

Getting Started

According to experts like us, travelling in the Western Balkans is dead easy. And that statement is almost entirely true! Visiting Slovenia and Croatia is no more difficult than going to Germany or Italy. Bosnia, Serbia and Montenegro, and Macedonia are less expensive; they feature lots of signs in Cyrillic alphabets, but are still easy to visit. Albania is more challenging: the capital Tirana is in the middle of a building boom, and many roads are either in dreadful shape or being rebuilt, though some of the main arteries have been finished. All around the region there are ATMs from which you can withdraw money from your account at home, and Internet cafés where you can check your email. Lots of new hotels and restaurants have opened in recent years, and there are many more on the way. If you are visiting in July and August it is useful to book accommodation ahead, particularly on Croatia's popular Dalmatian coast. The conflicts of the 1990s are well and truly over and the region is safe to visit, though it pays to check on current events in Kosovo before you venture there.

WHEN TO GO

The Western Balkans has a surprisingly consistent weather pattern for a region of its size. The high season for tourism runs from May until September. Croatia and Slovenia are the only countries where the sheer volume of visitors can be a hassle at the height of the season in July and August, though the main coastal resorts in Albania and Montenegro get fairly busy as well. The best time to visit is either side of the summer peak: May, June and September stand out, when it's not too hot, too crowded or overbooked anywhere. The ski season runs from late November until March.

Travelling out of season can result in some real bargains in accommodation, although many places where tourism is the main industry all but close down during the low season. Also, bear in mind that the mountains have very cold winters. Winter is quite cold everywhere except for the Adriatic coast.

See the Climate Charts (p388) for more information.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Appropriate luggage: a travel pack (combined backpack/shoulder bag) with zip-away straps; a big zip bag with a wide shoulder strap; or a suitcase with wheels (though these can be awkward on cobblestone streets)
- Sunscreen, which can be rather expensive here
- Light cotton clothes between June and September, plus a light jacket or sweater for the mountain regions
- A coat, thick socks and a rainproof jacket if travelling during winter
- A Swiss army knife (just don't put it in your hand luggage before boarding a plane) to slice up local cheeses and pop corks on wines bought at the supermarket
- An iPod, to block out the sometimes overwhelming Balkan turbofolk music
- Ladies, bring your most lurid eye shadow for dress-ups à la Belgrade's Silicon Valley (see p287)

COSTS & MONEY

There's a quite a wide variation in average travel expenses across the Western Balkans. The further north and west you go, the more expensive it is. Slovenia is the most expensive country, and Croatia isn't far behind. Prices are steadily rising in the most popular resorts and cities. Serbia and Montenegro and Bosnia and Hercegovina are moderately priced, especially outside Belgrade and Sarajevo, while Macedonia (with the exception of Skopje) and Albania are quite budget friendly – certainly comparable to Turkey. Even so, don't expect to live royally on a few dollars a day.

Trying to give daily budgets isn't easy. Backpackers staying in hostels and eating cheaply can expect to spend around €40 per day, but will spend more in cities such as Zagreb, Belgrade and Ljubljana. Those wanting to have a more comfortable trip (staying in midrange accommodation and eating at decent restaurants most of the time) will probably spend between €70 and €100. In the countryside you'll be able to get by on far less, but in big cities during the high season you'll need more, especially if you're visiting a lot of museums and sights.

As long as you have an ATM card, you need not worry about money in any decent-sized town. All major credit and debit cards are accepted by ATMs, including those on the Cirrus/Maestro platform. Travellers' cheques used to be a good backup, but are less so now. They may be the safest way to carry a lot of money, but they can often be an utter pain to change; bank staff are usually unfamiliar with them, so if there's a big business hotel with an in-house bank, try there. Having €100 in cash tucked away in a safe place is the best insurance – enough to land a cheapish hotel room, a meal and a ride to a working ATM the next day. Many currencies are difficult or impossible to exchange outside of the country in which they are used. It's best to change the local currency into euros or dollars before leaving.

READING UP

Books

The Fall of Yugoslavia by Misha Glenny is one of the more easy-to-read tomes on the ex-Yugoslav wars. Though not without critics, Glenny spells out the details with verve and clarity.

Explaining Yugoslavia by John Alcock does just that: this scholarly book pulls together historical, cultural and political analysis of the highest order to reach some surprising conclusions.

Ismail Kadare has written serious works as well as the light, funny *The File on H*, about two Irish academics who stumble into local politics. Highly recommended for anyone who fears Balkan literature may be boring.

Black Lamb & Grey Falcon by Rebecca West is a sprawling, poetic account of travels through Bosnia, Serbia, Kosovo, Croatia and Albania in the 1930s and 1940s. West shows her prejudices quite clearly, but she's an incredible reporter.

Through the Embers of Chaos by Dervla Murphy is widely available and gives terrific background information on the region. Murphy bicycles through the region and describes the 'decade of decay' beautifully, but her strident interjections can be quite irritating.

Historian Noel Malcolm takes on the near-impossible task of setting out disputed histories clearly in *Bosnia: A Short History* and *Kosovo: A Short History* – they're not light reads (warning: neither is particularly short) but they are authoritative.

WESTERN BALKANS WORLD HERITAGE LIST

This list of sites deemed 'world heritage' by Unesco includes some – but not all – of the most remarkable attractions of the region. In 2005 Bosnia and Hercegovina's Mostar and Albania's Gjirokastra joined the register of the world's most precious cultural and natural treasures. For more information see <http://whc.unesco.org>.

Albania

- Ancient ruins of Butrinti (p72)
- Museum-City of Gjirokastra (p73)

Bosnia & Hercegovina

- Old Bridge (Stari Most) area of Mostar (p111)

Croatia

- Dubrovnik's Old Town (p211)
- Plitvice Lakes National Park (p191)
- Poreč's Euphrasian Basilica (p163)
- Šibenik's Cathedral of St James
- Split's historic centre with Diocletian's Palace (p195)
- Trogir's Old Town (p200)

Macedonia

- Ohrid and its lake (p247)

Serbia & Montenegro

- Dečani Monastery (p307)
- Durmitor National Park (p320)
- Kotor and its gulf (p316)
- Stari Ras and Sopoćani Monastery (p301)
- Studenica Monastery (p302)

Slovenia

- Škocjan Caves (Rakov Škocjan, p362)

Websites

There's a vast amount of information on the Web about the Western Balkans, which is useful whether you're planning a full two-month tour from Maribor to Bitola or a weekend in Dubrovnik. The following are recommended:

Hostels.com (www.hostels.com/en/easterneurope.html) This site has a list of most hostels and budget accommodation in the region, as well as ratings and a lot of photos.

In Your Pocket (www.inyourpocket.com) This publishing firm gives information on Albania and Croatia and publishes frequently updated pocket guides to Zagreb, Zadar and Tirana.

Rail Europe (www.raileurope.com) Tonnes of information on routes, prices and timetables for the whole region, bar Albania, is available on this website.

Thorn Tree (<http://thornree.lonelyplanet.com>) Lonely Planet's travellers' bulletin board has a wealth of information on the region – the Eastern Europe and the Caucasus branch covers the Western Balkans. Post a query and online experts generally give a quick reply.

Virtual Tourist (www.virtualtourist.com) This covers virtually the entire world, including all of the Western Balkans, with reviews, forums, photos and tips from travellers and amateur experts. It's slightly difficult to navigate, but with patience and a healthy scepticism it yields a lot of information.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Western Balkan cities and towns come alive during festivals, and while you may need to book accommodation in advance it's a great time to visit. See each of the country chapters for details on local festivals. Following is a selection of our favourites:

Ljubljana Summer Festival (early July–late August) This annual celebration of music, opera, street theatre and dance is now in its fifth decade. It's held at venues around Slovenia's capital, but is centred on the open-air Kržanke theatre (p344).

Exit Festival (July) The biggest rock concert in the Serbian summer draws top international rock and techno performers to Novi Sad (p293).

Galičnik Wedding Festival (mid-July) Over the second weekend in July this rustic village in Mavrovo National Park, Macedonia hosts a very popular festival of traditional, wildly romantic weddings. Tissues a must (p246).

Baščaršijske Noći (Baščaršija Nights; July) This festival in the heart of Sarajevo encompasses everything from dance to pop music, traditional folk music and theatre (p103).

International Carnival of Rijeka (January or February) Croatia's wildest carnival falls before the Lenten fast, with concerts, parties, balls and grotesque parades (p181).

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

Litter in national parks, nature reserves and picnic spots can be quite severe, especially in the southern parts of the Western Balkans. Do remember to pack up your litter, and let's hope it starts a trend. Minimise the waste you must carry out by taking minimal packaging and no more food than you need. Don't use detergents or toothpaste (even if they are biodegradable) in or near natural water sources. When camping in the wild (checking first to see that it's allowed), bury human waste in holes at least 15cm deep and at least 100m from any nearby water.

When visiting mosques and *tekkes* (shrines or monasteries), wear conservative clothes which cover arms and legs, and take off your shoes

and socks before you enter. Women should cover their hair. Don't walk around in front of people if they are praying. When visiting Orthodox churches and monasteries, it is customary to buy a few candles and light them; it's an ancient tradition and it generates a bit of income for the custodians.

If you go diving on the Adriatic coast, try to protect the environment you're visiting by not taking souvenirs, not standing on or touching corals (contact can kill them) and following the instructions of your diving guide.

CONDUCT IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

There's nothing really unusual about the customs of the region that might cause you to stumble into a major faux pas, but here are a few tips to make the locals like you even more.

The Balkan and/or Mediterranean idea of time is something that superefficient global professionals might chafe against. If you're here for work, expect to mix business with pleasure. Cafés are not places for a quick caffeine refill, but somewhere to laze for an hour or three. Conversations about every aspect of your family and your marital status are a sign of friendly interest, not nosiness. If you go into a shop, a cheerful hello in the local lingo is appreciated, rather than just making a beeline for the display racks.

Spouting forth with your theory on the fall of communism and the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s probably won't win you many friends. You may have all the facts at your fingertips, but in many cases the reaction to an opinionated dissertation will be a politely strained silence or a sharpish retort along the lines of 'You weren't here, you can't possibly know'. Asking people about their experiences in the conflicts will inevitably bring up some interesting anecdotes but perhaps also some horrendous memories.

Alcohol tends to flow fairly freely in the Christian parts of the region, less so in Muslim areas (where the habit of drinking endless cups of coffee risks caffeine overload). Being high-spirited is fine, being totally rotten isn't, especially for women. If people start spouting nationalist rhetoric after a few shots of firewater, it's your turn to be diplomatically polite.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

THE ESSENTIAL TOUR

Two Weeks

Start in Slovenia with a cheap flight into **Ljubljana** (p339). Explore this charming capital before heading into the **Julian Alps** (p350) and the divine scenery around **Lake Bled** (p351). Whether you like adventure sports or quiet strolls, Slovenia's mountains have much to offer. Head south to dip your toes into Croatia's dramatic **Dalmatian coast** (p187). Take a ferry across to the jet-setters' island of choice, **Hvar** (p203), before heading to the architectural splendours of **Dubrovnik** (p209). You might want to detour into Bosnia to visit the cultural treasures of **Mostar** (p110), Bosnia's first World Heritage-listed city, where the Neretva River has been hurdled by the famous Old Bridge. From Dubrovnik it's a short hop south to Montenegro's dramatic **Bay of Kotor** (p316), where you can stay in the walled port towns of **Herceg Novi** (p319) or **Kotor** (p316). Next is a classic Balkan train journey over the Dinaric Alps into the rolling hills of Serbia and the party capital of the Balkans, **Belgrade** (p274), with riverboat party palaces, restaurants and nightclubs, plus a fine array of museums and galleries. For a taste of Serbia's Orthodox Christian heritage, take a detour to the vineyards and monasteries of **Fruška Gora** (p294). A train ride through the fields of Slavonia brings you to **Zagreb** (p148), great for strolls through plazas, parks and elegant streets.

This is a great trip for any first-time visitor to the Western Balkans, taking in the highlights of four countries. It begins in Slovenia, heads along the coast of Croatia with a detour into Bosnia, then into Montenegro. Here you turn north to the region's biggest city, Belgrade, and stop at Zagreb on the way back to Slovenia.



WORLD HERITAGE SIGHTS (PLUS EXTRAS)

One Month

Start in Corfu and catch a ferry across to Saranda in Albania to visit the ruins of **Butrinti** (p72), then head on to the Ottoman-era hill town of **Gjirokastra** (p73). Culture and history buffs will also enjoy **Berati** (p64), arguably Albania's finest Ottoman town, and the mountain town of **Kruja** (p63), near Tirana. Take a bus into Macedonia to explore the churches of **Ohrid** (p247), and maybe the Baba Arabati *tekke* (shrine) at **Tetovo** (p243). From Ohrid head north into Kosovo via Skopje. The **Dečani Monastery** (p307) in Kosovo is a Serbian cultural treasure. From here it's just a short trip to Novi Pazar and the Serbian Orthodox monastery of **Studenica** (p302). From Novi Pazar travel to Montenegro and the spectacular **Durmitor National Park** (p320), and it's just a short hop down to pretty **Kotor** (p316) on the gulf of the same name. Montenegro's old capital at **Cetinje** (p310) is also worth a visit. Heading up the Adriatic coast into Croatia, **Dubrovnik's Old Town** (p211) is probably the most famous World Heritage site in the region. Dubrovnik is also a jumping-off point for the island of **Hvar** (p203). The centre of Hvar town is quite incredible. From Dubrovnik take a detour to **Mostar** (p110) in Bosnia, then head up the Dalmatian coast to **Split** (p192), with its historic centre and the ruins of Diocletian's Palace. The old town of **Trogir** (p200) is very close to Split. Further north and a little inland there's the rugged **Plitvice Lakes National Park** (p191). Then head to the Istria region and the enormous Euphrasian Basilica at **Poreč** (p161). From Poreč it's not far to Slovenia's limestone **Škocjan Caves** (p363) and **Lake Bled** (p351).



This route has a peculiar start – from package tour heaven in Corfu straight into Albania – and takes in Orthodox monasteries, Catholic churches, lake towns, walled port cities, old Ottoman-era towns plus a couple of the region's best national parks and natural attractions.

ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

HERITAGE & TRADITIONS

Start in Thessaloniki and take a train to **Skopje** (p236), the Macedonian capital. Explore the Ottoman bazaar, the city's churches and monasteries, and take a trip to **Suto Orizari** (p238), Europe's biggest Roma settlement. Swing south on a detour to **Ohrid** (p247), the ancient Macedonian cultural centre. Head north to **Prishtina** (p304) in Kosovo, capital of this largely Albanian-populated UN protectorate. The **Dečani Monastery** (p307) near Peja is one of the treasures of the Serbian Orthodox Church. In the Muslim corner of Serbia near Novi Pazar, is the grand monastery of **Studenica** (p302). Head for Montenegro, one part of the Balkans where people of different faiths have always seemed to get along. **Kotor** (p316) is a divine port town, and **Ulcinj** (p314), near the Albanian border, is a well-integrated Christian-Muslim community. Head up to **Dubrovnik** (p209), Croatia's Adriatic jewel, then inland to Hercegovina's peculiar pilgrimage town of **Medugorje** (p119) and the reviving town of **Mostar** (p110). **Sarajevo** (p95), the heart of the Balkan conundrum, is close by with churches, mosques and synagogues. Move on to **Banja Luka** (p125), the capital of Bosnia's Republika Srpska region. Head north to Croatia's museum-rich capital, **Zagreb** (p148). A side trip to **Samobor** (p158) offers a taste of Croatian village life. The coastal towns of Istria are becoming well known but inland gems like **Motovun** (p178) and **Pazin** (p177) move at a slower pace. Heading into Slovenia, **Piran** (p366) is as charming a port as you'll find; from the graceful capital, **Ljubljana** (p339), it's easy to take trips into the **Julian Alps** (p350) and old craft centres like **Kropa** (p355).

This trip emphasises the cultural and historic treasures of the Western Balkans – a taste of each of the region's main cultures, faiths and traditions. There's also a lot of spectacular scenery along the way, plus many authentic B&Bs to get a further insight into the Austro-Hungarian-Orthodox-Ottoman influences that underpin the region's sensibilities.



THE WILD SIDE

Slovenia's **Triglav National Park** (p357) covers almost all of the **Julian Alps** (p350) and is the perfect starting point for an adventure into the natural wonders of the Western Balkans. Slovenia's Karst region has some rare sights, including the gorge of **Rakov Škočjan** (p362), the **Križna Cave** (p363) and the **Škočjan Caves** (p363). Moving south into Croatia, Pula is the stepping-off point to **Brijuni National Park** (p177). The **Plitvice Lakes National Park** (p191) near Zadar is a must, but take time to venture into the **Kornati Islands** (p189). **Makarska** (p200), on the Adriatic, is a great base for hiking up Mt Biokovo. Further south, check out the national park on **Mljet Island** (p208). Most of Bosnia's national parks are still off limits because of land mines, so head on to Montenegro's **Bay of Kotor** (p316) and the **Lake Skadar National Park** (p309). Montenegro's best nature reserve is **Durmitor National Park** (p320), which has a ski resort and is dotted with lakes. Another highlight there is rafting through the immense **Tara Canyon** (p320). Serbia's rugged **Kopaonik National Park** (p299) can be reached from the southern city of Novi Pazar, and is also Serbia's biggest ski resort. Kosovo's nature reserves and parks are in a similar state to Bosnia's – it would be unwise to explore them for now. Most of Albania's national parks are inaccessible, so aim for Macedonia's **Lake Matka** (p243) near Skopje, which has some fantastic hiking. Macedonia's two best national parks are **Mavrovo National Park** (p245) in the west, with skiing, miles of forest and the rocky slopes of Mt Korab, and **Pelister National Park** (p252) in the southwest, with old villages, treks to highland lakes and rare fauna.

One Month

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This tour emphasises the natural wonders of the Western Balkans, from Alpine hikes to white-water rafting to skiing. Kick off in Slovenia and make your way down through the heart of the region all the way to Macedonia, enjoying as many thrills and spills as you can handle (don't forget the travel insurance).

TAILORED TRIPS

THE 'ARE WE THERE YET?' TOUR WITH KIDS

Any of the itineraries listed in this section would be suitable for children, just at a slower pace. An alternative strategy might be to pick a central base and do short trips from there. These suggestions centre on seaside holidays. There are quite a few direct flights into Croatian coastal cities like Split, Zadar and Dubrovnik, and there are lots of apartment rentals along the Dalmatian coast. The island of **Mljet** (p208) is a tranquil retreat ideal for a family holiday, and other islands such as **Korčula** (p205), **Krk** (p183) and **Rab** (p184) are suitable as well. An expedition to the **Plitvice Lakes National Park** (p191) is an easy day trip from underrated **Zadar** (p187).

Montenegro's coast packs a lot of variety into a small area. **Kotor** (p316) and **Herceg Novi** (p319) grace the spectacular Bay of Kotor, while **Budva** (p311) and **Ulcinj** (p314), further south, have decent beaches. It's easy to make excursions up to **Cetinje** (p310) and **Durmitor National Park** (p320).

Albania is a child-friendly country but the broken pavements and rustic roads might be too much of a strain. Still, if the kids don't mind a bit of adventure then the Ionian Coast port of **Saranda** (p71) might be fun – it's just a short ferry ride from Corfu.



THE ADRIATIC

This tour is for people who do like to be beside the seaside, and highlights some of the lesser-known beaches and resorts. Start off in Corfu and catch a ferry across to Saranda in Albania. The little resort of **Ksamili** (p73), south of Saranda, has fine beaches and views over to Corfu. Heading north along the Ionian Coast there is a fabulous beach at **Dhërmiu** (p70), though facilities are much simpler than in Croatia or Montenegro. Crossing into Montenegro aim for **Ulcinj** (p314) and **Budva** (p311).

Croatia's seaside resorts are booming but there are still plenty of lesser-known spots. **Cavtat** (p215) is a good alternative to Dubrovnik. **Mljet Island** (p208) and **Korčula Island** (p205) are more laid-back than Hvar. **Brela** (p202), near Makarska, has 6km of pebbly beach. Further north, underrated **Zadar** (p187) is a base to visit the gorgeous Kornati Islands, **Rab Island** (p184) has dozens of tiny coves and beaches, and for a touch of class there's **Opatija** (p182), near Rijeka. On the Istrian Peninsula there are plenty of camping grounds around **Pula** (p166). Slovenia's seaside resorts are normally quite busy, but **Izola** (p366), near Piran, is quieter than most.



The Authors



RICHARD PLUNKETT

Coordinating Author, Albania, Macedonia

Richard grew up on a vineyard in southern Australia, and has a peculiar fascination for wines made from obscure varieties. Albanian Kallmet and Macedonian Vranec more than satisfied his curiosity. Richard has written for Lonely Planet on a gaggle of postcommunist countries, including Uzbekistan, Armenia and Turkmenistan, and enjoys visiting cities with vast plazas suitable for May Day tank parades. He also writes freelance articles and stories and is battling away at a degree in international relations.

Life on the Road

Without sounding too much like an obscure-destination travel snob, I love going places that I'd never dreamed I'd go to. Travelling to a sturdy old monastery topped with gleaming domes, or to a beach with rocky islets within swimming distance, are the kind of trips that make me grin in a happy, stupid kind of way. The easiest thing about travelling in this region is that no matter how unpronounceable the destination (Mijet? Jajce? Krk??) it isn't hard to find a comfy, cosy bed that won't trigger hysteria when the credit-card statement comes. After a night of weird local drinks at a lunatic bar where Shakira battles Pink Floyd on the playlist, a warm room with a frilly duvet and a hot shower is sweet comfort.



VESNA MARIC

Bosnia & Hercegovina, Serbia & Montenegro

Vesna was born in Mostar, Bosnia and Hercegovina and moved to Britain at the age of 16. Her love for all things Balkan has never subsided, although it has sometimes manifested itself as frustration. Returning to Bosnia and Hercegovina and Serbia and Montenegro as a travel writer for this book deepened her love for (and some frustration towards) the region. Vesna has written magazine articles, produced radio features and worked on short films.

LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

Why is our travel information the best in the world? It's simple: our authors are independent, dedicated travellers. They don't research using just the Internet or phone, and they don't take freebies in exchange for positive coverage. They travel widely, to all the popular spots and off the beaten track. They personally visit thousands of hotels, restaurants, cafés, bars, galleries, palaces, museums and more – and they take pride in getting all the details right, and telling it how it is. For more, see the authors section on www.lonelyplanet.com.



JEANNE OLIVER

Croatia, Slovenia

Jeanne has been visiting and writing about Croatia and Slovenia since 1996, shortly after the new countries were 'born'. Travelling these countries by bus, boat, train and car, she's swum in the Adriatic, hiked on trails and stuffed her backpack full of local cheese, homemade brandy and a handful of recipes to keep her going until the next trip. She's looking forward to eventually visiting every one of Croatia's islands, especially now that she's finally figured out how to decipher the Jadrolinija schedule.