

DEPARTURES

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Dispatch

Montenegro Rising

The proud, beautiful Balkan nation is positioning itself as the Mediterranean's next It spot. **MATTHEW MCALLESTER** reports.

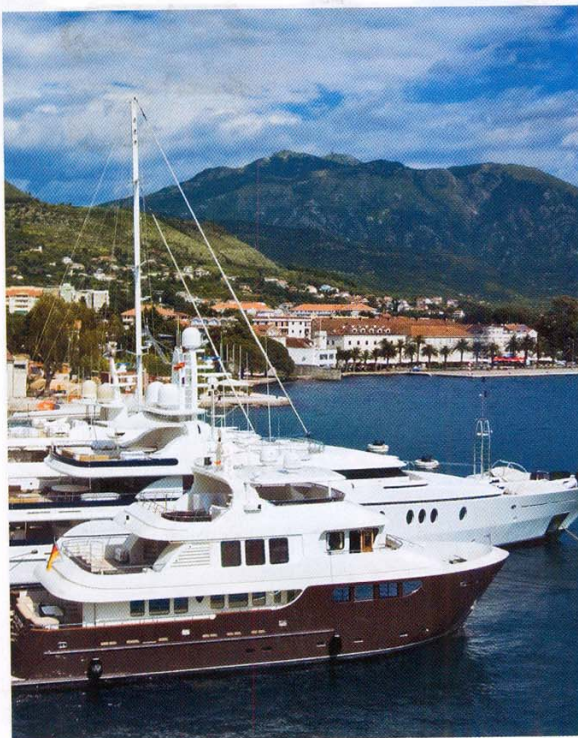
The pool at the Hotel Per Astra offers incomparable views across Boka Bay.

It was lunchtime when I arrived in Perast, a picturesque old Venetian village at the entrance to Montenegro's deep and placid Boka Bay, a scenic 45-minute drive from the Croatian border. Before checking in to my hotel, I walked down to the village through narrow alleyways, past churches and recently restored Baroque palaces, and found a few simple places to eat. I chose the one with no customers and a gently smoking grill sitting next to the road. A middle-aged man sitting at a table on the terrace stood up and smiled when I walked in. As an occasional boat sailed lazily past, I enjoyed a plate of grilled prawns, a salad of fresh greens and scallions and a bottle of Niksic, the thirst-slaking,

pilsner-style beer named after Montenegro's second-largest city. They were the freshest, tastiest prawns I'd ever eaten.

Afterward I headed back to the Hotel Per Astra, which has to be one of the most gorgeously situated properties on the entire Adriatic. It would be worth a trip here just to sit on the patio next to the small pool, drink in hand, gazing across the bay at the chapels on the magical, tiny islands of St. George and Our Lady of the Rock (manmade more than 500 years ago). That evening the pool was all mine, and I swam in it as the sun went down behind the mountains, before retiring to my room. The comforts at the two-year-old Per Astra (soft pillows and crisp cotton sheets on

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Yachts in the new \$780 million Porto Montenegro marina; centuries-old buildings on St. George Island; a couple on the waterfront in Tivat.

contemporary four-poster beds and powerful, hot showers), while standard in most tourist destinations, are things a traveler in Montenegro could only have dreamed of just over a decade ago, when I first came here as a correspondent for the New York daily *Newsday*, covering the war in neighboring Kosovo.

But Montenegro, having shaken off the tarnish of its ties to Serbia during the long conflicts that embroiled Yugoslavia's former republics, is embarking on a new era as Europe's latest hot travel spot. That's certainly the story Montenegro's government and tourism cheerleaders are eager to tell. Often compared with Croatia, its neighbor to the north, this country of 650,000, which is roughly the size of Connecticut, offers unspoiled glacial lakes and alpine peaks, ancient walled towns and a remarkable coastline that's rapidly being discovered by global tourists as well as opportunistic developers. Indeed, the biggest news in Montenegro is the rebirth of Sveti Stefan, a 15th-century fishermen's village and 1960s hotspot that Amanresorts is resurrecting as an ultraglamorous destination.

This was the Montenegro I'd come to see. Though I'd traveled here on a number of occasions as a reporter tracking down war criminals—and even spent a few days enjoying the beaches and seaside cafés—this was my first opportunity to really explore the country in its new incarnation. So in the morning, after a breakfast of croissants and cappuccino (a far cry from the typical

drowned-in-fat, overcooked eggs I'd remembered), I set out down the coast with Jovo Martinovic, a native Montenegrin who has been my translator, colleague and good friend for more than ten years.

Especially for visitors who fly into Montenegro's capital, Podgorica, it's worth making the trip north into the wilds of the beautiful, barren "black" mountains that

E-MAIL FROM ROBERT CHAVEZ *President and CEO, HERMES*

Sveti Stefan is a beautiful addition to the Aman collection. With rocky, pine-covered mountains in the background and the Adriatic Sea right in front, the setting is spectacular. The Villa Milocer, where I stayed, has only eight suites, and the rooms are spacious, modern and comfortable. The bathrooms are large and luxurious. There are flat-screen TVs, WiFi and all the modern technology one could need—but with the glimmering Adriatic staring at you, who needs it?

Hotel service was spotty during my visit. Much of the staff was carried over from the previously government-run hotel, and you could tell who the new, Aman-trained employees were. As one staff member told us, they are still in the "Amanization" process. The villa sits on a beach that's half-public and half-reserved for hotel guests. There is another "private" beach a short walk away, and it is truly stunning. I say "private" in quotation marks because there is a glitch that has to be pointed out: Although Aman owns all the property, the Montenegrin government insists on public access to the walkways along the beaches, and there is a constant flow of people on the paths. It's only a nuisance if things like this bother you, and in this setting you tend to forget it.

Quiet, relaxing, sun and sea. Three days max will suffice, but for Aman junkies it's definitely a must-see.

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give this proud little Balkan nation its name. There one finds thrills such as white-water rafting and skiing as well as gentle hikes around lakes as placid as any in the Alps. But a lot of visitors come to Montenegro and, understandably, never leave its stunning coast, which stretches some 182 miles from the Croatian border down to Albania. The first major town along the coastal road, after Perast, is Kotor, whose Venetian-built walls scale the mountain cliffs rising behind it. Kotor definitely merits a day trip to wander the narrow streets of its well-preserved old town (a UNESCO World Heritage site). But after buying some delicious dried figs from one of the market stalls facing the bay, we continued on.

Our next stop was Tivat, where Porto Montenegro, an ambitious, \$780 million, Monte Carlo-like marina project, is taking shape on the site of the former Yugoslav Navy shipyard. The developers,



The island of Sveti Stefan will be home to 50 cottages and suites, a spa and several restaurants.

redevelop the site, it had fallen into serious neglect. If you'd stopped by several years ago, you no doubt would have had a hard time imagining Sophia Loren laying her head on the threadbare pillowcases.

The first phase of the Aman project, completed in late 2008, involved the renovation of Villa Milocer, an eight-suite ocean-front property just a few minutes' walk up the beach from the island of Sveti Stefan. The '30s villa, a summer residence for Queen Maria of Yugoslavia and, later, for the Communist dictator Josip Broz Tito, sits on a quiet stretch of sand, part of which is just for hotel guests. Today the villa offers a level of luxury Queen Maria would have marveled at: spacious rooms with deep, modern bathtubs and flat-screen TVs, all presented with Aman's vaguely Asian-inspired, minimalist aesthetic (plenty of wood, leather and silk), as well as world-class food.

Aman is resurrecting Sveti Stefan, a 1960s glamour spot for movie stars and playboys.

who include Canadian and Russian billionaires Peter Munk and Oleg Deripaska, as well as Bernard Arnault and Lord Jacob and Nathaniel Rothschild, are promoting this community of luxury apartments, restaurants, a hotel and berths for mega-yachts as the Mediterranean's new elite enclave. At the moment the project, which is being built in phases, features one completed residential complex and 185 slips for boats up to 325 feet long. Two vast yachts were moored there when we visited—just a hint of what's to come.

Last year Swiss developer Orascom announced its own plans, in partnership with the Montenegrin government, to build an even larger, \$1.3 billion resort complex on the nearby Lustica peninsula, west of Tivat. The proposal includes two new marinas, several hotels, a conference center, shops, a golf course and more than 2,000 apartments and villas. The master plan calls for the first phase to open at the end of 2013.

The scale of new development in Montenegro is impressive, but the greatest challenge it faces is avoiding the kind of unsightly projects that already blight parts of its coast. Take Budva, where trashy apartment buildings and hotels, many put up by Russian builders, now line the ancient waterfront. Meticulously rebuilt after a devastating earthquake in 1979, Budva's beautiful old city is now hemmed in by concrete and glass and, I fear, ruined forever. Though it remains a common stop on many travelers' itineraries, Budva is probably best avoided entirely.

Just a bit south of Budva is Aman's show-stopping Sveti Stefan resort, which occupies a centuries-old walled fishermen's village on a tiny island (reachable by a permanent causeway) and a nearby former royal villa. First turned into a hotel a half-century ago, Sveti Stefan was one of Europe's sexiest destinations in the '60s and '70s for movie stars, playboys and jet-setters. But before Aman signed a long-term agreement to

Meanwhile, renovation work continues on the island, where last summer Aman unveiled the first eight of what will ultimately be some 50 guest cottages and suites, many with beamed or barrel-vaulted ceilings, stone walls and marble floors. There is also a cliffside pool, a spa and a central piazza featuring a taverna, an enoteca, a pasticceria and an antipasti bar. (Rooms at Sveti Stefan start at around \$800 per night, though suites on the island can run as high as \$3,300.)

When everything is completed, later this year, the resort will have no fewer than nine dining options. One afternoon Jovo and I enjoyed lunch on the terrace at Loggia, the larger of the villa's two restaurants, with views of Sveti Stefan's terracotta roofs across the bay. We had delicious sea bream with a creamy garlic and beet sauce accompanied by a perfect ratatouille. The French chef Olivier Daniel (who has since left) told us that the ingredients here are of a higher quality than those he finds in France. The fish is fresh off

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The beachfront terrace at Aman's eight-suite Villa Milocer, once a retreat for royals and, later, a Communist dictator

the boat, the vegetables are from local farms and the meat is from animals that feed on grasses in nearby alpine meadows.

Linger, I ordered a glass of Vranac, a Montenegrin wine produced by nearly every vineyard in the country, including the largest, Plantaze, near Podgorica. When I first tasted it, in 1999, I instantly fell for the affordable charms of this rustic but surprisingly complex red, and the rest of the world now seems to be catching on.

On our way back north, we stopped in Lustica, whose coast is dotted with hidden gems of beaches. More than one person recommended taking a boat out to access the magnificent, isolated waterfront spots. In the end, we found one reachable by foot on a rugged stretch between Budva and Lustica, in Zagora, a hamlet of a few dozen stone houses lining a single-lane road surrounded by fields of grazing cows and sheep.

Following a steep and winding track

down to the water, Jovo and I arrived, after half an hour, at an empty pebbled beach. All alone, we swam in the impossibly clear waters of the Adriatic, rocks and anemones visible on the seafloor below.

There wasn't a human being or a house in sight as I floated beneath the late-afternoon sun. Down in this magical cove, in this country poised between its past and its possible future, time seemed to stand still, with nothing changing at all.

Montenegro, Three Ways

Because there are no direct flights from the U.S. to Podgorica, Montenegro's capital, or to the coastal hub of Tivat, Americans must catch a connecting flight in Europe. For those accustomed to high-end travel, Montenegro can be uneven, so if you plan to explore a bit, it's worth consulting a specialist. **Abercrombie & Kent** organizes customized trips, typically starting in Dubrovnik and traveling into Montenegro by boat (800-554-7016; abercrombiekent.com).

IN THE CITY

Virtually flattened during World War II, Podgorica is a pleasant, modern city left off most travel itineraries. While Hilton Hotels is redeveloping a building in the city's center (slated to open in 2012), the best place to stay in the capital at the moment is easily the **Hotel Podgorica**, a renovated Tito-era marvel whose large terrace looks over the Moraca River (rooms, from \$212; 1 Bulevar Svetog Petra Cetinjskog; 38-22/040-2500; hotelpodgorica.co.me).

IN THE MOUNTAINS

In the northern ski town of Kolasin, where the slopes are modest but uncrowded, the once-shabby **Bianca Resort and Spa** has been made over as a handsome lodge and first-rate spa (rooms, from \$160; Mirka Vesovica; 38-22/086-3000; biancaresort.com). On the outskirts of Kolasin, **Savardak** is the place to sample Montenegrin specialties such as the delicious but heavy polenta-like dish *kacamak* (dinner, \$15; Biocinovi, Kolasin; 38-26/905-1264).

BY THE SEA

If you don't have a yacht to moor at the new Porto Montenegro marina, the boutique **Hotel Per Astra** in idyllic Perast has smart rooms with fine linens, flat-screen TVs and views to die for (rooms, from \$320; 38-23/237-3608; hotelperastra.me). For a meal of fresh fish and good traditional Montenegrin meat dishes, the waterside restaurant **Stari Miini** occupies an old mill in the village of Ljuta, between Perast and Kotor (dinner, \$25; directly off the main road that

borders Boka Bay; 38-23/233-3555; stariini.com). Just outside the walls of beautiful Kotor, the restaurant **Galion** serves up some of Montenegro's best modern cuisine, especially seafood (dinner, \$25; Suranj; 38-23/231-1300). And on the waterfront 10 minutes south of Budva, Amanresorts has brought a new level of luxury to Montenegro with its **Sveti Stefan** resort, featuring sophisticated cottages and suites and world-class dining (rooms, from \$800; 38-23/342-0000; amanresorts.com).