mountains of Montenegro* (£12.95).

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MONTENEGRO

Peace in the Balkans:
stone buildings topped
with red tiles beside the
tranquil Bay of Kotor are
a Montenegrin motif

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MONTENEGRO

European summit: the view from Petar II's tomb. Opposite, Sveti Stefan, a newly restored luxury resort; lunch is nearly ready

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Put your back into it:
sunbathing in the Bay
of Kotor. Opposite,
quite a catch

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Lord Byron thought this 'the most beautiful encounter between the land and the sea'

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