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MONTENEGRO MAGIC

A fascinating encounter with Kotor and Perast

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21 AUG 2017: Climbing 1350 steps to the top of a 1200 meter mountain at Noon, with temperatures hovering around 33 degree Celsius may not be everyone's idea of a fun time, but on our day of arrival in Kotor, Montenegro it seemed like the right thing to do.



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From the old moat outside the ancient city walls, past the giant, orange-wire statue of Gulliver, casually leaning against one of the guard towers in readiness for the upcoming Children's Festival, and on to the Sea Gate, the entrance to the city built in 1555 when Kotor was under Venetian Rule, we kept looking up at the St. John Fortress and wondering where the entrance to the cable car was located!

The woman at the Tourist Information kiosk set us straight with instructions to enter the city, walk through an alleyway to an old church, and then continue walking...up!

Only six days earlier, we had climbed up to the Spanjola Fortress in Hvar, Croatia, so we felt we had sufficient training, but this climb was much steeper with limited shade along the way. Also, with people climbing up and down the same trail, there was only one narrow set of sometimes broken stone steps, so someone always had to step aside to allow others to pass and I ended up being that someone!



But we persevered and the views from the top were spectacular: the medieval layout of the city far below, the Thomson Dream cruise ship in the harbour (460 cruises ships visited Kotor in 2016) and the not-too-distant views of the Dinaric Alps –part of the “black mountains” that account for the name “Montenegro”. The 15th century fortress itself, which was noted in Kotor’s UNESCO World Heritage Site designation, is a treasure for photographers, historians, architects, adventurers and dreamers.

Earlier that morning we’d boarded the 7:00 am coach in Dubrovnik, crossed the border and then wound our way around the Bays of Morinj and Risan and on to Boka Bay (the Bay of Kotor), listed as one of the most beautiful Bays in the World. We arrived at 10:30 am and immediately went into ‘explore’ mode.

Just inside the city walls in the Square of Arms, (Guns and ammunition were stored here in the 17th century), the leaning Clock Tower recalled the earthquake of 1667. Workers decided it was easier to complete the tower with a slight tilt, rather than tear it down and start from scratch.



Many of the buildings and palaces in the old town were built between the 15th and 18th centuries in Venetian Baroque style with a few exceptions, such as St. Tryphon Cathedral and St. Lucas Church, both of which trace their origins to the 12th century. And walking through the city's narrow, shaded, curving, Mediterranean alleyways revealed beautiful archways and detailed stone carvings on the buildings.

In the public squares, cafes and restaurants were doing a brisk business. And no wonder, as many restaurateurs did their shopping at the busy morning market just outside the city walls. There we found displays of fresh olives (17 varieties!), bottles of light, flavourful olive oil, jars of pistachio nuts and walnuts packed in sweet honey, local goat, sheep and cow cheeses, delicious home-made prosciutto, fat, red tomatoes, and fragrant porcini mushrooms, ready to complement the traditional Italian cuisine of the area.

In fact, on our first day, we needed to re-hydrate after the climb to the Fortress, so we grabbed a table at Pizzeria Sara and quaffed a few ice-cold mugs of Nikšičko (nick-sheesh-koh) beer. But I guess the combination of the Italianate buildings surrounding us, and the pizza fumes finally got to us, so we ordered a four-cheese pizza with prosciutto and thick, juicy, anchovies. Rarely has pizza tasted so good!

The next day, the Tourism Organisation of Kotor arranged for a guide, Gojko Samardžić, to give us an orientation tour of the area. We drove along Boka Bay to the small town of Perast, an exclusive vacation/residential enclave characterized by Baroque Palaces bordering the Bay, and bright pink Oleander nestled around the ancient churches and bell tower. But the islands are the major attraction.

Tourists take photos but don't actually visit St. George, a small island on which a 12th century Benedictine Monastery rests along with a grove of Cyprus trees and a cemetery.

In contrast, tourist boats stop at Our Lady of the Rocks on a regular basis. This artificial island consists of rocks and sunken ships. The story goes that on July 22, 1452 a fisherman and his brother, who had an injured leg, saw an image of the Madonna on a reef under the water. The next day the brother's leg was cured, but the image had disappeared. To thank the Madonna, the brothers vowed to build a church near the spot. A tradition began whereby fishermen would throw rocks in the water or scuttle unseaworthy boats to thank the Madonna for their safe return from the sea, and to build-up the reef. The first Church was constructed on the reef—now an island—in 1484. In an ongoing festive event, every July 22 the men of Perast tie their rock-filled boats together in a circle around the island, and dump rocks into the water to preserve the site.



The blue-domed church that people visit today is an artistic trove, containing paintings of Tripo Kokolja, a 17th century Baroque artist from Perast, plus a large collection of Votive Plates donated by fishermen praying for safety on the seas. In the Church museum, the tapestry by Jacinta Kunić-Mijović is considered to be a treasure. She began an embroidery of the Madonna and Child while waiting for her husband to return from the sea. She used her own brown hair to make the angels, but by the time the piece was completed 25 years later, the hair used was grey, and the artist was nearly blind from the very detailed (700 points/cm) work. Her husband never returned.

Back in Kotor the fishermen's fruits of labour attracts foodies from all over Europe and beyond. At Konobo Trpeza, a cool, quiet restaurant away from the madding crowds, the 'appetizer' was a large platter of Black Risotto (made with squid ink),

Seafood Risotto with mussels and clams, tender fried Calamari, chunky Octopus Salad, grilled shrimp, savoury potatoes and Swiss chard. And just when we thought the meal was over, Slobodan, our server, presented a whole pan-roasted Turbot, a popular European flatfish, on a bed of potatoes, red peppers, eggplant and olives. Our enjoyment of the meal could only be expressed in superlatives.

While we saw only a small part of Montenegro, we discovered that the country is ripe with opportunities for special interests including olive oil, wine and beer tours, culinary activities, white water rafting, yachting, hiking, mountain biking, canyoneering, National Parks, birdwatching, beaches, scuba diving, soccer matches, as well as luxury and super-luxury experiences.



Montenegro is a creative add-on to a client's trip to Croatia, or a great stand-alone destination. For me it was a magical experience because of the history, culture, scenery, and food, along with the friendly conversations I had with just about everyone.

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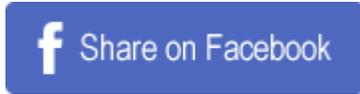
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The Statue of Gulliver leans against the old city walls of Kotor, with the mountains behind





Steve Gillick

A tireless promoter of "infectious enthusiasm about travel", Steve delivers his wisdom once a month in his column *The Travel Coach*.

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