

Girl next door



A scene from the journey.

Driving me nuts

Road rage in Albania

LOOKING at a road map of Albania, distances do not seem that great. Development has been underway for over a decade, so I thought a day to make it from Tirana, the capital, to the resort of Saranda, 175 miles to south, was enough. I was wrong.

How can driving the distance from New York City to Baltimore take two full days?

The answer's simple. Like dog years, road miles in Albania are seven times as long as normal miles. Not brave enough to drive myself, I hired a guide to help me get around. It was hard to focus though, when it seemed like our car was dodging disaster at every turn.

Cars in Albania must contend with many obstacles. Some roads are well paved, but those not yet repaired have axle-bending potholes, so cars fight for the same patch of asphalt. They must also avoid goats, sheep, cows, donkey-carts and buses. Albanian drivers, fond of passing on blind curves, add more thrills to the mix.

Along nearly every road in the country are memorials for drivers who died. They are elaborate, decorated with wreaths, pictures, and, I once observed, a hubcap.

If danger on the road isn't enough, navigating adds to the stress. Street signs, road signs, stop signs; all luxuries to be savored when they appear.

Incongruously, the choice of automobile is very 21st century. It is common to see a brand-new \$70,000 S-Class plying the same bumpy routes as the goats.

Somehow, my guide explained, the chaos all adds up to a working system. I was just worried about hitting the donkey up ahead.

A.B.

Just miles from Croatia, another coastal paradise awaits. ALEXANDER BASEK checks in on Montenegro

Amere 35 miles or so from the sun-splashed Croatian coast — now popular with travelers worldwide — lies the Republic of Montenegro. Though it, too, is on the beautiful Dalmatian coast, tourists are still the exception here.

Not that Montenegro, only 3 years old, is any less appealing. Its 180 dramatic miles of Adriatic shoreline are a collision of Slavic and Mediterranean influences. Outdoor cafés buzz, fashionable types promenade in club wear, pushcarts proffer *burek* (a savory pastry) and fish is on the menu. Jagged limestone mountains provide a stern, handsome backdrop.

Montenegro also has celeb eye candy: **Sophia Loren** owns a villa in the old fishing settlement of Sveti Stefan, a resort town that has also attracted big names like **Sylvester Stallone** and **Claudia Schiffer**.

There's only one good that reason Croatia is buzzing and Montenegro isn't — politics. The republic is still loosely joined with the more troubled Serbia (The Serbs have long flocked here in summer).

Now, however, Montenegro is preparing for an influx of visitors from abroad, and independence could come as soon as a 2006 referendum. Signs from EU and U.S. development agencies pepper the roads, hotels and restaurants take credit cards, and many people speak English, the *lingua franca* of regional tourism.

It's clear that the international community is bullish on the republic's future. With such unspoiled beauty on hand, why not?

WHERE TO GO

Montenegro sits between Croatia in the north and Albania in the south. It contains the largest fjord in southern Europe, upon which is the historic, and popular, town of **Kotor**. **Budva**, another tourist



Picture perfect: The ideal way to see beautiful Sveti Stefan is from afar.

haunt, is a great place for sun and sand. It's 30 miles to the south.

Kotor is almost wholly contained within Stari Grad (Old Town), a pedestrian-only zone of stone buildings (some 900 years old) and narrow streets teeming with cafés. Wander without a map and you're likely to end up where you started shortly thereafter, having traversed most of Kotor in the process.

Above the town are remnants of ramparts and fortifications dating back to the third century B.C. Pay the \$1.30 and start climbing. The view of the town and fjord is spectacular. Go early morning and your only company will be goats.

For great fresh fish, head for **Bas-tion**, near the North Gate of Old Town (Stari Grad 448).

At night, teens turn Old Town into a bit of a scene. These days, clubs are playing turbo-folk, a jarring techno and folk music combo.

For lodging, it's the **Hotel Vardar**, which is clean and friendly (\$56/night for a double; 082 325 08). The posh **Hotel Marija** is a more luxe option (\$85/night for a double, 449, 082 325 062).

For sun and relaxation, head to Budva (pop. 20,000) on the coast proper. It marks the start of Montenegro's best beaches. The town



Kotor is cafe culture central.

has a classic Adriatic beach vibe thanks to palm trees, seafood restaurants and ice cream stands.

Budva's original walled Old Town was nearly decimated in a 1979 earthquake. Now rebuilt, it's over run with souvenir shops.

The best restaurants are on Slovenska, which runs parallel to the beach. Have drinks outside at the Italian **O Sole Mio**. Most evenings, a live duo sings Serbian torch songs (Slovenska obala 15). Farther south are **Donna kod**

THE LOWDOWN

GO: Montenegro Airlines serves a handful of European gateways, with connections to Podgorica, two hours from Kotor and Budva, or Tivat, 15 minutes from the coast (www.montenegro-airlines.cg.yu).

GETTING AROUND: Taxis are plentiful, but most people take the bus; Podgorica to Kotor takes two hours and costs \$7.50.

Nikole (Budvanska Marina) and Restaurant **Jardan** (Slovenska Obala 10), two solid, seafood-heavy establishments.

The **Hotel Mogren** has great views and tasty breakfasts (\$56/night, 086 451 780). Next door, the **Hotel Avala** has more upscale digs (\$59/night, "villas" from \$30/night; 086 402 656, www.grand-hotelavala.com). Both are on beautiful Mogren Beach.

The former fishing village of **Sveti Stefan** is pretty, but the settlement has been converted to luxury rentals and is rather precious. There's a \$4.50 entrance fee at its gate and not much to do once inside.

Worthy of a day trip is **Cetinje**, in the mountains between Podgorica and Budva. With the National Museum and Cetinje Monastery, it's a nice respite from the crowds.

TICKER | A FIRST: The first Airbus A380 (the largest aircraft to date) completed a three-hour-and-54-minute inaugural test flight last week.



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