

# Riding off the beaten tourist path in the

# Balkans

## Intriguing Southeast Europe with Adriatic Moto Tours

Words by Tim Walker. Photos by Tim Walker & Adriatic Moto Tours





If one word could describe the riding experience in the half dozen Balkan countries on the AMT Intriguing Southeast Europe tour, that word would be variety. That variety includes mountain

twisties, scenic and rugged shorelines, picturesque river valleys, lush forests, and rolling hills dotted with vineyards reminiscent of Tuscany.

This is definitely an off-the-beaten-path type of tour, so riders signing up for it will

have a blast getting off the main roads and visiting places that other tourists zoom right past.

Expect to tackle a few challenging roads, though. That's to be expected when visiting countries new to tourism.

Experiencing — and overcoming — those challenges are what still linger in my mind from the time I took this 15-day tour couple of years ago.

### A semi-private tour experience

The tour began just as most of the world was emerging from pandemic lockdowns. But covid fears still lingered, and all but two riders who had signed up for this tour dropped out.

Above: Golubac Fortress 14th century Medieval Stone Fortress East of Belgrade Serbia.

Left: Old Ottoman Stone Bridge Bosnia.

Top right: The Author On the top of Llogara Pass at an elevation of 1.043m (3,422ft) above the sea Albania.

Bottom right: Sheep on the road



I credit AMT for operating a tour catering to just me and Jim, the other rider, who hails from Florida. Many other tour companies would have canceled.

And I strongly recommend a guided tour for this part of Europe, especially for first-timers. That's because the variety in the region also makes for some hassles: six countries (border crossings ... ugh!), four languages, three alphabets, and four currencies!

So it's best to have a Balkan native to guide you through this melange of countries. For Jim and me, that guide was Tomaž, a multi-lingual, native Slovenian with riding experience throughout the region.

The three of us gelled together immediately, which was a very good thing as we would be traveling and eating together for two straight weeks!

I teased Jim about living in a flat state, which has nothing like the mountain twisties we were about to encounter.

My home state, Minnesota, also lacks mountains, so Jim and I decided to treat this tour as a crash course — not literally, we hoped — on how to improve our navigation of mountain twisties.

We both teased Tomaž, too, and mocked him for the small tuft of hair centered under his lower lip. We did so kindly, of course, and in the process taught him some new English words: soul patch, pretentious, and hipster!

We started and ended in the vibrant city of Belgrade, Serbia, and took a clockwise path through North Macedonia, Albania, Kosovo, and Montenegro.

Bulgaria closed its borders due to covid just a week before our tour started, so AMT quickly rearranged the first three days of the tour. The current AMT Intriguing Southeast Europe tour includes Bulgaria once again.

### Start your engines

I rode a new BMW F750 GS, which matched the weight and size of the 1989 Honda Transalp I ride at home.

Of course, the BMW had almost double the horsepower of my 30-year-old Honda, and included modern safety features such as ABS and traction control — which, I confess, were deployed a handful of times on the tour!

AMT sells all their bikes at the end of each riding season, and so all tours are outfitted with new or practically new machines, including BMWs, Hondas,



Suzukis, and Yamahas. All are equipped with ample storage cases and a pre-programmed, handlebar-mounted GPS showing each day's route.

Our riding skills in curves were tested on our very first day when we rode alongside the wandering Danube River separating Serbia and Romania and through the foothills of the Serbian Carpathian Mountains.

Riding in the foothills only whetted our appetite for eventually riding up into higher elevations. Those mountain twisties would come soon enough, Tomaž said, and there would be plenty of them. Yay, mountains!

We had a lunch at a roadside restaurant in the shadow of the massive Golubac Fortress, a strategically positioned military post that controlled access to the Iron Gorge, a narrow portion of the Danube River with steep, fjord-like embankments, which we rode alongside later that day.

The lunch was fabulous and was the first of many more tasty — and varied — dining experiences in our future.

The Balkan peoples have borrowed the best flavours from the cuisines of the many invaders who swept up and down the peninsula throughout history, including the Ottomans, Greeks, ►



Left: Road leaving Ohrid Lake Macedonia.  
Above: Gipsies on the road.

Romans, and Illyrians.

In addition to being a great motorcycle guide, Tomaž also helped guide us through menus to help us find the tastiest local food and drinks.

Evening meals were washed down with fresh-brewed local beers or national brands — all excellent — and local wines, mostly reds. And raki.

Raki, sometimes spelt rakija in the western Balkans, is a strong brandy made most often from plums (Slivovitz is a popular export), but peaches are also a common starting fruit.

But beware. Raki may be more than 80 proof, and it may be home-distilled. Even a shot served in a bar or restaurant could be the owner's special creation. So, definitely enjoy raki with caution!

After spending a night in the Serbian town of Zaječar, we fortified ourselves with a lavish breakfast buffet at our upscale hotel (all AMT hotels are at least 3 or 4 stars, and all breakfasts are included), and rode through lush valleys and plains until we arrived mid-afternoon in North Macedonia's capital Skopje.

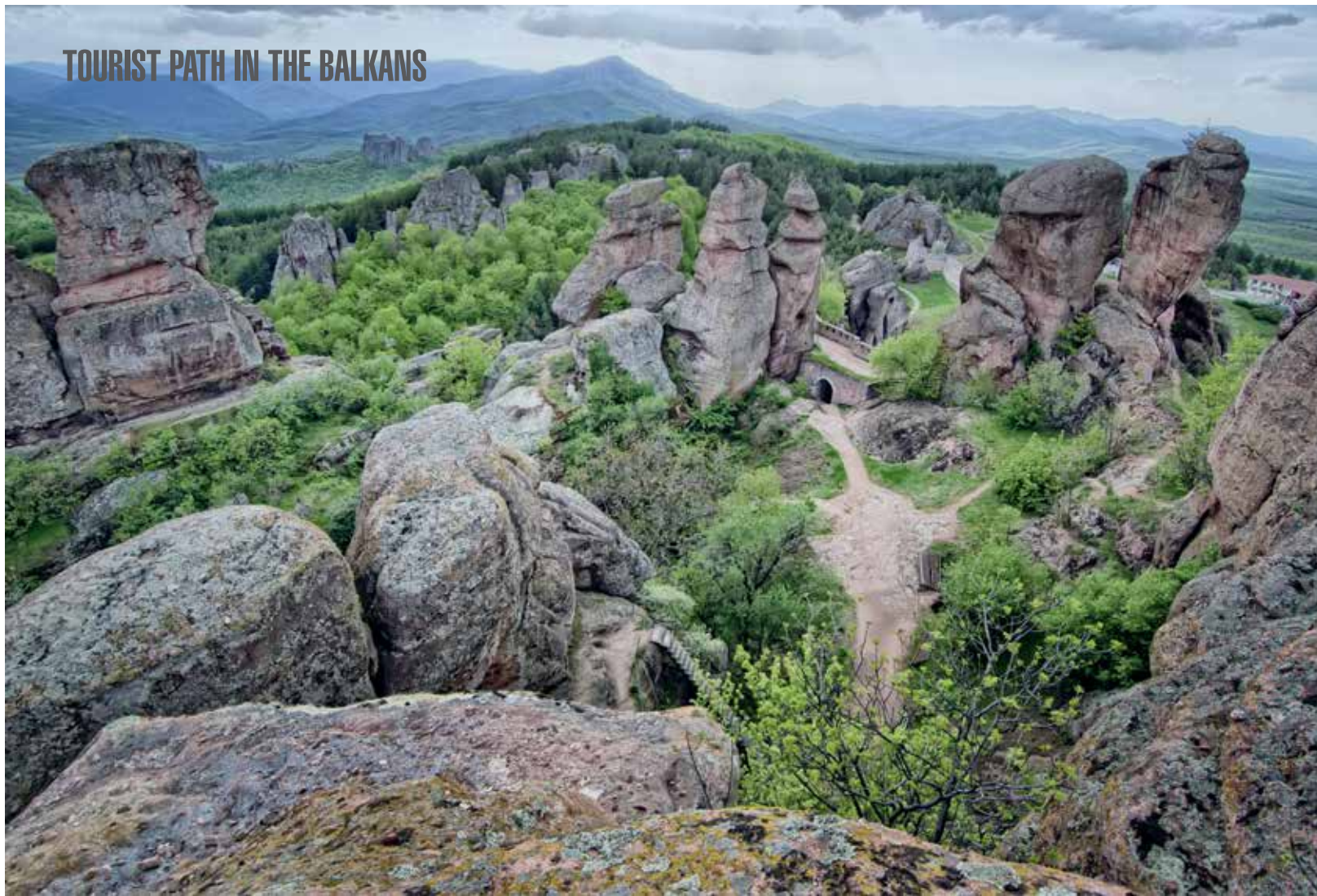
We had time to explore this cosmopolitan city. The standout attraction was the absolutely massive central square and the enormous statue of Alexander the Great dominating it.

Except that to make nice with neighboring Greece — which claims Alexander the Great to be exclusively of Hellenic (Greek) heritage — the statue is officially named "Equestrian Warrior".

Our dinners aside this square were very pleasant (if I were with my wife, I'd say they were romantic), as the statue and the entire square was brightly illuminated and full of people enjoying a nightlife vibe.

I was elated seeing people in this region enjoying fuller, freer lives and no longer living drab existences under communist rule. ▶

## TOURIST PATH IN THE BALKANS



### Macedonian wine, Lake Ohrid, Albania

After an energizing rest day in Skopje, we traveled southeast, riding through the Demir Kapija gorge in Macedonia's wine region, boasting gentle hills dotted with vineyards, reminiscent of Tuscany.

Fittingly, we stayed the night at a hotel

Above: Stunning Red Rocks Formations Belogradchik Bulgaria.

Below: Vivid Old Town of Prizren Kosovo.

Below right: Tirana Central Square the capital of Albania.

connected to a vineyard where dinner included sampling the many different wine varieties produced in the area.

Our hosts told us that Macedonia is the fourth-largest supplier of bulk wine to Germany. Our taste buds told us the Macedonians save the good stuff for themselves!

The next day, we rode through the long, curving roads of southwestern Macedonia, through a sparsely populated, forested, and mountainous area. Jim and I are thoroughly enjoying the mountain highs.

We arrived at Ohrid, a city on the north-eastern shore of beautiful blue-green Lake Ohrid, one of the world's deepest and oldest lakes, with 200 unique species.

Of particular note is the Lake Ohrid trout, a local delicacy tasting like a brown trout crossed with an Atlantic salmon.

Ohrid was the highlight of the tour for me, because my 1990 trip was a honeymoon with my wife, and one of our stops was Ohrid!

My fond memories of Ohrid came rushing back to me and I insisted — much to their annoyance, I suspect —



Right: Albanian Coast.

Middle right: Demir Kapija Winery Boutique hotel in Macedonia.

Bottom right: Author's Tour Party of 3 - 2 riders and the guide, Roman Ruins Butrint Albania.

that Tomaž and Jim take a photo of me each time we came across a spot where my wife and I visited in 1990!

On our rest day in Ohrid, Jim and I took a pleasant and relaxing boat cruise on Lake Ohrid, under sunny skies and on beautiful clear water, with a stop at the monastery of Sveti Naum, the spiritual heart of Orthodox Macedonians.

The next day, the three of us rode along the lake's northern shore past the monastery on our way to Albania.

It wasn't too long after crossing the border that we see a defensive machine-gun bunker, one of more than 750,000 built during Albania's post-WWII communist regime.

Now all abandoned, the bunkers are a symbol of the extreme isolation and paranoia of the Albanian government, which feared armed invasion from the West and even from its communist neighbors.

I think Albania is my favourite Balkan country — this tour is my third time visiting the country on a motorcycle.

Part of the allure for me is that Albania is still mostly rustic and less touristy than its neighbors.

And although some Albanian roads are good — the country is undergoing a road construction boom preparing for an expected tourist boom — a good road can suddenly become a very, very bad road without warning.

Both Jim and I agreed it was good that Tomaž was in the lead!

The next day's ride took us to Gjirocastër through the Gramoz mountains, where we thoroughly enjoyed climbing to the Barmashi Pass at 1759 m. Yay, mountain twisties!

In Gjirocastër, we visit the Cold War Tunnel Museum, an underground bunker that served as an emergency shelter for Albania's top communist officials.

Like the innumerable small defensive bunkers found throughout the country, the Gjirocastër tunnels and its 59 rooms reflect the paranoid fear of a foreign invasion, and was designed to withstand a nuclear attack.

Our next stop was Sarande, a beach ▶



## TOURIST PATH IN THE BALKANS



Above: On the way to Gjirokaster Albania. Below: Serbian countryside.



Above: Gramos Mountains Albania.  
Far left: Dinners at the local restaurants are included in the tour.  
Left: Kadinjaca WWII Memorial in Southern Serbia.

resort town on the southern tip of Albania with great swimming and fresh seafood.

We had a planned rest day at Sarande, but we opted to spend it riding south to Butrint, a UNESCO World Heritage site, where we strolled among Greek, Roman, and Byzantine ruins.

On a whim, we decided to ride even farther south and cross into Greece, where we had a pleasant seaside lunch in a small fishing village.

The deep-fried feta cheese we ordered had a perfect combination of flavour and texture that I've never experienced before, and it made the hassles of getting through Greek customs entirely worthwhile.

The next day's ride was north toward Albania's capital city of Tirana, and took us through two distinct landscapes.

In the morning, we rode 120 km on a beautiful coastal road, enjoying gentle sweepers with cliffs on one side and the shimmering blue Adriatic Sea on the other.

In the afternoon we went up and over the Llogara Pass (1027 m). This was a challenging, technical ride. Thank

goodness the road surfaces were new and the wandering animals few.

The incredibly wide central Skanderberg Square in Tirana is something to behold. It's a busy and vibrant mishmash of architectural styles, crowds, and noise.

What a profound change from just a few decades ago when closed-off Albania was called the North Korea of Europe.

### **Kosovo, Montenegro, and a return to Belgrade**

As our tour wrapped up, bittersweet feelings emerged. This was a moderately tough tour that even with three rest days can tire you out. ▶

## TOURIST PATH IN THE BALKANS



So I began to look forward to relaxing at the Belgrade hotel where we started, but not looking forward to losing the camaraderie that developed among the three of us.

But until then, there are a few more highlights to describe.

First was the mountainous ride north from Tirana to the town of Kruja, which for centuries was the center of Albanian culture and the linchpin in their fight to keep foreign invaders at bay. The huge citadel towering over the town is a testament to that need for armed resistance.

Another highlight was riding for more than 100 km on the brand new divided

motorway from Kruja, heading north through mountains and valleys towards the border crossing with Kosovo.

I'm guessing all three of us were probably riding quite a bit over the speed limit because the smoothness of the road and the lure of broad, sweeping mountain curves made it hard not to twist the throttle.

The roadway truly evoked the feeling of being on a German autobahn — but without the traffic. We felt like we were on a private race track!

We arrived in Prizren, Kosovo, in the mid-afternoon, still elated from our day's ride and looking forward to exploring this charming city of mosques and

monasteries and Ottoman architecture dating back to the 14th century.

Leaving Kosovo, we crossed into Montenegro for only a short stretch. But that stretch was a pleasant ride up to the Kulina Pass, which at 1800 m makes it one of the highest passes in the Balkans.

This wasn't a technical climb and descent — there were only a few hairpin

Above: Albanian Countryside.

Below left: Blue Lake Coffee stop Albania.

Below: Defensive bunkers built during Albania's post-WWII communist regime; Albanian Macedonian Border.

Top left: Wooden ferry boat Albania.



turns. Instead, a lot of moderate back-to-back curves tested our skills.

By this time, both Jim and I had taken our cornering skills up at least a couple of notches, and that's a great feeling, innit?

### Goodbyes

Upon our return to Belgrade, we didn't have the traditional AMT champagne toast. We needed rapid covid tests at the airport, and raising a toast in a parking lot there seemed like a bad idea.

So we said our goodbyes quickly, as Jim

and I had to pack up for early flights the next day and Tomaš had to load up the van for an all-night drive to the AMT home base in Ljubljana.

Along with memories of the thrilling riding, the tasty cuisines, the scenic landscapes, and the city scenes we experienced, I also have the fondest memories about the laughs and the stories the three of us shared.

Although our parting was rushed, we pledged to keep in touch — and we have.

Jim and I may meet each other again, as

we are both looking for opportunities to hone our cornering skills in new corners of the world.

We were both thoroughly impressed by our AMT experience, and are looking over the company's Calendar for another mountain riding adventure.

*In 2024, the Intriguing Southeast Europe tours run in late spring June 8 – 22 and autumn September 7 – 21, starting from Belgrade, Serbia. Visit [AdriaticMotoTours.com](http://AdriaticMotoTours.com) for more information.*

ADV



**SHOP ONLINE**  
[adventurebikeaustralia.com.au](http://adventurebikeaustralia.com.au)

\$9.95 FLAT RATE SHIPPING AUSTRALIA WIDE

HUGE RANGE OF PARTS & ACCESSORIES FOR SUZUKI DR650, DRZ400 & DRZ250, KAWASAKI KLR, HONDA CRF300L/RALLY, YAMAHA WR250R/X

AUSTRALIA'S LARGEST ONLINE SUPPLIER OF...

Procycle US, Warp 9 Racing, Promoto Billel, OBR ADV Gear, Advanced Clutch Tech, Parabellum, Pit Posse, Outlaw, Bajaworx, Majer, Cogent Dynamics, Nomadic, JNS Engineering, Cyclops, Kreiga, Eagle Mike, DG Performance, TFX Suspension, Nova Racing and more!