

MONTENEGRO 2025

A LAND OF CONTRASTS



CHARLES GANNON © 2025



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This account is about a Travel Department tour in Montenegro that started on 3 April 2025 and finished on 10 April 2025.

Cover photographs: Budva Old Town (top) and a view from the mountains down to the Adriatic Sea and Kotor Bay (bottom).

The official language of Montenegro is Montenegrin, a Serbo-Croat language, though Serbian is the most spoken language in the country. The letter *c* is pronounced *ts*, as in ‘pets’; *č* is pronounced *ch* as in ‘church’, and *ć* is like a weaker form of *ch*. *Š*, *š* is pronounced *sh*, and *Đ*, *đ* is pronounced like the *j* in ‘jam’. A neutral vowel, similar to the *i* in ‘bin’, is often pronounced between consonants, such as in the surname Grloma (‘*gir*-lo-ma’) mentioned below.

My thanks to our guide Darinka Grloma who has kindly checked the information in this travelogue, and to Andrew Robinson, who has proofread the text.



Maps courtesy of Google

1: BUDVA AND A TRIP TO ALBANIA

Thursday, 3 April 2025

It was 4.30 when I was rudely woken by my phone alarm. I jumped out of bed, got myself ready, gobbled down a bowl of breakfast cereal and, by five o'clock, I was in my friend Anna's car, being driven at speed to Dublin Airport. It did not take long to get there; when we arrived at Terminal 2, I said goodbye to Anna, thanked her, and went into the building. As I had used the online checking-in system, I was able to make my way up to the security area without having to join a queue at the desk downstairs. After the luggage check, I set off on a long walk towards Gate 302, which I guessed was in Terminal 1. I was right, for I soon found myself in familiar surroundings, and ended up in the same circular waiting area that had been used for my flight to Egypt last December.

Many years before, in September 1972, my mother and a friend had spent a holiday in Yugoslavia. Mum had brought my cine camera with her, and had taken shots in the places that she and her friend had visited, such as Korčula, Split and Dubrovnik in Croatia, and also Kotor Bay in Montenegro. I was fascinated by the souvenirs and presents that she had brought home with her, which included a Turkish pipe. She and her friend went again in 1979 and stayed in Poreč, Rovinj and Pula in Croatia, Portorož, Ljubljana and Lake Bled in Slovenia, then Trieste in Italy. As I had been studying a little Russian, I was able to understand some of the words that were printed on the souvenirs that my mum had brought home, for the Slavic languages have much in common. I finally set off to Croatia on a Travel Department holiday in 2019, and stayed for a week in Pula, seeing all the local sights. As I had longed to go to the slightly less-known country of Montenegro, south of Croatia, I decided to book on a Travel Department tour and fly there on 3 April, 2025.

Seated now in the airport's departure lounge, I once again got stuck into *Brideshead Revisited*, some of which I had read when travelling to and from Egypt. The time went quickly and soon I noticed that people were boarding the plane. I followed them and found my seat in Row 8. I joined an Irish-American couple who were looking forward to a short holiday in Dubrovnik, the destination of our flight. The plane was due to take off at 7.35 a.m., but we had to stay put and wait an hour as many more passengers were in the process of transferring from another flight that had been delayed. At last the passengers arrived; I noticed that many of the younger people were singers in an American school choir. We finally took off shortly after 8.30; by now the sun was shining outside. I read some more of my book, put it away after a while, then slept. When I woke up, a food and drinks trolley was being pushed down the aisle and so, feeling hungry by now, I ate one of two wraps that I bought the previous day, and drank some water from a bottle that I had filled in the airport's circular waiting area. Later I continued reading, then stopped and began removing unwanted photographs from my phone, freeing up space for more. The time went quickly, and soon the pilot informed us that we were flying over Venice and onwards to Croatia.

We finally touched down in the large though rather empty airport near Dubrovnik at about 12.30 p.m., at the original scheduled time. Walking along corridors, we approached passport control and then made our way to the baggage collection hall. As I did not need to spend much time here, I left it and went out to meet our pretty guide: a slim young lady named Darinka, who ticked my name off her list. When everybody had been accounted for, we were brought across the road to a waiting tour bus and, after our luggage had been stowed in the hold, we boarded the coach. Finding a spare seat up near the front, behind the driver, I sat down beside a pleasant lady named Aisling, whose travel companion Rory sat in the seat in front of us, right behind the driver. Aisling turned out to be quite pleasant and chatty, and told me that she, Rory and a few other people had met on a Travel Department holiday a few years previously, and now went on holidays together as a group.

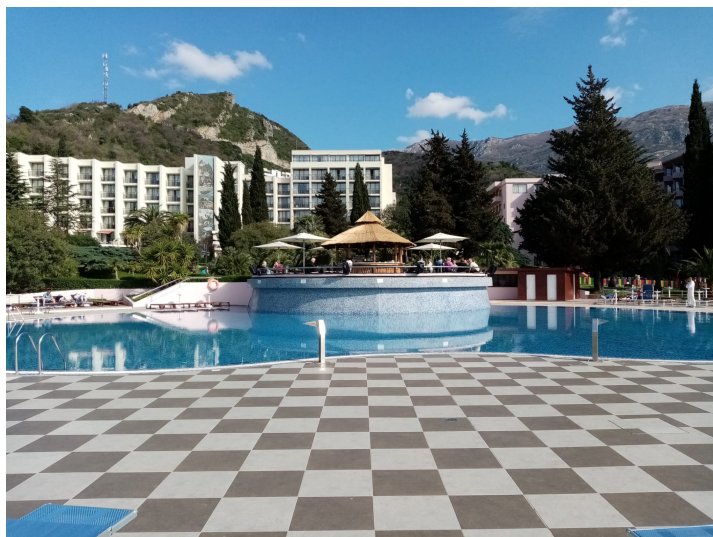
At last we set off on the long and rather tedious journey towards the border with Montenegro and then to the town of Budva, where we would be staying. At first we travelled quickly along the road as the traffic was light, but soon ground to a halt when we approached the passport control area at the Croatian border, where we joined a long line of cars and huge lorries. As there were only two men on duty, we moved forwards at a snail's pace. It took us at least half an hour to reach the booth where our passports were checked and returned to our guide Dada (a shortened version of Darinka). As soon as we had left the area, we drove to a nearby petrol station, where we got off the coach to use the facilities and eat or drink something. As I had eaten my second wrap on the plane shortly before we had landed, I just bought two small packets of biscuits and ate them, then drank some more of the water in my bottle. When everybody was ready, we boarded the coach again at about two o'clock and continued our journey by driving along a high mountain road that overlooked some fine views of Montenegro and the sea. We then had to stop and wait at the Montenegrin border, then slowly make our way towards the checkpoints. Fortunately the authorities here did not need to examine our passports.

At last we were off again and making our way down to the bay. We passed through a small town where I spotted an Orthodox church, and listened to what Dada had to say about her country, its history, and this region. For example, she explained why the country had been given the Italian name *Monte Negro* (Black Mountain). This was due to large southern parts of the country being ruled by the Venetian Republic between the late 14th century and the late 18th century.



Crossing Kotor Bay by ferry

When we approached Kotor Bay, which did not look particularly impressive under a grey sky, we were told that we would drive on to a ferry and be transported to the other side at the narrowest point, thus saving a journey of about twenty-eight kilometres along the coast road. Despite the dull weather and a light shower of rain, the inlet and bay looked quite magnificent from the ferry as we sailed across to the other side. It was good to be off the coach and out in the fresh air for a while.



The Iberostar Bellevue hotel, Budva

From the little town on the other side we drove to Budva along a dusty road that was being remade. This meant having to drive very slowly once again on the rough surface. By now I had given up any hope of being able to catch a bus from Budva back into Croatia in order to see Dubrovnik. Tired by now, I was glad when we finally arrived at our huge and rather impersonal hotel, the Iberostar Bellevue, where we were given keys to our rooms and shown on a printed map where our rooms were located. I discovered that we were now in the third of three large buildings, and that my bedroom was in the second one, a short walk away, on the first floor. This meant that I had to leave the building that we were in, walk out to a large open space where there were gardens, swimming pools, tennis courts, and playgrounds, and enter Block 2, climb upstairs and find the check-in desk. Here I was given a flexible red bracelet with the number 2203 written on it (Block 2, room 3 on the second storey), and told where to go. I found the room easily enough and opened the door with the plastic card that I had been given. Although it was a fine room with a large double bed and clean bathroom, it looked out towards another building and a large machine that controlled the air conditioning, which was quite noisy and could be heard even when the glass door was shut tight. However, as it looked quite comfortable and as I was tired by now, I decided that the room would do me fine, even though it was rather cool. I now took a few things out of my bag, lay down on the bed and had a snooze.

Feeling better after I had woken, I had a shower, organized my things, then went off in search of the main restaurant close to the hotel's entrance. When I found some people from our group, I joined them, then went off to help myself to some food. I began my meal with a bowl of rather watery 'minestrone' soup, then chose a selection of salads, along with some meat, potatoes and cooked vegetables, which I washed down with a glass of rather chilly red wine that tasted rather odd. While eating this main course, I chatted to a couple of men in our group, then finished my meal with a

selection of fresh fruit and some small but delightfully sinful slices of cake. After I had drunk a cup of camomile tea, I excused myself and left.

On the way back to my room, I stopped at the service desk and told the man that I could get no liquid soap out of the dispenser in my bathroom. The young man suggested that I give the middle of the plastic container a good squeeze, but I still could not coax any soap out of it. I returned to the desk to report this and the man said that he would send somebody to my room to fix the problem. Shortly afterwards an elderly man knocked on the door and I let him in. At first he could not get anything out of the new soap dispenser but, after a lot of banging and squeezing, he finally got it to work.

After he left, I wrote my diary entry for the day, then went to bed.

Friday, 4 April

I woke to the sound of my phone alarm at seven o'clock and, feeling refreshed after I had washed and done my morning exercises, I went down to the restaurant for breakfast. Once again there was a large selection of food to choose from. I had a good meal of fruit, cereal, and a plate of scrambled egg and sausages with bread and tea. Afterwards I went outside to amble around the grounds, where children were already running around and playing, then later joined some of my companions to pay for our excursion on Sunday to see part of Albania. As I could not remember whether I had paid for this trip or not, I was relieved to find that I had, for my name was already on the list of people going.



The island of Sveti Stefan, near Budva

At 9.50 we all met in a room near the main reception desk and, at ten o'clock, set off on our morning excursion to Budva's old town, which had been built on a small promontory nearby. However, first of all we set off in the opposite direction, driving along the coast road past the many hotels and apartment blocks, finally leaving the town behind. From the road we now had a fine view of the sea and the rugged coastline on our right; the sun shone brightly on the nearby mountains and the deep blue sea below us. We finally came to a stop at a lay-by, tumbled out of the coach, and looked down at the famous small island of Sveti Stefan (Saint Stephen) far below us. I was delighted to see this famous landmark at long last – as my mother and her

friend had been here back in 1972. Joined to the mainland by a short tombolo, it had become a protectorate of the Republic of Venice in 1423, having been independent since the twelfth century. The local people had accepted Venetian sovereignty as they had been fearful of an attack by the Turks. Initially the island and its fortress had housed just twelve families, but by the 1800s a village of some 400 people had been established on it. Between 1934 and 1936, the Villa Miločer was built as a summer residence for Queen Marija Karađorđević of Serbia, and it was refurbished in more recent times. The population of the island declined in the first half of the twentieth century; from its four hundred inhabitants, there were just twenty people remaining in 1954. The Yugoslav government then converted the buildings on the island into a luxury hotel, moving the remaining inhabitants to the mainland. The island village therefore became an exclusive resort frequented by many celebrities, including Orson Welles, Elizabeth Taylor, Sophia Loren, Marilyn Monroe, and Princess Margaret. However, the breakup of Yugoslavia during the 1990s brought a decline to the resort. A contract for revitalizing the island and its buildings was awarded to Aman Resorts in 2007, and the refurbished resort was completed in 2009.

As this exclusive place was only accessible to well-heeled celebrities and their guests, all we could do was admire and photograph the beautiful island from above. As far as I could see, white wooden shutters had been closed over all the windows of the dark red-bricked buildings. Dada had suggested to us that, as nothing had been organized for the following day, it might be a good idea if a group of us could travel here by taxi in the morning, see the island at closer quarters, and walk all the way back, along the coast, to our hotel.



The old town of Budva

We now returned to our coach and drove back the way we had come, passing the many hotels again and heading for the little promontory on which Budva's old town had been built, and which could just about be seen in the distance. We eventually came to a stop in a street and followed Dada to the entrance of the old quarter, which was not far away. En route, she told us about the history of the town over a microphone and earphones.

The first record of Budva, we learned, dates back to the fifth century BCE. Originally the town had belonged to the state of Illyria, in the Western Balkans, and a Greek emporium had been established in it during the Greek colonization of the Adriatic back in the sixth century BCE. The area became part of the Roman Republic in the second century BCE, then part of the Roman Empire from 27 BCE. By the sixth century CE, the town was part of the Byzantine Empire. During the following two centuries, Slavs and Avars began arriving in the area, mixing with the native Roman population. In 841 the town was sacked by Muslim Saracens, who devastated the area.

During the early Middle Ages, the town was reigned by a succession of Doclean kings, as well as Serbian and Zetan aristocrats. In about 1200 it became the see of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Budva, which lasted until 1828 and was nominally revived as a Latin titular bishopric. The Venetians ruled the town for nearly four hundred years, from 1420 to 1797. Budva, which was called Budua during this period, was part of the Albania Veneta, and was fortified against Ottoman conquest by powerful Venetian walls. Most of the population spoke the Venetian language until the 19th century. However, Budva was briefly under Ottoman rule between 1572 and 1573.

With the fall of the Republic of Venice in 1797, Budva came under the rule of the Habsburg monarchy. In 1806, during the Napoleonic Wars, Montenegrin forces allied with Russia took control of the city, only to relinquish it to France the following year. French rule lasted until 1813, when the town was ceded to the Austrian Empire, which controlled it for the following one hundred years. From 1814 until the end of World War I in 1918, Budva remained under Austria-Hungary. After the war, the Serbian army entered the town after it was abandoned by the Austrian forces, and it came under the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. In 1941 Budva was annexed by the Kingdom of Italy. The town was finally liberated from Axis rule on 22 November 1944, and incorporated into the Socialist Republic of Montenegro, part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Montenegro finally became an independent country in 2006, with Budva as its primary tourist destination.

Dada told us most of this information while we stood in a large square by the main gate of the old town. On the other side of the square we could see the remains of an ancient necropolis, found while constructing a new hotel; I went over to have a look, then rejoined the group.



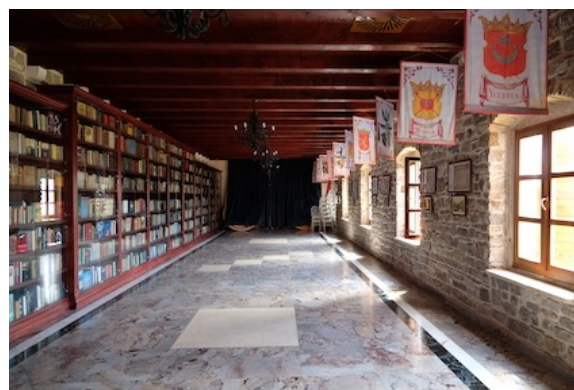
The old town of Budva

We then entered the walled town and ambled along the old-world narrow streets, stopping in squares to admire fine houses, many of which were spoiled by the sight of modern air-conditioning units attached to their walls. We also stopped to admire some churches, the main ones being the Orthodox Holy Trinity Church and the nearby Catholic Saint John the Baptist Church. Beside the latter could be seen the ruins of a fifth-century Christian basilica that had been uncovered by an earthquake in 1979. Here we listened to what Dada had to say about these two churches and the ruins.



The Orthodox Holy Trinity Church and the Catholic Saint John the Baptist Church

We then left this area and walked over to the nearby Citadel and climbed up some steps. Inside the old fortress we found two very elegant long rooms, one of which contained long large comfortable armchairs, fine furniture, shelves filled with books, and chandeliers. The other one, a plainer room, contained books on shelves and flags hanging from the wooden ceiling. After we had seen inside these rooms, we moved up to the top of the solid stone structure, where we were able to admire a fine aerial view of the old town with its elegant churches, the modern city beyond, the mountains, and the deep blue sea.



The rooms inside the Citadel, Budva old town

From here Dada brought us to the Budva Museum, near one of the gates, where we removed our earphones and listened to what she had to say. After she had told us about the various finds and archaeological digs in the area that had yielded ancient Greek and Roman artefacts, such as mosaics, amphorae, bowls, and jewellery, we wandered around the various rooms, admiring what was on display. On the top floor was a room containing costumes and furniture from the recent past.



Budva Museum

We would now be driven back to the hotel for lunch, but I decided to stay in the town and find my own way around, at my own speed, and walk back. I therefore told Dada about my plan and said goodbye to her. When the others had left, I wandered around, taking some photographs. Taking out of my bag a little notebook in which I had written useful information and drawn a rough map of the town, I set about getting my bearings. Although we had been blessed with bright sunshine during the morning, the sky now darkened and it began to spit with rain.

Finding the Catholic Saint John the Baptist church open, I went inside to take a look. The rather garish mosaic on the wall behind the altar, created by the Croatian artist Ivo Dulčić, looked rather bizarre; far more interesting – and important – was the twelfth-century icon of the Madonna of Budva in a side chapel, which is venerated by both the Catholic and Orthodox faithful.



The Madonna of Budva icon in the Saint John the Baptist church

After I had rested here for a little while, I walked back to the Orthodox Holy Trinity church, which I also discovered was open. Inside I admired the numerous though rather modern-looking icons that adorned the iconostasis, the walls, and the ceiling. Just inside the door, on the right, was a little shop where candles, icons,

prayer books, and other religious paraphernalia could be bought from an elderly lady. She was keeping a strict eye on visitors as photography was not allowed in the church. As two men were busy preparing something, I bided my time and watched what was happening. One of the men disappeared behind the iconostasis (the partition of icons that separates the altar from the main body of the church) and returned moments later with a long, thin candle, which he placed in a tall candlestick and lit. While the two men placed various things on a table in front of the candle, a local lady, who obviously had some connection with the church, came in with a young couple. Much to my surprise, all three of them were speaking in English. Shortly afterwards, when I managed to speak to the local lady, she told me that there would be a baptism, and said that I would be very welcome to stay and watch the ceremony. As it turned out that the couple were Turkish, I could then understand why they were all speaking English. One of the men who had been setting up the table then approached the Turkish lady and handed her a sheet of paper, on which a prayer that had been translated into Turkish had been printed. Shortly afterwards a well-built man strode into the church, disappeared behind the iconostasis, then reappeared shortly afterwards attired as a priest. The lit candle now was handed to the Turkish lady, and her partner sat down in a seat nearby in order to film what was about to happen, using his phone. As there was no sign of a baby, it now became obvious that the Turkish lady was about to be baptized prior to being received into the Orthodox Church. The priest now stood in front of the iconostasis, facing the Turkish lady, and the local lady stood behind her, so that all three people formed a straight line.

Opening a prayer book, the priest now began reading and intoning the text before him at a terrific speed – no doubt because he realized that the Turkish lady did not understand a word of Church Slavonic. Responses were supplied by the local lady behind her or sung by one of the men who had set everything up earlier; although dressed casually, he may have been a deacon. The most frequently sung response was a simple '*A-min*'.

During the long ceremony, the priest dabbed a little of some blessed ointment on the lady's forehead, ears, eyes, hands, the area around her private parts, and her feet. He also cut three very short pieces of the lady's hair and placed them in a little container. At one point, the priest indicated that the lady should read the translated prayer that she had been given before the ceremony.

Towards the end, a curved basin was carried over by the deacon, placed close to one side of the lady's hair, and a small quantity of water was carefully poured over her hair so that it flowed into the basin. The priest then used a small embroidered towel to wipe any excess water from her hair, neck and face. This, of course, was the symbolic baptism.

When the elaborate ceremony finally finished, the lady received congratulations, hugs and kisses from those around her. I could see that she was quite overcome with emotion – as indeed I was. I went up to her, shook her hand, and offered her my heartiest congratulations. The priest's rather severe demeanour had now completely vanished and there was a big smile on his face. Speaking in English to the lady, he congratulated her and presented her with a bag full of presents that included the container of her hair, the ornamental towel, and an icon, which she kissed. I then spoke again to the lady who had provided the responses, and she explained the significance of some of the things that had been done during the ceremony. When I told her that I had a Ukrainian Orthodox lady in my house, she jokingly told me that the priest here could baptize me and convert me to the Orthodox faith if I wished!

I then reluctantly dragged myself away from the little church and ambled around the little town, looking out for some of the places mentioned in my little notebook. I quickly discovered that the rough map that I had copied from the guide book was not at all accurate! I made my way over to two tiny chapels, now closed to the public: the 12th-century church of Saint Sava the Sanctified, and Saint Mary in Punta, dating from CE 840. As I walked along some of the narrow streets, it began to rain again. Realizing that I was now beginning to get hungry, despite my large breakfast, I looked for something simple and cheap to eat. Noticing a pizza shop near the main gate, I stopped and bought a large slice of ham and cheese pizza for €3.50. Nibbling at it within its paper and cardboard cover, I ambled out of the old town through the main gate and made my way to a nearby park, where I sat down to eat it in comfort and drink some water.

I then left and set off on foot along the seafront towards our hotel. Although the rain had stopped by now, another big black cloud had appeared over the nearby mountains, and soon it began to rain again. I eventually had to run for shelter into a café-cum-restaurant, where I sat down and ordered a small glass of draft beer. A waitress soon appeared with a rather large glass and put it on my table. Although it was really too much for me, I managed to drink most of it over a period of time. By the time I was ready to leave, the rain had started again! The waitress invited me to sit down again, and so I waited until the rain finally eased off. There were a few drops later as I walked on towards the hotel, but I did not get very wet.

I soon found the tunnel that Dada had told us about and, as it was quite short, I quickly emerged at the far end and discovered that I was now very close to the hotel.

Back in my room I lay down on my bed and had a welcome siesta, for I felt quite tired by now. Afterwards I went out for a walk through the gardens and towards the beach, where I noticed that the path came to a dead end at the nearby promontory. I ambled around some areas that I had not seen before and came across several cats. Eventually I returned to the hotel and my room. Feeling in need of a cup of tea by this stage, I took out my map of the grounds, went outside again, and made my way to Block 1, where I found another dining area. As it was open and serving both food and drink, I got myself a cup of black tea and a couple of tiny slices of cake. After I had drunk the tea and eaten the cakes, I left the noisy area, which was full of children running around and looking for chips and slices of pizza.

I now returned to my room, where I sent some photos to various friends and wrote some of my diary. I eventually went down to the main restaurant at about 7.30 p.m., where I joined some of the people in our group, and had dinner. I started with some rather watery chicken soup, then had a main course of fish with rice and vegetables, washed down with a small helping of white wine. I chatted to a very interesting lady and a man from Northern Ireland about various things, then finished my meal with some dessert and a cup of tea.

Before I left the dining room, I asked Rory and Aisling if they would like to come with me to Sveti Stefan on the following morning by taxi and walk back to the hotel, and they immediately said yes. We agreed to meet at nine o'clock for breakfast.

I then returned to my bedroom, where I watched some of the news bulletins on the television (mostly about President Trump's levies), then went to bed shortly after eleven o'clock.

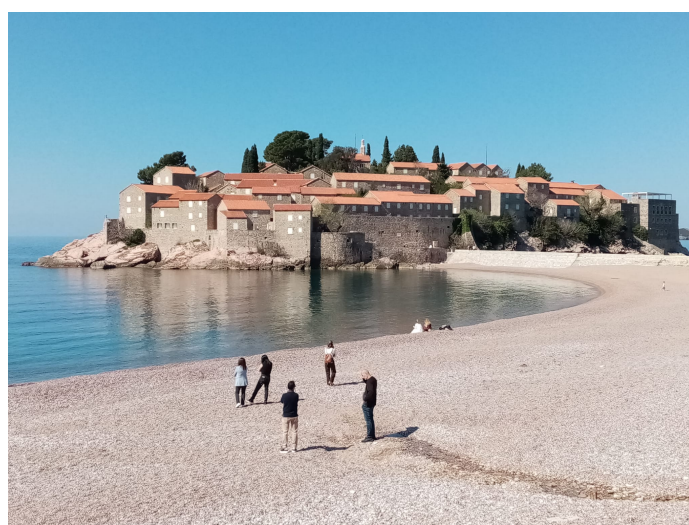
Saturday, 5 April

Although I had set my alarm for 7 o'clock this morning, I woke shortly before 6.30 and listened to BBC Radio 3 on my phone for a while. As the machine outside was

still making plenty of noise and I was getting rather tired of listening to it, I decided to try moving to a different room. As soon as I had done my morning exercises and got myself ready, I headed for the nearby reception desk and spoke to the man on duty. He found an empty room not too far away and asked me to return in twenty minutes. I therefore went back to my room, where I took a chance and put my belongings back into my suitcase and little backpack. I then returned to the reception area, where a young man who spoke excellent English led me along corridors to a neat little room on the third floor and showed it to me. As it was very quiet and pleasant, I told him that I would take it, even though there was no view from the window – just a blank wall. We then walked back to the reception area, where I collected my luggage and returned to my new room. After I had got everything in order, I went down to the restaurant, sat down beside one of the men in our group, and had a good breakfast. Afterwards I joined Aisling and Rory, who were more or less ready for our taxi journey to Sveti Stefan. I returned to my room to wash my teeth and collect my little bag, then met them downstairs in the main reception area. After a rather long wait, I managed to catch the attention of young man with whom I had spoken during the previous day, and asked him if he could order a taxi. He spoke to somebody and then informed me that a taxi would arrive in a few minutes.

When I rejoined my companions and we went outside, we found an elegant white Tesla car waiting for us. Aisling and Rory sat in the back, and I joined the driver in the front. Before we set off, I asked him how much our journey would cost, and he answered, ‘About €10’. Satisfied, we left and drove through the busy town towards the coast. Although I had sat in a Tesla car once before, I had never been driven in one. I was suitably impressed; the journey was smooth, and the computer display beside the driver was fascinating.

Before long we were travelling along by the sea. We passed the spot where we had stopped to gaze down at Sveti Stefan, then turned to the right and drove down a steep, winding road towards the island, passing some houses and other buildings. Eventually we reached the coast, where we stopped and paid the driver a little over €12. Having shown us which way to go, he thanked us, turned around and began his journey back to the town centre.



The island of Sveti Stefan

We now wandered towards the enchanted island with its tall brick buildings topped with red tiled roofs, stopping now and then to take photographs. Apart from a few

tourists like ourselves, the place was almost deserted. The island and the intensely blue water looked superb in the bright sunshine. Slowly we made our way across the bridge to the deserted island, where we found the main gate firmly locked. We did not feel unduly disappointed as we had known that humble tourists like us were not welcomed here; indeed, we were lucky to get so close to the island.



A view of the coastline from Sveti Stefan

When we had finished looking around and taking photos, we set off on our long walk back to Budva and our hotel. A little uncertain as to where exactly the path began, I checked with a man standing outside a nearby restaurant, who told me which way to go and what to expect. Once on the winding path, we skirted the bay, passing through little parks, small villages, and open spaces that offered dramatic views of the mountains, the coast, and the deep blue sea. By now the sun was blazing down on us from a clear sky and so we became quite hot. We then followed the path up to the main road (the worst part of the journey), where we only had a narrow space to walk, with traffic whizzing past us; Dada had warned us about this. A little unsure as to how and when we could get back to the path, we followed a young couple who eventually turned off the road into a car park, then left it using a path that brought us back down to the coast.

As we were getting a little tired and thirsty by now, we eventually stopped at a small restaurant beside the tunnel that we had been told about, and ordered some drinks. We were all very glad to sit down for a while and relax. I sipped a glass of what I had thought was apple juice, but was actually apple cider; it was very refreshing. Aisling drank a cup of coffee, and Rory drank a small can of Coca-Cola. As I needed change, I paid for the drinks with a €50 note, then handed Rory a €5 note as my contribution to the taxi fare. However, he gave this to Aisling as she had paid most of the sum asked by the taxi driver.

Shortly afterwards we left the restaurant, walked through the tunnel (which was much shorter than what we had been led to believe), and continued on our way to the long beach that ran along the town of Budva. Soon we were back at the hotel, entering it through the gardens. We headed for the restaurant in Block 1 and went up to the terrace. Tired and hungry by now, we selected what we wanted to eat and drink, and

sat down for a good lunch at about 1.30 p.m. All three of us had enjoyed our morning walk. I finished my meal with some fruit and ice cream.



The grounds of the Iberostar Bellevue hotel, Budva

We then parted, having arranged to meet again this evening at seven for dinner, and I went up to my new room, where I lay down and had a good siesta. I woke later, went out for a stroll, and stopped here and there to take photos of the hotel grounds bathed in strong sunshine, but with the mountains behind shrouded in dark and rather threatening clouds; the scene looked very dramatic. Fortunately the clouds more or less stayed where they were, and so it did not rain. Afterwards I went back into Block 1 and had a cup of tea with a man whom I had befriended, although I still did not know his name. After we had chatted for a while, I returned to my room, where I wrote my diary. As the room was a little chilly, I experimented with the air conditioning control to see if I could warm it up.

Just before seven o'clock I left my room and made my way down to the dining room, where I accepted a tiny glass of raki from a girl at the door. Having helped myself to some rather watery chicken soup, I joined some of my friends at their table. With them was a young lady who had had a body massage during the afternoon. She, I discovered later, had travelled widely and had been in countries such as South Korea and Japan. After the soup I helped myself to some veal, cooked vegetables, and rice. I also had a small glass of beer, which was not as bad as I had been led to believe. I then finished with some camomile tea and a small plateful of fresh fruit and slices of cake. When everyone left afterwards for a 'nightcap', I said goodnight to them and returned to my room, where I prepared for the following morning's early start and trip to Albania.

Sunday, 6 April

As many of us had booked to go on the optional excursion to Albania today, for which we had paid €70, we had to get up early. I was already awake when my alarm went off at 6 a.m. I joined some of my companions in the dining room at seven o'clock, when some food was being placed on the long tables. I grabbed whatever was

available and had a good meal. I returned to my room at 7.30 to wash my teeth and grab my bag of belongings. I was in the reception area by 8 a.m.; shortly afterwards we climbed on board our coach and set off through Budva towards Sveti Stefan, which we soon reached. On and on we went; while we travelled, Dada gave us a running commentary on just about everything that we passed, such as the fine scenery, the bays and churches, and began telling us about the country that we would be visiting. Reference, of course, was made to the harsh Stalinist ruler Enver Hoxha (pronounced *Hodge-a*), who turned the country into a one-party communist state and implemented state atheism, persecuting both Muslims and Christians; during his rule, ties to other communist countries, including the People's Republic of China, were cut, which resulted in the country becoming isolated. The main reason for my wishing to see a little of the country was that I had read about the fine scenery around the area that we would be visiting. Over recent years I had watched some BBC television programmes about this little-known and rarely-visited country, which I found very interesting.

However, as we approached the border it clouded over and then started to rain. Dada and the driver had to get out of the coach to have their documents checked; although Dada had collected all our passports, they were not needed. While this was taking place, a young man joined us and was introduced as our guide in Albania. After a short delay, we drove off, then stopped at a nearby petrol station to use the facilities and have a snack. We set off again, passing through some unremarkable countryside dotted with houses and villages, all of which did not look particularly pretty in the dull light, towards the 2,400 year-old town of Shkodër, the traditional capital of Albania. At one point, a convergence of two rivers was pointed out to us. By the time we approached Shkodër, the weather had deteriorated significantly, for by now it was raining heavily and a gale-force wind was blowing.

Just before we reached the town centre, we swung right and approached Rozafa Fortress, which was situated on top of a steep hill. We were told that it had been inhabited since the 4th century BCE during Illyrian times, though the present structure had been constructed by the Venetians and the Turkish Ottomans. According to what I had read, sweeping views over Shkodër's waterways and brightly painted homes could be seen from the top of the hill.

To get to the fortress, we now had to transfer to two minibuses and be driven to the top of the hill. By the time we reached it, it was lashing rain, very windy, and we could hear rumblings of thunder and see lightning flashes. Dressed in my light jacket with just a thin jumper underneath, I now felt freezing cold and wet, for my new little folding umbrella was blown inside out by the wind and broken almost immediately. Some members of our group, mostly ladies, decided to go back down to the coach in one of the minibuses; I clambered in but, as there was no room for me, I was obliged to stay put.

I therefore had to follow the others up a steep and slippery stone path to the remains of the castle, then stop to listen to a very tedious and long-winded description of the place by our new guide. As I was now shivering violently from the cold, I inwardly cursed the guide and wished that he would shut up. However, all I could do was stand in the most sheltered spot that I could find and hope that we would soon leave this bleak spot. When eventually the wind, rain and lightning subsided a little, we made our way to another section of the castle, where we listened to more information. When the guide finally finished and asked if we had any questions, I put up my hand and said, 'Could we please go back to the bus as we're all freezing cold?' Surprised, but taking the hint, he then led us back to our minibus, offering me his

padded jacket if I was feeling too cold. I thanked him for his kind offer, said no, then told him that he would need to be more concise when giving information about this place when the weather was so bad. While doing my best at trying to avoid slipping on the wet paving stones on our way downhill, I glanced over at what was supposed to be the fine scenery below us, but it was barely discernible in such poor conditions. When we finally reached our coach, we all scrambled into it.

We now drove into the rather unremarkable town of Shkodër, where dreary apartment blocks built during the Hoxha era were pointed out to us. However, most of the buildings and shops looked fairly modern. As a road had been blocked by a couple of police cars, the traffic was chaotic. Slowly we inched forward, drove round a roundabout, went back the way we had come, then approached the street where we intended to stop by taking an alternative route. When we eventually reached the spot, everyone got out of the coach and followed our new guide to some nearby shops. As I had made it clear that I wasn't interested in shopping, and as Dada had noticed that I was wet and shivering, she very kindly brought me across the road to a high-class restaurant, where she treated me to a welcome cup of hot tea. Feeling a lot better by now, I had an interesting conversation with her, telling her about myself and my love of travel. She seemed to be quite fascinated by what I had to say, such as my decision to share my home with a Ukrainian lady. When it was time to leave, we went outside, met the rest of the group, then climbed back into the coach.



The fish restaurant in Shkodër, Albania

We then drove to a nearby fish restaurant and went upstairs to a large dining room, where we were served dishes that we had ordered earlier while in the coach. I had chosen a hot bowl of soup, which was very welcome, and then a large plate of rice and prawns. The price of the meal had been included in the amount that we had paid for the trip, but we had to pay for the drinks; I had chosen orange juice. Aisling kindly paid for her, Rory's and my drinks, but I left two euro beside her plate when she wasn't looking.

When we had finished our lunch, we left, got back into our coach, and set off on our return journey to Budva. As the rain had eased off a little by now, we were able to enjoy some of the scenery and take note of the houses and buildings in the small

towns that we passed through. At the border check, our Albanian guide left us, thanking us for our attention and tips. Poor Dada had to come back to the bus to fetch our passports for the official on duty; he would not be satisfied until he had checked them all and had pocketed a €5 note deliberately left just inside the first passport. Dada was understandably annoyed about this.

At last we set off again and drove to Budva. It was still wet by the time we reached the town and our hotel. I went straight up to my room, where I took off all my damp clothing and, following advice from one of the ladies in our group, had a hot shower and washed my hair. I then managed to switch the air conditioning to heater mode in order to warm the room and dry my sodden jacket, which I hung over a chair. Having changed into dry clothes, I sat down and sent some messages and photos to friends from my phone, then wrote a little of my diary.

Later I stopped and made my way down to the dining room, where I joined Rory and a lady from Northern Ireland who was a member of our group; during our meal we had a good chat. This evening I started with a bowl of chicken soup, had a good main course of lasagne with potatoes and vegetables, and finished with fruit and small slices of cake. With all this I drank a small helping of rosé wine, which was not bad.

After the meal I joined some of my companions for a 'nightcap' in an area beside a nearby bar; I accepted a glass of Prosecco, which was quite pleasant. I chatted to the people around me and then, when I had finished my drink, I returned to my room, where I wrote the rest of my diary and finally went to bed. Not a particularly satisfying day!