

Slovenia, Croatia, and Montenegro June of 2024



Let me first start by saying that Jeff scored us some business/first class seats on our long flight from Denver to Frankfurt, Germany! It was amazing and it helped to get good sleep laying flat at least for a few hours. We typically fly coach for obvious reasons (traveling as much as we do, first class on a regular basis would get much too expensive!). We did enjoy all the extra storage spaces, the attention and service of our every need from the flight attendants, the white tablecloth, the snacks, drinks, and classy 3 course meal.

Now onto the trip itself:

SLOVENIA

Slovenia was a first time for us and we were not disappointed! Lake Bled was just as beautiful as its pictures and as people told us it would be.



We stayed in an apartment less than a minute to the actual lake itself with just a few restaurants- both in walking distance and we ate in Carmen's twice out of the three nights we were there! We sat on the balcony overlooking the lake. The food was very good! I enjoyed the beef soup (which is popular there and also in the other two countries we visited). There is no beef in it, just beef broth and usually thin noodles and occasionally a few vegetables diced very small. (I had it several times on this trip in case you couldn't tell). One of my other favorites at Carmen's was a breaded chicken cutlet with a nice tarragon sauce, and the fries are usually good all over Europe and come with many of the dishes you order without realizing it! So don't order a side of fries before you ask.

Another staple thing you must order if going to Slovenia is their dessert - Crème Cake. It really is tasty without being too sweet. I also loved the Fructal strawberry juice that can be found in grocery stores in plastic bottles, again not too sweet but very refreshing.



Another dish I enjoyed was gnocchi filled with spinach and cheese in Slovenia as well when we visited an old town called Radovljica, which sits high on a cliff so our lunch there had an gorgeous and peaceful view with rolling hills and snow-capped mountains.

One disturbance to our peaceful lunch, as we were seated next to a multiple family table with small children was Maximillian! This kid was rambunctious! He kept going onto a lower terrace with his toy car and annoying the single lady trying to enjoy her lunch and glass of wine in peace.

The mother kept yelling “Maximillian! Stop! Come back here!” (in her native language which I didn’t have to work too hard to know what she was saying) but he wasn’t having it and at one point Jeff and I could not help but laugh when he stuck his tongue out at her and made the noise that often accompanies such a gesture. The humor in it sort of ended when he got in trouble for not listening and was made to sit at the table once and for all – I think the father took over at this point. One thing that we quickly learned about eastern Europe in particular is that they will not bring you the check unless you ask and it could be awhile before you can even get their attention. So, by the time we were ready to go, Maximillian was now screaming the top of his lungs right behind my ear and we could not get out of there fast enough! We now refer to every screaming child as “Maximillian!” LOL.



After our meal in the old town we wandered around Lake Bled and the town of Bled. We climbed the many stairs to the top of the castle and luckily there just happened to be a renaissance fair going on so we got to watch people dance and there were some demonstrations such as a knight having volunteers put their hands and head in the butcher block as they pretended to whip our behinds before cutting off our feet and head! Of course, yours truly volunteered as Jeff took video. We also got to see Slovenian costumes and traditional dancing with flags and singing that was very entertaining. Lastly, there was a wine cellar in a cave where I tasted some delicious wine and purchased a few bottles to share with our friends in Croatia who were going to join us for the Live Your Life Travel portion of our trip.

After our castle experience, we decided to ride the toboggan ride on the opposite mountain and across the lake from where the castle is located. It was very fun, and would not be the first thrill ride on a mountain that we got to experience this trip as you will read later!



The next day we went into the capital city of Slovenia, Ljubljana, and walked around the old town, shopped, and then took a city tour to get a sense of how life is in their capital city. I learned that they have many music festivals all year round and a strong sense of community of free events bringing people of the city together on a regular basis. The city was clean with very low crime. After the tour, we had some warm soup in a cozy café called Marley's & Me on the cobblestoned streets of the old town, which was nice as we had a little rain that day.



The next morning, on our way out of Slovenia and on the way to Croatia, we stopped at one of the most impressive caves I've ever seen (and I have been to a few very big ones in different parts of the world). This one had many large rooms with very high ceilings but one of the best parts about it was that you ride a train that goes fairly fast to get into the part where we walk around with our tour guide. The train ride is approximately 15 minutes deep into the center of the cave which explains how many miles of underground this cave actually covers, so if you are claustrophobic, (obviously not due to being a tight, small space, but rather because you cannot quickly or easily get out if you needed to) this would not be for you!



CROATIA

The whole drive to Croatia was stunning as it hugged the coast for most of the five and a half hour drive.



We arrived at the walled historic town of Trogir and figured out the complicated parking situation with the help of our host, Ratko, from the Hotel Monika. What a gem of a hotel right in the middle of the old town! The staff there could not be more accommodating and Ratko, who runs the hotel, is a young guy (in his 30's) who offered (and I gladly accepted!) to carry my bags and some of Jeff's from the North Gate to the hotel entrance over cobblestones and all. He was much stronger than he looked and he did it effortlessly. The hotel was very warm and welcoming in its ambiance as well, with large rooms, nice bathrooms and showers, a restaurant with a terrace as well as another terrace where one could relax and read or enjoy a cocktail.

Jeff and I had the first night there to ourselves and enjoyed a nice steak dinner within the walls of Trogir, and Ratko and I worked out all the details of the seven travelers that were due to arrive the next day. I was a little stressed, having been my first big international trip as a group leader, but the host kept reminding me that I too am on vacation and that I should not be worried about anything and that he was used to handling these situations. Of course, knowing me, I was not worry free, but I did trust his ability to make the process run smoothly.

The next day, we had three small groups arriving at different times. The first couple arrived, Robbie (who is a fellow psychologist that I work with) and his newly wed wife Steph, who is a vet. They joined us for a nice lunch, also within the walls of Trogir. I then sent them off to wander and shop so I could get ready for the next arrival, Michelle (a newly retired medical doctor) and her daughter April who is a bright young scientist in biochemistry. I walked around the town with them and showed them the cool shops and perimeter of Trogir as well. We then only had one more group expected to arrive a few hours before our welcome dinner at the hotel and this is where things went a little south. To no fault of their own, my last three travelers did not make their connection from Heathrow airport in London! The first flight was delayed and they made the choice to stay in London for the night and then take a flight out the next day and get a private driver to take them from Split to our next destination in Zadar. Needless to say, they missed out on our welcome dinner at Hotel Monika as well as our first day outing to Krka Falls (located in between Trogir and Zadar). They said they made the best of it and were in good spirits when we finally connected in Zadar, but more on that in a minute.



After our breakfast at Hotel Monika the next morning, we walked over to the Fort ruins just outside the city walls of Trogir and explored and took in the views from up top.



I had hired a driver for our transportation from Trogir to Zadar and at 10:00am the six of us met him at the same gate where the previous taxi drivers dropped people off and we were on our way. Krka Falls was amazingly beautiful and it had a nicely laid out path to follow with wooden man-made bridges and great viewpoints for pictures. It progressively got better and better as you continued. At the end you could see all the smaller waterfalls cascading into one another into a naturally landscaped masterpiece with turquoise and dark blue water tones. It was so clear and easy to see the water life as well including schools of fish and frogs in some areas.



There were plenty of opportunities to get decent food either before the hike as well as another area right where the main waterfall trail ends so you could eat and enjoy the beauty for a while. There were tables to sit in the shade which made it nice and refreshing after the hike, which really only took about 45 minutes to an hour. Not to mention, you could opt for the air-conditioned bus to take you to and from the trailhead instead of walking the extra 20 minutes (down or up) where it was more steep than the actual trail to the waterfalls. We chose to all walk down and after the hike, many of us chose to take the bus back up from the falls to the main parking lot. It also had a ferry to take you to further waterfall sites, but we did not plan to make a full day of it. I recommend Krka Falls National Park as well as Plitvice National Park which is somewhat larger also with ferries going from one waterfall area to another and is located between Zadar and Zagreb (which we did the last time we were in Croatia).



Our driver continued on and took us to Zadar (only an hour and half to two hours total driving time from Trogir)

and I had booked five different apartments all within walking distance of one another in the old town.

Our other three travelers (Saurabh and Nichole, both of whom I work with and who also just got engaged days before this trip, and Jared, a good friend of Saurabh's) managed to locate theirs and after we all checked in, we had a progressive reunion at each of our five residences. A

few of us had drinks and snacks to offer and it was a lot of fun to see everyone's very vastly different accommodations.



That evening we had a “family/welcome dinner” (since now everyone was in attendance) at a restaurant very close to the two highlights of Zadar – the sea organ (which literally was built to capture the waves and air from beneath the sea steps creating some beautiful sounds) and the sun salutations which was built to capture the solar energy creating a fantastic natural light show every evening.





The next day was an all-day outing to an island a little more than an hour from Zadar called Pag, known for lace making, sheep cheese, olive trees and olive oil. Our first stop was at the Gardens of Lun where we took a short hike through the olive tree garden with trees around 2,000 years old. I was disappointed that the electric cars were not running when we visited but we did get our steps in!

Next, we visited a museum in the main town of Novalja where they have the Italian Aqueducts – very narrow and dark tunnels that go miles underground. Not everyone was keen on going in which was fine because the few of us that did go in did not stay too long as it had rained a few days prior and was rather muddy so you had to step on the sides of the walls to avoid ruining your shoes.



Next, we hit the beach area called Zrce, which was one of the highlights that day! If we had gone two weeks later, it would have been a total party scene! This is where they hold all night music festivals! Essentially it has three or four beaches connected by restaurants and “clubs”, some with pools as well as ocean swimming. They are free to use with no food or drink minimum and we even somehow got a free cabana by accident! Some of us tried water skiing by being pulled on a pully line, and others (like myself) did the blow up bouncing ride pulled by a speedboat. Four of us girls choose that option and I am so thankful we opted for the ten minute versus twenty minute ride as my mouth was so dehydrated from screaming and my hands were so sore from clenching for dear life to the raft. We were bouncing around and flying on those waves! I had not laughed so hard in a long time!

We ended our time on the island of Pag with a catered wine and cheese meal at a restaurant called Trapula Wine and Cheese Bar, in a quaint town called Otok, where we witnessed a bride and groom taking photos as we enjoyed our wine and cheese which was lovely. The town also had great shopping that the guys in our group seemed to take advantage of, and us girls refrained due to lack of time and needing to get back to Zadar before too late (in general men do not take as long to shop as women). Pag is an island you can easily drive to from Zadar with much to offer! I would look into staying there for a night or two next time.



Another highlight of that day was the van ride home (Jeff was our driver on two occasions when we did not have luggage and this was one of them). What made the drive special was we started randomly talking about old TV shows and theme songs which then led to us singing songs as a group which was so much fun! I love the spontaneity that happens with group trips! We were all pretty wiped out from the day and some of us were still adjusting to the time difference so after exploring the nightlife a little we called it a night.

That particular night around 1:00am I heard our front door open and a woman said, "Oh, I'm sorry, I'm sorry!". Of course I was freaked out not only that our door wasn't locked but, mind you our particular apartment had four steep flights of stairs and was the only unit on that floor, so it was not a place that people would just "stumble" upon in the middle of the night (even if Croatians are used to many flights of stairs)! Jeff couldn't figure out how to lock the door that night, so I kind of slept with one eye open with my head turned so I could hear for any other intruders before finally falling asleep. You know you are most vulnerable when you are asleep! The next morning we needed to check out so we figured out how to lock the door after all. It was one of those locks where you pull up, not down, on the door handle. Oh well! We survived!

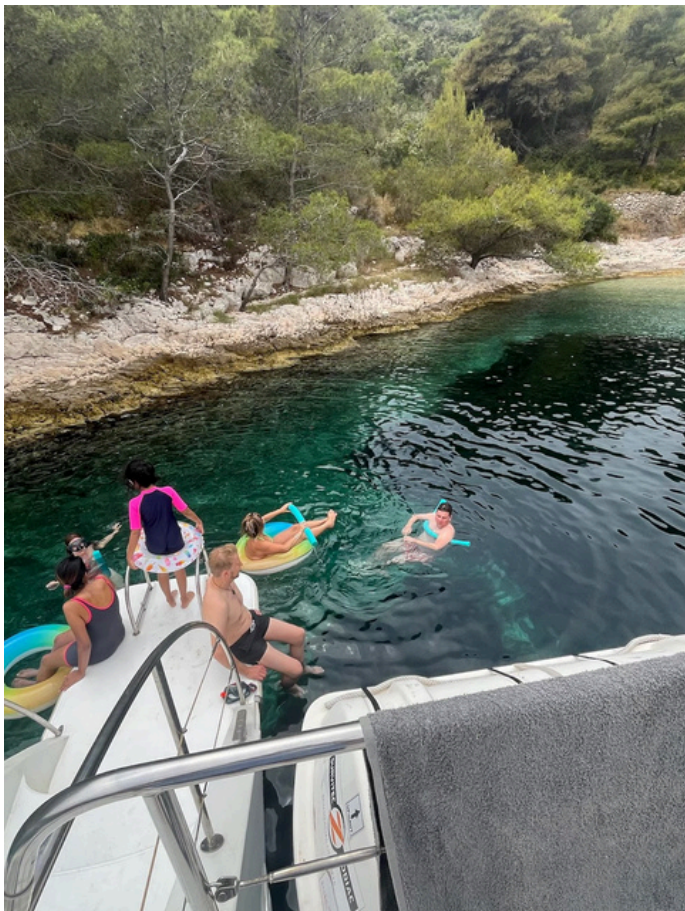


The next morning we got picked up from our driver to head to our next destination, Split. However, I built in a nice stop for a group lunch at a very luxurious resort in Sibernik called Solaris. It had two or three resort hotels right along the Adriatic coastline with a mini-golf course and a bar and a few restaurants along the water. We had our lunch however in the Dalmation Ethno Village, which was a cobblestone small village within the resort and it was beautiful and charming and we got top service in our own private covered cabin essentially. Everyone loved the location and it was a perfect stop between Zadar and Split to break up the hour and a half commute. I would definitely book a few days at one of the hotels in Solaris for some rest and relaxation in between excursions. They also had a dock where you could do some island hopping from the resort as well.

That afternoon we checked into our hotel in the heart of the Old Town in Split. We stayed at the “Heritage Palace Hotel for Adults Only” (yes that was all part of the name when I booked it). They were decent sized rooms and breakfast was included each morning. You could not have a better location for restaurants and shopping literally at your doorstep. Everyone seemed to really like Split and the hotel. We had free time to explore, eat, and shop.



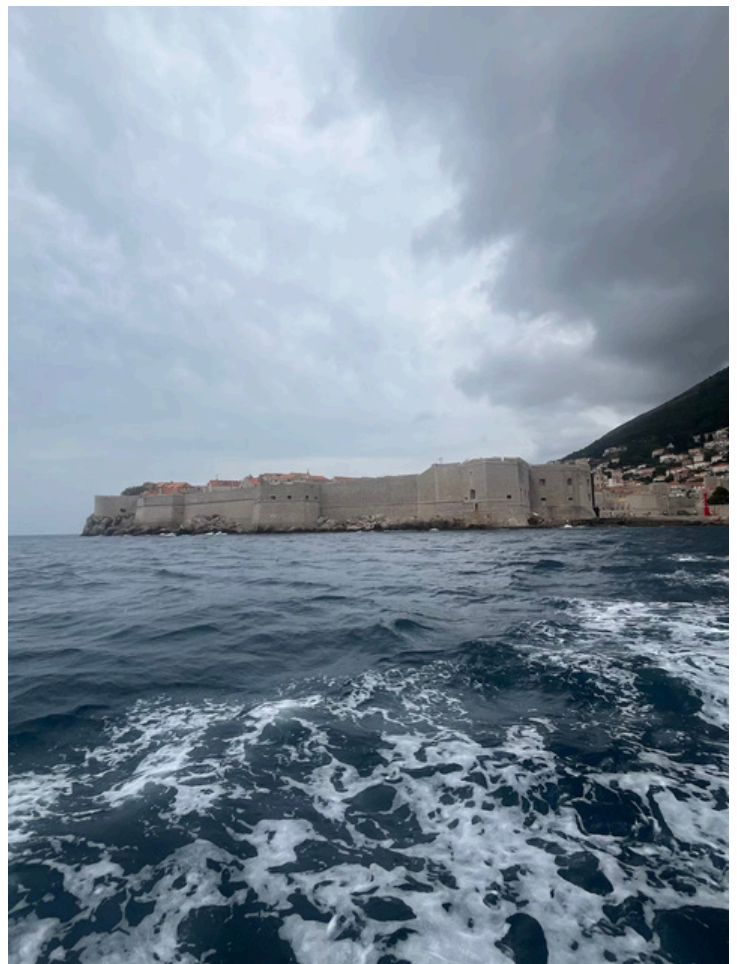
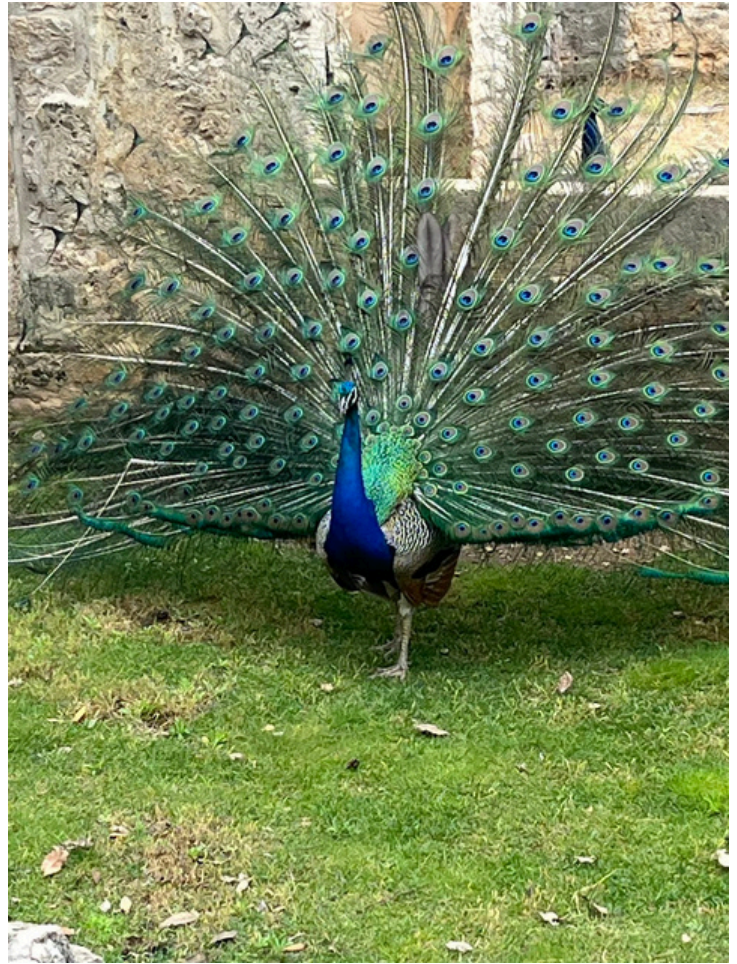
The next day was super fun. We went on an all-day catamaran island hopping tour and visited Hvar, Brac, Solta, and some of the Pekleni islands for swimming opportunities. It later turned into a dance party which was very lively and memorable. It was run by a company called Summer Blues and I highly recommend them. They were a cheerful and fun staff and took very good care of us. There were about 30 or 40 people on the boat and we all had a good time together as drinks were flowing and music was inviting! It was challenging to dance on the boat with the rough waters and funny to watch the line dancing in particular when rows of people swayed with the boat! They did have some food but also gave us time to enjoy a nice lunch at one of the many restaurants on Hvar, which many of us did. It was a wonderful day which ended with Steph and Robbie dancing in a public square in Split for a crowd of people cheering them on. They are both great dancers and always fun to watch.



The next morning we had an early departure to get the ferry from Split to Dubrovnik. It was a five and half hour trek on very rough waters, unexpectedly, and it was a challenge for all of us to not actually vomit. Steph had a unique technique of standing as if surfing and holding onto the rail and keeping her eyes focused on one spot. Her legs were exhausted after hours of doing so, but it worked for her. We were all very much relieved to reach ground in Dubrovnik! That afternoon we walked the perimeter walls of the amazing medieval Old Town and enjoyed the stunning views and took lots of pictures. There are two bars on top and we enjoyed one of them and somehow got into random discussion of what each of our weird traits or talents were. A good getting to know you topic. Laughter and fun had by all in a beautiful setting!



The next day was a free day and everyone got a three-day Dubrovnik pass which got them into museums and discounts on ferries and certain restaurants in addition to the one time admission onto the perimeter walls of the city. I went to Lokrum, an island only 15 minutes by ferry from Dubrovnik that you can explore in as little as two hours with a few swimming spots. One of the couples in our group was asking about nude beaches and read that there was one on Lokrum, which I didn't remember from six years ago. I looked it up and sure enough, not only did the article verify that, but it also stated that it was the best nude beach in Croatia and even possibly Europe! Our group was determined to find this beach out of curiosity of what made it so appealing over other nude beaches. We searched the whole island and nothing came close to a nude beach. What we did find amusing, and I do remember this from last time, was the numerous wild peacocks running around. Almost minutes after our ferry ride, a beautiful male, full feathers out, was strutting his stuff proudly trying to attract the ladies. It was a sight to see and that alone was worth the trip to the island.



After our free day, I had planned a very special dinner experience at a nearby farm/local residence in a small town just fifteen minutes outside of Dubrovnik called Osojnik. Our host was a couple who grew a garden of vegetables, had various animals such as chickens, goats, pigs, and a donkey (who was just a pet, not a food source). It was in a very old stone built home that had been there for generations and had much interesting history and was kept and sustained in the family over generations. We were greeted with a drink similar to grapa, fresh mint and lime water and homemade sweet snacks. We then got put to work and were each assigned a job to pick our ingredients from the garden for our meal. We prepared the vegetables together and then made some fresh bread and had a competition between our group which was broken into two of which bread came out the best. One group designed theirs into a braided challah like presentation, and the other (which was my group) decided (probably more me) to make a phallic symbol! LOL. After it was baked, you could not really guess what it was supposed to be, but the other group's held it's shape well. It was a lot of fun. We also made cookies with fresh dough and that had some braiding technique which was a challenge, but we all learned a lot! The four course meal in such a beautiful and interesting setting was delicious, bonding, and memorable. We all enjoyed our cooking class and meal, not to mention getting to feed ChiChi, the donkey, some carrots.





The next day was our last day together, and three of us were leaving later that day. We drove to Ston, about an hour and ten minutes outside of Dubrovnik, which is known for its mussels and oysters and it's long stone wall with a path you can walk on that connects Mali (small) Ston with Ston. We ate lunch in Mali Ston and then Steph and Robbie (the most adventuresome of our group) climbed the wall and met us on the other side. It took them about 40 minutes to walk across and they were greeted with by us as we all enjoyed some gelato.



After Ston, we stopped at a winery in a town called Boljenivici. It was a family run winery of over a hundred years and started in their garage, expanded underground in a cave, and then they added a new building above ground which had a much more modern feel to it with huge oak barrels.



Lastly, we made one more stop to a village on the Adriatic sea which I did not know about before very close to the Dubrovnik airport called Cavtat. It sits on a harbor with a beach area as well and lots of great shopping and restaurants. Now that I know about this town so conveniently located to the airport, I would opt to stay there as a home base as opposed to staying within the walls of Dubrovnik, only because it is the most crowded out of all the old towns we stayed and the parking is much easier in Cavtat. I am thankful to have learned about this town for future trips. We dropped off Saurabh, Nichole, and Jared at the airport and went back to Dubrovnik, where we all did our own thing that evening. Steph and Robbie had a romantic dinner on a rooftop, which they thoroughly enjoyed. Jeff and I had a nice dinner at a Bosnian restaurant. And, Michelle and April settled for some delicious gelato as they were not very hungry after our big lunch earlier that day. It was a nice ending to our eight days together.

We had an early morning airport drop off and vehicle switch at the airport from the van to a regular four door hatchback for us to continue on to **MONTENEGRO**. Driving across the border did not represent what we were about to encounter, let me just prephrase with that. When we arrived at the border control, we saw a number of police cars on the opposite side we were on entering Croatia. There was one car being searched inside and out and the five passengers were all being handcuffed and searched. It looked like the men were being taken into custody and the each female, on two different occasions, tried to make a run for it! We witnessed two police chases on foot!

They obviously knew they were not going to get very far, but still made an effort. One girl had a smirk on her face, as did the policeman. Quite entertaining. Once we got past that, it was short ride to the first city, Herceg Novi. It was little hairy trying to navigate with the many one way roads and dead ends and we did get stuck a few times trying to get to beach area to find a place for lunch. I was driving at this point. I quickly forfeited willingly by driving privilege to Jeff as he had been our driver the last week in Croatia and knew all the nuances such as the speed limit changing rapidly from one road section to the next. Once we arrived at Herceg Novi and figured out where to park, we meandered down some steps and found our way to the waterfront where there were restaurants, beaches where you could rent lounge chairs and umbrellas, and an old castle and some ruins to explore. After spending a week in Croatia, where there literally is no ugly place that I have come across in all the places we visited, I noticed this city to not be as clean as the ones in Croatia.

I saw more garbage and graffiti in certain areas, but overall it was beautiful place. Still, as in most places we visit in Europe, very little homelessness, which I love.



After exploring the area for a few hours and then continued on the Kotor bay area. After leaving Herceg Novi, it seemed to get increasingly beautiful and I took the wheel again once out of the city and it was a very pleasant drive as we passed by small little villages along the coast. About a half hour later, we arrived at our next home and it was a pleasant surprise! We were located right on the waterfront in a non-touristy area, filled with locals sunbathing on these concrete platforms, having little picnics and family gatherings. People were swimming in the bay which was crystal clear and calm. Others were bike riding along the path along the water. There were a few restaurants overlooking the bay just steps away from our apartment, but no crowds of people whatsoever! A big change from Dubrovnik. It was very peaceful and serene and quiet. Once we checked into our hotel, we were also pleasantly surprised by our decent sized balcony overlooking the entire Kotor Bay and could see all the pockets of villages along the water, which was so beautiful at night when they were all lit up.





We ventured out after unpacking a bit and took a stroll along the water to the old town in Kotor. It was about a 25 minute walk from where we were staying but it was filled with interesting sites and restaurants and people relaxing by the water. I just loved the vibe! We made it to the old town which was impressive. It was filled with shops and restaurants but, again, not nearly as crowded as Dubrovnik's old town. It had a mountain behind it with some ruins and a castle the middle of the mountain surrounded by greenery all by itself, which as beautifully lit at night. We ate in a restaurant in the old town called Cesar. It had steaks and a great wine selection. Soon after we finished our meal it started to downpour unexpectedly and everyone sitting outside on the terrace, as we were, scrambled to get dry inside the restaurant. Although we had already settled our bill and were tired, we sat it out and ordered a drink in the restaurant until the rain subsided. It never really stopped completely, so we got a taxi just outside the gate of the old town and returned to our safe haven for the night.



The next morning we ventured out to get some breakfast before our 9:00am cruise to a few key spots in the Kotor Bay and could not find a breakfast place that opened before 8:30am on a Friday morning! We ended up going to a bakery and got some delicious items to hold us over. The three hour boat excursion was so well done! We got picked up a few minutes from our apartment and the speedboat had about 25 people on it. The captain was an amazing driver and played my kind of fun 80's dance music and lined it up to what we were seeing and was humorous and knowledgeable. Our first stop was "Our Lady of the Rocks", which was church on its own tiny island. Our next stop, although we did not get off the boat, was the underground tunnels that were used to hide Yugoslavian ships (Radovici area) during the war. The next stop was more of a thrill ride, as our captain said, it was the open sea and that day it was choppy weather. We made it to our next site, which was Mamula, which used to be a prison on its own island and has now been turned into a seven (yes I said seven) star resort! Although we did not get to tour it that day, maybe it will be an experience we have to experience in this lifetime, especially because we do plan to be back in Montenegro maybe sooner than you think. More on that later. Last but not least, we headed toward the blue cave and it was beautiful but not safe, that day, to go inside, as the waves were big and the cave ceiling was not high so you could imagine what would have happened if we dared to enter! We did get great pictures just outside the cave opening and we could still see inside. On a different day, weather permitting, we would have been able to swim inside the cave.



After our sea excursion, we drove to Porto Montenegro in Tivat. This is where all the wealthy Yacht owners live. It was a nice sunny day and we sat at a restaurant where we could view our dream boat docked before our eyes!



That afternoon we relaxed our peaceful neighborhood by the water and I reveled in what an amazing place we were so lucky to be visiting as my feet swished back and forth in the water as I laid in the sand. After some rest, we rode bikes as the locals do and went to a nearby restaurant called Moments, where they had a four-piece band playing dance music! The service was superb, the food was excellent, and it had a real local vibe which we love! They were promoting the restaurant and had a videographer/photographer that was taking pictures and video of us several times so we will be checking their website for our cameo appearance! After dinner we rode in the opposite direction and found an awesome hotel with a beautiful terrace overlooking the water where we had a nightcap before heading back to our apartment.



The next morning we had quite an experience riding the cable car up mountain Lovcen to one of the highest points of Montenegro (5,000 feet!). We had a beautiful lunch at the restaurant and then rode the toboggan ride along the edges of the cliffs! Quite thrilling and quite beautiful! I now want to chase toboggan rides that are built on mountains and in nature (as opposed to amusement parks) all over the world! That and caves! Maybe there is somewhere in the world that has a little of both in one!??

After that experience we drove to Budva where there are numerous beaches attached to restaurants with lounge chairs and umbrellas one after the other. Our favorite one was Coco Beach where we settled for our three hour relaxation time. We were not there during high season but if we were just two weeks later, it would have been a huge party scene and I can see why. Very fun and lively place with an walled in old town at the end. Budva has a lot to offer but the city limits can be chaotic and crowded to drive around in.



We spent our last dinner at a local restaurant in our Dobroto neighborhood called Dubrotski Dvori and it was a lovely end to our wonderful two and a half week trip. We fell in love with Montenegro so much that we actually are strongly considering purchasing a second home there!! The reasons are that the cost of living is noticeably less than other European countries, and certainly less than San Diego. We liked the local vibe without the crowds of tourists in a hidden gem that has so much to offer with its old towns, miles of coast, usable beaches with water activities as well as restaurants and night life, mountain terrain with hiking, skiing, and gorgeous views all around. It is easy to get from one place to another within minutes to an hour commute, and getting to nearby European countries quickly and easily either by driving (could be in Dubrovnik, Croatia in an hour or so for example), ferry to Croatian or Greek islands, or a short flight to anywhere in Europe.

I hope you enjoyed reading the recap of our wonderful latest trip and that it inspires you explore the places you have yet to see and experience.

Bon Voyage,

Stacy