

GUIDING THROUGH THE BALKANS

The Balkans through the eyes of a motorcycle tour guide — four countries, four cultures, with ever-changing roads, scenery and cuisine...

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"...THE BALKANS REMAINS VERY MUCH UNSPOILED"

Balkan peninsula was frozen in time for the duration of the war, while neighbouring countries were developing at supersonic speed... the countries didn't evolve like they should have or could have at the turn of the millennium.

There's an upside to this, of course. The Balkans remains very much unspoiled. I've explored the area from different perspectives: as a journalist and photographer, a guide and support van driver for Adriatic Moto Tours and lastly, as a tourist, choosing different ways of travelling — from hitchhiking, driving around in an old VW campervan, riding a brand-new BMW GS or sailing on a small sailboat. This time, I will take you on a motorcycle ride. Welcome to the journey behind the handlebar!

LJUBLJANA, A PERFECT STARTING POINT

We'll start in the northeastern part of the Balkan Peninsula, in a country that was a part of Yugoslavia and is today a neighbour to Italy, Austria, Hungary and Croatia. Welcome to our beloved Slovenia! The capital city Ljubljana (which means beloved) is also home to Adriatic Moto Tours, a company I've been working for for the last eight years. I could write about Slovenia for the entire length of this article, despite it being a tiny country; it has a population of only two million with around 300,000 living in the charming capital. I'm happy and proud to be living in a country where getting to the Alps takes only an hour's ride northeast. An hour's ride southwest and you can jump into the Adriatic Sea. At about the same distance there's Croatia, our southern neighbour, well known for the spectacular Adriatic coast and numerous islands, but it offers much more than that. For example, Plitvice Lakes National Park is an amazing spot in southeastern Croatia that we visit on the first riding day of our 15-day Beautiful Balkans Adventure guided motorcycle tour, right after leaving Slovenia behind. The 16 lakes are connected with several waterfalls and streams, surrounded by green forests.

"How come there are no fences around the wooden walking paths? That's dangerous!" comments one of our guests from the US. It's because they want to keep it as pristine as possible. If you pay attention, you'll see they don't even remove fallen trees and bushes and somehow, even though more than one million tourists come to see it every year, they've managed to keep it wonderful, almost intact.

NEW DAY, NEW COUNTRY, OR THREE

On the second riding day, the scenery changes soon after leaving the national park and crossing to Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the blink of an eye you're not in



EDITOR'S NOTE: Adriatic Moto Tours invited *Road Rider's* editor to join a tour and review the experience, but COVID-19 shut that down in 2020, so here's what you can expect from the perspective of a local and tour guide...

Italy is one of the world's most popular motorcycle touring destinations and not just because it's the home of Ducati, Moto Guzzi and other famous manufacturers. The countryside, mountains and coast are spectacular and the riding is fantastic. It's also crowded, heavily policed, and getting more and more expensive to experience... but it borders the Balkans, a melting pot of different cultures and religions. A region where a few kilometres can make a huge difference in the landscape.

The countries on the Balkan Peninsula (which is opposite Italy on the Adriatic Sea) are Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Kosovo, Montenegro and

Macedonia, as well as Croatia, Serbia, and Slovenia — although the borders of the Balkans are not completely clear. Imagine a land at the intersection of the Mediterranean, the Alps and the Adriatic, at the crossroad of different cultures and religions and incredible diversity of landscape, roads, culture, history and cuisine. The Balkans offers a diversity that adventure seekers are dreaming of.

I'm from Slovenia, a country that was first to declare independence from the former Yugoslavia in 1991, when I was six. In the years to come, I remember how my parents were saddened watching the news about shooting and bombing locations that were just a few hours' drive away. I realised what was really happening much later in 2009, when I joined a magnificent ride through Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina, accompanied by foreign motorcycle journalists. I can still remember that when the conversation touched on nations, religions, borders or war, an unpleasant tension was felt around the dinner table, even though we were great riding buddies.

Riding through the region evoked mixed feelings as we passed destroyed buildings, saw tears in the eyes of a young local tourist guide, and noticed the majority of the



"YOU KNOW YOU'RE IN BOSNIA WHEN YOU CAN SPEND THREE HOURS DRINKING THE SAME COFFEE"

Europe anymore. Well, you didn't leave the continent, but by leaving Croatia you left the European Union and entered Bosnia and Herzegovina. The country is divided into two entities: Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska — which are politically autonomous to an extent — as well as the Brčko District, which is jointly administered by both. Complicated? Wait until you hear about disorders in its government (we'll best leave that alone) or religious divisions: according to Wikipedia, 51 per cent is Moslem, 30 per cent Orthodox and 15 per cent Catholic. Politically things are (still) complicated, but we (Slovenes) are exempt as we were not directly involved in the disputes with any of these nations and we are therefore warmly welcomed everywhere.

Bosnians are some of the kindest and most hospitable people I've met. You know that you're in Bosnia when you can spend three hours drinking the same coffee. They like to enjoy moments and take time. For coffee. For their guests. For making "burek", a traditional juicy



BIKES AND GEAR

If you're thinking about joining any of the AMT tours in the Balkans, which run entirely on paved roads, an all-rounder like the R1250GS or similar bike is probably the best option. I wouldn't pick a super sportsbike for that ride, even though you'll probably meet a couple of them on the Adriatic Coastal Road. If you're not driven by the power and you're not riding two up, a smaller-capacity bike (700 or 650cm³) is completely fine (and fun) around here. Don't forget: riding a motorcycle is a great way to explore the area and it's the rider who makes the difference and experiences the joy. It's good to carry a tyre repair kit (if you're accompanied by one of our guides, he'll take care of it). Choose riding gear with removable layers (warm with summer gloves) and you should keep an extra rain suit in your top case. The temperatures in Durmitor National Park can fall to zero in early spring (we've had snow in May!), while on the coast it can be 30°C.

pie with meat or cottage cheese or potato or whatever they decide to put in it — and they are all fantastic.

Our third day (well the morning part of the ride) is relatively fast, with soft-edged hills surrounding the surprisingly good road with not much traffic. On this day we usually take a longer detour over the mountains to see the scenic Rama Lakes and the Canyon of Neretva River, and after a pretty long day we arrive in Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina, just before dark. We always stay two nights there. The half-day guided city tour reveals a perspective of the Yugoslav war in the 1990s, bringing tears and laughter to your cheeks.

In the afternoon it's time to take a stroll through the streets with an unexpected oriental feel, where the smell of fresh coffee and grill (the Bosnian "čevapčići", small grilled minced meat sausages, are incredible) is mixed with prayers emanating from minarets and ringing bells of orthodox and Catholic cathedrals. The vibe of Sarajevo and its people is inspiring and brings a rush of joy.

After another day on the winding roads in the wilds of the eastern side of Bosnia we spend a night in the town of Mostar. The word "most" means bridge and the city of Mostar (Most-ar) was named after its Ottoman-era bridge, made of stone. Unfortunately, it had to be made twice! After it stood for 427 years it was destroyed in 1993 during the Croat-Bosnian (Yugoslav) war. In 2004, both sides of the town were connected again with the exact same stones, found deep in Neretva River running under the famous bridge.



ADRIATIC MOTO TOURS IN THE BALKANS

With 17 years of experiences in the Balkans, Adriatic Moto Tours offers four different guided tours in the area: a 15-day Beautiful Balkans Adventure, a shorter Adriatic Riviera Tour (nine days) and a longer (Balkans and Adriatic Explorer, 18 days) version of it. They all start and end in Ljubljana, Slovenia. For more adventurous riders there's another tour starting in Belgrade in Serbia, Intriguing Southeast Europe, that'll take you through Serbia, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Albania, Kosovo and Montenegro.

There are three basic options for a rider to choose from: you can RENT a bike (24/7 road assistance included) and explore the area on your own; or you can get the SELF-GUIDED package that includes a bike, a pre-set navigation device, a detailed marked map, a booklet with useful information and the booking of all the hotels on the way; or a third option that's a full-service GUIDED TOUR including everything mentioned above AND two guides – one on a motorcycle and the other in the support van, making sure your luggage will be waiting for you in your hotel room.

MONTENEGRO: MOUNTAIN RIDING!

The last part of the ride in southern Bosnia is less mountainous and usually much warmer before we enter Montenegro, the neighbouring country to the east and one of the ex-Yugoslav republics, and start a climb to the Durmitor National Park. Now that's a hell of a journey! After following the 12.5km-long Piva Lake in a valley so narrow the road is carved into both sides of a steep canyon, you turn on an even narrower and very twisty road that climbs all the way up to almost 2000m above the sea. Words can't describe how gorgeous this place is. If you like mountains, think about AMT's 18-day Balkans and Adriatic Explorer Tour that has an extra rest day in Žabljak, a small town in Durmitor Plato in the heart of Durmitor National Park, and the highest town in the Balkans. For dinner, expect to have something that you saw eating grass on endless pastures... sheep cheese and lamb, traditionally cooked "under the bell", covered with charcoal. The country is known for its strong red wine, Vranac, but if you prefer a beer, just order the one from a well-known brewery in Nikšić, a town located south of Durmitor.

What goes up must come down – I'm referring to the altitude. Coming down from Durmitor National Park, we drop from almost 1500m to sea level. In the morning we ride through the Tara River Canyon, one

of the deepest canyons in Europe, and after lunch we arrive at the spectacular Kotor Bay, where everyone is amazed by the 28km-long fjord surrounded by two massifs of the Dinaric Alps. I can honestly say that these two roads, the one climbing up to Durmitor National Park and the one riding down towards Kotor bay, should not be missed.

At this point we leave the mountains (and meat) behind and turn northwest, heading back to Croatia and the Adriatic coast (yes, seafood time!).

SAVE THE BEST FOR LAST: ADRIATIC AT ITS BEST!

If you're a *Game of Thrones* fan, you've surely heard of Dubrovnik. The TV series made the city famous worldwide, even though it didn't really need it... It's a fortified old town known for maritime trading, wealth and effective diplomacy, particularly in the 15th and 16th centuries. Somehow, Dubrovnik managed to survive all the wars, except the latest one in the '90s, when the town was bombed from the hill above. Dubrovnik was rebuilt and today it's on a must-visit list of travellers from all continents.

Again, we're spending two nights in this historic and romantic city, but riding wise, the best is yet to come. Long sweepers in Bosnia and twisted hairpins in

"RIDING THE SUPERB ADRIATIC COASTAL HIGHWAY IS PURE POETRY..."

Montenegro are great, but nothing beats a well-paved twisty road along the ocean and countless islands (actually there are 1246 of them if you count every single reef) on your left and mountains on your right. Meet the one and only Adriatic coastal highway, made in the '50s and '60s to connect the coastal towns of Croatia, Bosnia and Montenegro. Should you ask a rider, he'll say this road was made for us, the riders.

We leave the road briefly to take the ferry to lush green Hvar, where we spend two nights on the "sunny island"; when there you'll probably want to buy a house among the vineyards or olive trees, a small fishing boat and just forget about the rest of the world! The next overnight stop on the Adriatic coast is Zadar, an old coastal Venetian town best known for its beautiful sunsets (according to Alfred Hitchcock). Before or after (or both) dinner we sit by the unique Sea Organ, listening to the music made by the waves, and try to be at peace with ourselves, knowing the adventure has almost finished.

But guess what? Our next and last riding day from Zadar back to Slovenia is the best. Riding the superb Adriatic coastal highway is pure poetry, and that's putting it mildly! We end the roller-coaster ride in the town of Rovinj, on the western side of the Istrian peninsula, to experience another aspect of the Adriatic coast. The fishing town and tourist resort is officially bilingual – Croatian and Italian – which explains just a little about its rich history. Rovinj was one of the most important towns in the Republic of Venice, and the gorgeous Istrian peninsula is often referred to as the new Tuscany – including rolling hills to ride during the day and gourmet experiences in the evening.

During COVID in 2020 I was in Croatia only once for a summer holiday. I miss going south and I suspect the locals miss us too. Tourism was one of the main income sources for many families, enabling them to stay and not go to western Europe for work. When the situation allows, I warmly invite you to experience the Balkans yourself to get to know the incredibly diverse and historically rich area, where local traditions still thrive alongside the recent "boom in tourism", especially in the newly discovered Adriatic Riviera. This experience will change your perspective and enrich your knowledge while you ride some of the best and less-travelled roads in Europe.

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