Bay Watch of the Balkans

For perfect weather, pristine waters and a thick slice of ancient history and culture, Ranald Macdonald heads to Montenegro and checks into the Chedi Luštica Bay.

Thirty years ago I could never have imagined that one day I would have four wonderful grown-up children and be in the fortunate position of considering how to celebrate my 50th wedding anniversary. This was clearly an excuse for a week of stimulating indulgence, but where?

I now find myself comfortably placed in the upper echelons of the middle aged and with reasonable possession of my faculties, although my decision-making abilities are very much diminished by choice, which I consider the greatest curse of the 21st century. The appropriate destination for a week’s commemoration of half a lifetime together is a tantalising and delicious dilemma. But after far longer than one would have spent with a travel agent in the golden pre-internet age of my youth, and having circumnavigated the world several times with bleary-aching, Google eyes, I was not one inch closer to the desired elusive destination.

For a week, we did not want to fly too far, but we did want a unique experience, some sun, a little pampering, excellent food, inspiring landscape, ideally the sea, and hopefully to be immersed in an interesting, ancient and hopefully relatively unknown culture. Ticking a handful of these boxes were Southern Spain and Italy, Greece, Turkey, and the like, but nothing really grabbed me.

It was while watching my favourite James Bond film for the umpteenth time that I had my fabulous Eureka! moment. Bond’s captivating winner-takes-all $100 million poker game in Casino Royale is glamorously set in Montenegro—a place I realised I knew virtually nothing about. Where was it, I wondered? And what did it have to offer beyond some lush vegetation around a grand hotel casino?

I did some research, which was encouraging. We’ve never been anywhere near there: tick. The temperature in late October is usually in the mid-20s and perfect for us: tick. I discovered it is a remarkably unspoilt, tiny and beautiful mountainous country sporting an amazing coastline: tick. The food and wine, I read, are good and honest with some of the best seafood in Europe: bigger tick. Culturally Montenegro punches extraordinarily high with an enthralling history that includes a soupçon of virtually everything that’s ever happened in the world right up to the late 20th century. If historical sites and architecture are your thing there’s plenty to go around: massive tick.

So where to stay? We clearly wanted to be on the coast in southern Montenegro, so that narrowed it down a bit, and when I saw that the renowned luxury hotel group Chedi had recently opened in Luštica Bay, I knew I needed look no further. Here, beyond all the other attractions of Montenegro, was undoubtedly the perfect pampering base for a week of exploration: biggest tick yet.

So I investigated further, Montenegro, despite being one of the smallest...
Almost every civilisation has left its mark here, making it a crossroads of culture and history.
Montenegro is called the ‘land of six continents’ because of its extraordinary diversity.

Several days were spent exploring the local villages, churches, castles and Roman ruins, usually ending up in a charming unpretentious hostelry where remarkably good traditional food and plentiful wine for two cost less than a few gin and tonics at Claridges. Pricewise this was a welcome breeze of nostalgia, similar to Southern Europe in the good old days before the euro. For the avoidance of doubt, Montenegro is not party to the euro, although it is the accepted currency. It must also be mentioned that there are extremely fine and extravagant restaurants that are definitely worth visiting. Our favourite was Ribarsko Selo on the Lustica Peninsula, to which you can arrive by land or sea. All ingredients are either home-grown or delivered by local fisherman at noon. These ingredients are presented as the menu and cooked according to your preference. We had a formidable and scary-looking Scorpion fish, which was both sensationally delicious and expensive, but worth every penny. As compensation, guests also have access to their choice of four private beaches.

The other must-do excursion was a day-trip to the mountains. Our expedition took us up steeply winding, virtually vertical hairpin roads, which produced increasingly dramatic views until, at 1,675 metres, we could see almost all of Montenegro from the summit of Lovcen. Here the legendary philosopher poet Prince-Bishop Petar Petrovic Njegos of Montenegro (1813-1851) is buried in an astounding marble mausoleum dug deep into the cold mountain. We descended the other side of Mount Lovcen through completely different scenery, at times reminiscent of the West Highlands of Scotland, to the picturesque tiny city of Cetinje, the old 15th-century capital of Montenegro. Here we visited the charming Royal Palace of the last Montenegrin King, Nikola I of the Petrovic dynasty. It was all enchanting, and having set off at 10am from Lustica Bay and after a lunch of unctuous slow-roasted mountain lamb in a family-run farm house restaurant, we were back for cocktails at the Chedi for 6.30pm.

We cannot recommend Montenegro highly enough, and when you go you should stay at the Chedi Lustica Bay.

My only disillusionment was being told on my return that Casino Royale was not actually filmed in Montenegro. By then it really did not really matter, although I did wonder, why not?

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