

# Destination Western Balkans

The first question many people ask about the Western Balkans is 'where's that?'. Lying in southeast Europe, the region stretches from Croatia's sublimely jagged Dalmatian coast, past Bosnia and Hercegovina's iconic Old Bridge of Mostar to the cultural crossroads of Sarajevo. Further east is Serbia, with its hedonistic music festivals and the pulsing nightlife of Belgrade. Plunge south to newly independent Montenegro, where ancient towns flanked by limestone cliffs are suspended above the azure waters of the Bay of Kotor. East again is controversial Kosovo, abuzz in its bid to have its self-declared independence recognised globally. Drop south into Albania, busy casting off the shadow of communism and welcoming visitors to its quirky capital and dramatic coastline. East of Albania is Macedonia, where other-worldly Lake Ohrid sets the scene for the historical treasures surrounding it.

European dreams that elsewhere on the continent turn out to be too expensive, too crowded or too commercialised are authentic and accessible in the Western Balkans. Sidewalk cafes line cobblestone alleyways, medieval castles preside over historic town centres, and Catholic churches, Orthodox monasteries and Ottoman mosques that vied to stake space throughout history share the terrain today. National parks are untamed patches of wilderness straddling national borders, while translucent turquoise waters lap at the edges of manicured resorts and undeveloped islands. Added to this are riverside restaurants serving world-class cuisine, wine regions ripe for the tasting and nightclubs floating on rivers or thumping underground.

Yet for all this the Western Balkans is still largely known for the wrong reasons. It's true that ethnic complexities led to unspeakable consequences during the troubled 1990s, but as that period seems further and further in the past, differences that once led to conflict now manifest themselves as wondrous diversity.

The 2008 Eurovision Song Contest highlighted that a spirit of regional discourse has overtaken that of discord. International and inter-ethnic conversations spread across social and cultural spheres; musicians cross borders to delight neighbouring fans; artists from one country are revered in another; and tragedies occurring in one part of the region are mourned elsewhere.

We don't want to sound too starry-eyed; some of what you may picture is true. Grim communist architecture still poops the party, some ex-Yugo buildings linger with all the charm of an apocalypse and some fashions are more retro than they know, but in context, on the precipice of Europe, all of this lends distinctive character to an energetically evolving region in which new buildings are being raised, old ones renewed, new ideas exchanged and old ones challenged. The powers that be and the people who elected them are licking their lips at the prospect of EU membership, knowing that getting there means leaving the past in the past and treating neighbours as neighbours.

For all its colour and contradiction, the region is ultimately defined by the similarities between its countries. The Western Balkans is an area of enormous heart and hospitality, and while it aspires to European integration, it stands well and truly on its own as one of the world's great travel destinations.

# Getting Started

Some still see the Western Balkans as shrouded in mystery, but for the most part the region is easily accessible for the capable traveller. Visiting Croatia is no more difficult than going to Germany or Italy. Bosnia and Hercegovina (BiH), Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia are less expensive; they feature lots of signs in Cyrillic, but English is widely spoken. Albania is more challenging; many roads are in dreadful shape, but some main arteries have been rebuilt. Recent years have seen old hotels renovated and new ones built. ATMs and internet cafes are ubiquitous. You need to keep your eye on Kosovo, but when things are calm travelling there is surprisingly smooth.

## WHEN TO GO

The Western Balkans has a consistent weather pattern for a region of its size. High tourist season runs from May until September. The volume of visitors (and increased prices) in Croatia, Montenegro, Macedonia and coastal resorts in Albania can be a hassle in peak season (July and August). At these times some places will only take bookings for a week or two, not one night. Migrant locals flocking back to visit family can add to crowds. During major festivals accommodation is scarce and significantly more expensive; it pays to book ahead. The best time to visit is either side of the summer peak: May, June and September stand out, when it's not too hot, crowded or overbooked.

Winter is cold everywhere (particularly mountainous regions) except the Adriatic coast. Ski season runs from late November until March, but sometimes the snow stays longer than skiers do; if there's still snow in late March or early April you may have it to yourself.

Travelling off season can reap some bargains, although places where tourism is the main industry all but close down and some hostels are only open in summer. Travelling as early as April will be economical, but you personally may comprise the extent of the social scene.

See p429 for climate charts.

## COSTS & MONEY

There's wide variation in travel expenses across the region. The further north and west you go, the more expensive it is. Prices are steadily rising in popular resorts and cities; the Croatian coast isn't a budget destination in high season, and budget options in Macedonia's Skopje are scarce. Serbia, Montenegro and BiH are moderately priced, especially outside Belgrade and Sarajevo, while Kosovo and Albania are quite budget friendly – certainly comparable to Turkey. But don't expect to live royally on a few euro a day.

### DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Some good travel literature (p22); the Balkans is the place for reading on the road
- An open mind; there's a new shade of grey around every corner
- An international driving licence if you're planning road trips (p446)
- A Swiss army knife (just don't put it in your hand luggage before flying) to slice local cheeses and pop corks on local wines
- An iPod or earplugs to drown out often-overwhelming turbo-folk music
- Appropriate shoes for tramping city streets and nature trails

## CONDUCT IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

There's nothing really unusual about the region's customs that might cause you to stumble into a major faux pas, but here are some tips for making (and keeping) friends.

### Talking the Talk

Cafes 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 marital status are a sign of friendly interest, not nosiness. On entering a shop, a cheerful hello in the local lingo is appreciated before making a beeline to display racks.

Spouting forth your theories on the fall of communism and the wars of the 1990s probably won't win you friends; your views may be met with strained silence or sharpish retorts along the lines of 'You weren't here; you can't possibly know'. Asking people about their experiences during the conflicts may bring up some interesting anecdotes but also maybe some horrendous memories.

If you can speak local languages, be careful when and where you do; speaking Serbian to Albanian Kosovars, for instance, won't endear you to your hosts.

### Walking the Walk

The Balkans idea of time is something superefficient global professionals might chafe against. If you're here for work, expect to mix business with pleasure.

When visiting mosques and *tekkes* (shrines or monasteries), wear conservative clothes covering arms and legs, and remove shoes and socks before entering. Women should cover their hair. Don't walk in front of people praying. When visiting Orthodox churches and monasteries, it's customary to buy a few candles and light them; it's an ancient tradition and generates a bit of income for custodians.

### Drinking the Drink

Alcohol flows fairly freely in Christian parts of the region, less so in Muslim areas, where coffee is drunk in alcoholic proportions. Being high-spirited is fine, being totally blotto isn't, especially for women. As anywhere in the world, when you are drunk you are more vulnerable (and not just to making a fool of yourself in a foreign country). If people start spouting nationalist rhetoric after a few shots of firewater, it's your turn to be diplomatically quiet.

The major expense is accommodation. Backpackers staying in hostels, eating cheaply and seeing sights can expect to spend around €40 per day, but more in cities such as Zagreb and Belgrade. Those wanting more comfort (midrange accommodation and restaurants) will probably spend between €70 and €100. Staying in private accommodation outside cities will get you by on far less.

If you have an ATM card, you needn't worry about money in decent-sized towns. Major credit and debit cards (including Cirrus and Maestro) are accepted by ATMs. Travellers cheques are much like chastity belts: safe but a pain in the arse. Many banks are unfamiliar with them and commissions can be high. Having €100 in cash safely tucked away is the best insurance – enough for a cheapish room, a meal and a ride to an ATM or phone. Many currencies are difficult or impossible to exchange outside their home country; change them into euros or dollars before leaving.

In Montenegro and Kosovo, where the euro is the official currency, carry small denominations – break notes at the bank if you have to. Even where the euro isn't the official currency, it's sometimes accepted (notes more so than coins), but the bad exchange assumed can make it more expensive than paying in local currency. Conversely, negotiations may be conducted in euro but payment will be expected in the local currency. Hotel prices are often quoted in both currencies.

## TRAVELLING RESPONSIBLY

Since our inception in 1973, Lonely Planet has encouraged readers to tread lightly, travel responsibly and enjoy the magic independent travel affords. International travel is growing at a jaw-dropping rate, and we still firmly believe in the benefits it can bring – but, as always, we encourage you to consider the impact your visit can have on the global environment and local economics, cultures and ecosystems.

### Getting There & Away

If ever there was an easy region in which to travel responsibly, it's the Western Balkans. Taking flights around the region not only increases carbon emissions but also decreases your experiences; overland journeys are often travel highlights. Once in Europe you can enter the region by bus or train (or ferry from Italy or Greece into Croatia or Albania). See p439 for suggestions.

Bus routes are efficient and a good way of discovering towns you won't find a word about in this book. Old-world adventures can still be found on railway lines; why fly when you can have an epic train journey from Paris or Vienna through to Zagreb or Belgrade and onwards to Moscow? Train enthusiasts should take the scenic route from built-up Belgrade to coastal Bar (Montenegro), then train it between Montenegro's national parks. Or travel overland from Belgrade to Skopje and on to Thessaloniki (Greece). While saving the environment, save on costs; travel by day to see the sights or overnight to save a night's accommodation.

### Slow Travel

What's the rush? The more slowly you move the more time you have to absorb what's around you. Take time to immerse yourself in wherever you are with leisurely day trips and burn nothing but calories by exploring on foot.

When diving, protect the environment by not taking souvenirs and not standing on or touching corals or wrecks. Ask tour companies about their environmental policies.

For more on ecologically ethical ways to enjoy the environment, see the boxed text, p428.

### Accommodation & Food

When it comes to accommodation, doing the right thing can be delightfully self-serving. Rather than staying in built-up (and often overpriced) hotels, stay in private homes, which make cosy quarters for passing travellers. They'll often find you or you can find them through local travel agencies.

Large resorts have their place, but when you're choosing them consider how they dispose of waste and do your bit by asking that towels and sheets not be changed daily.

With food that's 'rare' or a 'speciality' consider why it's a rare speciality; Ohrid trout in Macedonia, for instance, has been fished to near-extinction and should be avoided. See the boxed text, p288, for more.

To find real local food, eat where real locals eat and shop where real locals shop. Buying local produce and eating in locally run eateries keeps small businesses and the people behind them afloat. It also keeps your costs low and your interactions genuine.

### Responsible Travel Organisations

Supply responds to demand: if more travellers raise environmental issues with operators they're more likely to go green. Useful links:

**Black Mountain** ([www.montenegroholiday.com](http://www.montenegroholiday.com)) Travel agent passionate about Montenegro's environment.

**'Old-world adventures can still be found on railway lines; why fly when you can have an epic train journey?'**

**Blue World** ([www.blue-world.org](http://www.blue-world.org)) Protects bottlenose dolphins and promotes environmental awareness in Croatia's Lošinj-Cres archipelago.

**Centre for Sustainable Tourism Initiatives** ([www.cstimontenegro.org](http://www.cstimontenegro.org)) Organisation committed to sustainable tourism in Montenegro.

**Eco-Centre Caput Insulae** ([www.caput-insulae.com](http://www.caput-insulae.com)) Part nature park, part sanctuary for the endangered Eurasian griffon.

**Green Visions** ([www.greenvisions.ba](http://www.greenvisions.ba)) Environmental protection and Bosnian eco-tours.

**Responsible Tourism Partnership** ([www.responsibletourismpartnership.org](http://www.responsibletourismpartnership.org))

**Responsible Travel** ([www.responsibletravel.com](http://www.responsibletravel.com)) Database of global green tour operators.

**Tourist Bureau Biljana** ([www.beyondohrid.com](http://www.beyondohrid.com)) Environmentally friendly agency for the Ohrid region.

**Travelling Balkans** ([www.travellingthebalkans.net](http://www.travellingthebalkans.net)) Bosnian-based sustainability projects.

## READING UP

The Western Balkans is a region meant to be written about. Before you go, get your head into the discourse (and discord) of the region – you'll appreciate what you see and who you meet if you understand their context. Follow in the footsteps of those who've gone before by taking some literary companionship on the road. See individual chapters and p38 for more.

## History & Politics

Misha Glenny's *The Balkans: Nationalism, War & the Great Powers* assumes some prior knowledge but is one of the most comprehensive books on the region from 1804 to 1999. Glenny's *The Fall of Yugoslavia* is an easier-to-read tome on the ex-Yugoslav wars. Though not without critics, Glenny spells out details with verve and clarity.

*The Balkans: A Short History* by Mark Mazower distils history and culture into an accessible account. John Allcock's *Explaining Yugoslavia* pulls together historical, cultural and political analysis to reach some surprising conclusions.

Historian Noel Malcolm takes on the near-impossible task of clearly presenting disputed histories in *Bosnia: A Short History* and *Kosovo: A Short History* – neither is light but both are authoritative.

## Travel Literature

Travel literature in these parts was defined by Rebecca West's gargantuan *Black Lamb & Grey Falcon*. Written in the 1940s, Dame West's journey through the Balkans is heavily dated and has evident bias, but her lyrical observations may become an indispensable travel companion, if you don't mind lugging 1200 pages.

One of many to have stalked West, Tony White's unapologetic *Another Fool in the Balkans: In the Footsteps of Rebecca West* is littered with a cast of interesting characters White encounters on the road.

Robert Kaplan's portable *Balkan Ghosts* takes an engaging look at the region in the mid-1990s and is rumoured to have influenced Bill Clinton's policies in the area.

*Through the Embers of Chaos: Balkan Journeys* by Dervla Murphy is terrific. At the age of 70, this courageous Irishwoman cycled through Yugoslavia; *Through the Embers* offers political analysis and insight alongside anecdotes of her adventures.

Chris Deliso's *Hidden Macedonia* is an engrossing travelogue that documents a recent journey around the great lakes of Ohrid and Prespa, shared by Greece, Albania and Macedonia.

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# TOP PICKS



## FESTIVALS

Festivals in the Western Balkans are as diverse as the region itself. Some symbolise triumphant resistance, others are cultural rites of passage, others are revered as timeless rituals, and others are just a good old-fashioned excuse for a party. Here are some – but not all – you should try to be a part of.

- Rijeka Carnival, Rijeka (Croatia), January or February (p211)
- Strumica Carnival, Strumica (Macedonia), beginning of Lent (p326)
- Budva Festival of Mediterranean Song, Budva (Montenegro), June (p352)
- Bašćaršijske Noći, Sarajevo (BiH), July (p120)
- Exit Festival, Novi Sad (Serbia), July (see the boxed text, p401)
- Ohrid Summer Festival, Ohrid (Macedonia), July and August (p305)
- Summer festivals in Dubrovnik, Split, Pula and Zagreb (Croatia), July and August (p255)
- Sarajevo Film Festival, Sarajevo (BiH), August (p120)
- Dragačevo Trumpet Festival, Kopaonik (Serbia), August (see the boxed text, p414)
- Tirana Film Festival, Tirana (Albania), November or December (p66)

## NIGHTSPOTS

A trip(out) through the Western Balkans is rewarding for the nocturnal traveller. Beach boozing on the Dalmatian coast and explorations of the emerging scene in Macedonia are training for the grand finale in the clubbing capital, Belgrade.

- Mumja (p69), Tirana (Albania)
- OKC Abrašević (p137), Mostar (BiH)
- The Garden (p224) and Barbarella's (p224), Zadar (Croatia)
- Jazz Inn (p306), Ohrid (Macedonia)
- Maximus (p349), Kotor (Montenegro)
- Anderground (p395), Belgrade (Serbia)

Fitzroy Maclean offers the thrill of a spy novel alongside endearing British humour as he parachutes into Yugoslavia for adventures with Tito in *Eastern Approaches*.

Nicholas Bouvier's *The Way of the World* pays literary homage to pre-hippie trail travel. Bouvier's journey kicks off in 1950s Serbia and Macedonia and is written with living, breathing, dizzying vividness.

*Wild Europe: The Balkans in the Gaze of Western Travellers* by Božidar Jezernik is a collage of 500 years of travellers' impressions of the Balkans.

## Magazines

Those wanting to keep their finger on the beating pulse of the Balkans will enjoy the following.

**Cafe Babel** ([www.cafebabel.com](http://www.cafebabel.com)) A smart, edgy, multilingual online magazine showing how cosmopolitan young Europe is.

**Hidden Europe** ([www.hiddeneurope.co.uk](http://www.hiddeneurope.co.uk)) A monthly magazine exploring far-flung corners of the continent including the Western Balkans. A free weekly e-newsletter is available.

**The Bridge** ([www.bridge-mag.com/magazine](http://www.bridge-mag.com/magazine)) Online and print editions focusing on European integration.

### Websites

**Balkan Travellers** ([www.balkantravellers.com](http://www.balkantravellers.com)) An upbeat site that'll give you itchier feet than a bad case of tinea.

**Balkanology** ([www.balkanology.com](http://www.balkanology.com)) Impressive home-grown travel site maintained by a Balkans enthusiast.

**In Your Pocket** ([www.inyourpocket.com](http://www.inyourpocket.com)) Snappy downloadable pocket guides to cities and countries including several in this region.

**Southeast European Times** ([www.setimes.com](http://www.setimes.com)) Economic and political site for keeping track of serious stuff.

**Thorn Tree** (<http://thorntree.lonelyplanet.com>) The Eastern Europe and the Caucasus branch of Lonely Planet's travellers' bulletin covers the Western Balkans.

**Virtual Tourist** ([www.virtualltourist.com](http://www.virtualltourist.com)) Reviews, forums, photos and tips from travellers and amateur experts.

## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

You may need to book accommodation ahead during festivals, but it's well worth the effort. See country chapters for details on local festivals and take a look at the boxed text, p23.

# Itineraries

## CLASSIC ROUTES

### THE ESSENTIAL TOUR

### Three Weeks

Start in **Zagreb** (p180) for plazas and parks. Head south for sea breezes on Croatia's dramatic **Dalmatian coast** (p220). Ferry to the island oasis of **Hvar** (p238), before heading to architecturally awesome **Dubrovnik** (p244). Detour into Bosnia and Hercegovina (BiH) for the iconic Old Bridge of **Mostar** (p131) and the captivating city of **Sarajevo** (p110). Hopping south to Montenegro's **Bay of Kotor** (p341) brings you to the walled port towns of **Herceg Novi** (p341) and **Kotor** (p345). Next, make for the Albanian capital **Tirana** (p62) via the mountain town of **Kruja** (p73). Moving to Macedonia, visit churches and lounge by the lake in **Ohrid** (p301) before exploring the old town of **Skopje** (p289). From here, it's a skip to Kosovo's monasteries, which are all accessible from **Pristina** (p273). If all's well at the border, cross into Serbia and pick up the pace in **Belgrade** (p381), party capital of the Balkans. Wind down in **Fruška Gora** (p402) for a taste of Serbia's Orthodox Christian heritage (and its local wines), before coming full circle with your return to Zagreb.



This do-before-you-die trip in the Western Balkans covers every country of the region. It journeys along Croatia's Dalmatian coast and detours into Bosnia before reaching Montenegro, then plunges south into Albania and loops through Macedonia and Kosovo before taking in Serbia on the way back to Zagreb.



## ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

### THE WILD SIDE

### One Month

Pula on Croatia's Istrian coast is the stepping-off point to **Brijuni Islands National Park** (p207). Further south, **Plitvice Lakes National Park** (p224), near Zadar, is a must for its turquoise lakes. From here you could cross over into BiH to explore the **Una Valley** (p161), near Bihać, for its gorges, castles and rapids, then head down to the wet wilds of the **Kornati Islands** (p222). **Makarska** (p235), on the Adriatic, is a great base for hiking up Mt Biokovo. Further south, check out the national park on **Mljet Island** (p242). In BiH, explorations of the shepherd villages behind **Mt Bjelašnica** (p129) are real and rewarding. Then, paying heed to landmine warnings, spend time conquering the canyons, waterfalls and valleys of **Sutjeska National Park** (p146). Over the border is Montenegro's best nature reserve, **Durmitor National Park** (p365), dotted with lakes and home to a ski resort. Here you can also raft through the immense **Tara Canyon** (p365). Head down to the **Bay of Kotor** (p341) and **Lake Skadar National Park** (p360). For something very new and very wild, head into the **Balkans Peace Park** (see the boxed text, p61), where Montenegro, Albania and Kosovo meet. Depending on the safety situation, consider exploring Kosovo's **Sara National Park** (see p273) on your way to Macedonia's **Mavrovo National Park** (p298) in the west. Slice up to Serbia's rugged **Kopaonik** (p413) near the southern city of Novi Pazar. There's also **Đerdap National Park** (p381) on the Romania border, with its striking 'Iron Gate' gorge. The monasteries of **Fruška Gora** (p402) are ensconced by nature and connected by walking trails in Serbia's Vojvodina region.

This trip hikes, walks, rafts and skis through natural wonders to the far edges of the region. Kick off in Croatia and take on the region's crevices and canyons, enjoying as many thrills and spills as you can handle (don't forget your travel insurance).



## WORLD HERITAGE SIGHTS

### Two to Three Weeks

From Corfu, catch a ferry to Albania's Saranda for the ruins of **Butrint** (p87), and on to the Ottoman-era town of **Gjirokastra** (p88). History buffs will drool in Albania's finest Ottoman town, **Berat** (p75). Bus into Macedonia for the churches of **Ohrid** (p301) and on to **Treskavec Monastery** (p318), near Prilep. From Prilep, head north into Kosovo via **Skopje** (p289) for **Gračaniča monastery** (p276) near Pristina, and consider a day trip to Peja for **Dečani Monastery** (p277) and the **Patriarchate of Peć** (p277). It's now a short trip into Serbia's **Novi Pazar** (p410) – if there's no trouble at the border – from where you can see **Sopoćani monastery** (p411) and nearby **Studenica** (p412). Travel through Serbia's stunning Zlatibor region to **Višegrad** (p146), across the border in BiH, for literature's *Bridge on the Drina* (Mehmed Paša Sokolović). Next, travel to Montenegro's spectacular **Durmitor National Park** (p365), from where it's a short hop to Montenegro's old capital at **Cetinje** (p358), and idyllic **Kotor** (p345) on the gulf of the same name. Heading up the Adriatic coast into Croatia, visit **Dubrovnik's old town** (p244), one of the most famous World Heritage sites in the region and a jumping-off point for Croatian islands. From here, detour into BiH, for the iconic Old Bridge of **Mostar** (p131), before moving up the Dalmatian coast to incredible **Hvar island** (p238). Continuing along the coast, make your way to the historical centre of **Split** (p227) and the nearby town of **Trogir** (p235). Further north and a little inland there's the rugged heritage site (and respite from tourist crowds) **Plitvice Lakes National Park** (p224). Finally, head to the Istria region and the enormous Euphrasian basilica at **Poreč** (p199).

This trip weaves indulgently through the cultural and historical treasures of the Western Balkans, offering a taste of the region's ancient and evolving traditions – and its spectacular scenery. Unassuming villages along the way offer insight into the Austro-Hungarian, Orthodox and Ottoman influences that underpin the region's psyche.



## TAILORED TRIPS

### LAKES & BEACHES

If you like lying by lakes or want to be beside the seaside...from northern Greece, hop over to **Ohrid** (p301) – the jewel of Macedonia – for leisurely days on Lake Ohrid (the deepest lake in the Balkans). Moving south to the tip of Albania, visit the small resort of **Ksamil** (p87), with beach views over to Corfu.

From Saranda (slightly north of Ksamil), catch a ferry for a side trip to Corfu. Head north along the Ionian coast for the blissful beach at **Dhërmi** (p84). The enormous natural repository of **Lake Skadar** (p360) straddles Albania and Montenegro; stop here on your way to **Sveti Stefan** (p353) and **Petrovac** (p353) in Montenegro. Croatia's seaside resorts are booming, but there are still some lesser-known spots to lay your towel. **Cavtat** (see the boxed text, p250) is a good alternative to Dubrovnik, while **Mljet Island** (p242) and **Korčula Island** (p240) are more laid-back than Hvar. **Brela** (p236), near Makarska, has 6km of pebbly beach. Further north, heavenly **Zadar** (p220) is a base for the **Kornati Islands** (p222). **Rab Island** (p217) has dozens of tiny coves and beaches. For a touch of class there's **Opatija** (p214) or, by casual contrast,

the many camping grounds around **Pula** (p204) are laid-back bases for beach basking along the Istrian Peninsula.

### BALKANS BY RAIL

All aboard for epic old-world train travel! Take a train from Eastern Europe into the Croatian capital **Zagreb** (p180), where Rebecca West's train first pulled in all those years ago. From there, train to the port town **Rijeka** (p210) and chug down the length of Croatia until you spill out at **Split** (p227) on the Dalmatian coast. Leaving aside trains for a while, sunbathe your way south, before crossing into BiH to visit the Virgin of **Međugorje** (p139) and see the Old Bridge of **Mostar** (p131), from where you can pick up a Doboj-bound train, with a stop-off in **Sarajevo** (p110). Crossing back into Croatia, catch a train in Osijek to Serbia's **Novi Sad** (p399) for day trips in the Vojvodina region. Train on to **Belgrade** (p381) for a day trip on the old-world **Romantika train** (p390). From the transport hub of Užice, get to **Mokra Gora** (p416) for

the restored Šargan 8 railway, which once upon a time linked Belgrade with Sarajevo. To end your journey at the beach, continue on the stunning route from Užice via **Podgorica** (p362) to **Bar** (p354) on the Montenegrin coast. Alternatively, go completely off the regular rails by heading to **Skopje** (p289) via **Niš** (p408) and onwards to **Pristina** (p273) – if the train is running.



# Snapshots

## CURRENT EVENTS

Though the Western Balkans still feels the weight of its past, nowadays it's actively confronting it in a bid to move towards the future. And that future is with Europe.

EU membership is conditional on bringing war criminals to justice. Croatia – the first country of the region to apply for membership, in 2003 – saw the arrest of fugitive General Ante Gotovina in December 2005. Macedonia saw the April 2007 commencement of the Hague trial of former interior minister Ljube Boskovski for alleged war crimes during the 2001 ethnic Albanian rebellion. The July 2008 arrest of Radovan Karadžić – wanted for his alleged involvement in several crimes against humanity, including the 1995 Srebrenica genocide – in Belgrade caused jubilation in the streets of Sarajevo.

Some countries are dealing with heavy issues on their way West. Macedonia's relations with Greece were tested when its long-held dream of NATO membership was vetoed by Greece in April 2008, raising speculation on what will happen when it makes a bid for the EU. Since it became an EU candidate in December 2005, Macedonia has been working to afford its ethnic Albanian minority greater autonomy. In June 2006, Albania increased its EU membership efforts by stamping out crime and corruption and ensuring minority freedoms. The death of media magnate and champion of independent reportage Dritan Hoxha was a blow to Albania. Croatia is making progress in the inclusion of minorities; the deputy prime minister of the new Croatian government as of January 2008 is the first Serb in a key position. Serbia's newly elected government has been moving towards Europe, signalled by its surrender of several war criminals to the Hague. This and the fact that issues of organised crime and state corruption are now openly challenged rather than hopelessly accepted give weight to the EU enlargement commissioner's recent comment that 'there is a new dawn for the Western Balkans, and it is a European dawn'.

But, while most states are busy preening themselves for EU scrutiny, independence issues are not entirely resolved. Kosovo's declaration of independence in February 2008 didn't quite go down in the same smooth way that Montenegro broke from Serbia. While Albanian flags hang defiantly in the streets of Pristina, Serbia remains adamant that 'Kosovo is the heart of Serbia'.

But even with complicated issues like this, the region can generally be said to be on a forward trajectory. Some controversial debates are going on, but the fact that they are is a step towards a more open future. And this won't be achieved purely through political channels.

Take the Eurovision Song Contest. Western and central Europeans may see the event as a bit of kitsch fun, but this blinged-up bonanza is a deeply serious affair in the Western Balkans. The political undertones of past song contests showed how lyrics could replace bullets as performers made controversial pro-independence gestures. Since independence has been largely achieved, the competition now shows how music can transcend ethnic and national divisions, as pop stars earn respect across the whole region. This was never more evident than in 2007, when the tragic death of former Macedonian Eurovision contestant Toše Proeski unified the region in deep mourning. That same year, Serbia's triumph at the song contest was a victory for a 'new Serbia'; the fact that every voting country of the former

The European Stability Initiative (ESI) releases in-depth reports on various countries in the Western Balkans on its website [www.esiweb.org](http://www.esiweb.org).

Richard Burton portrayed Josef Broz Tito in the 1973 big-budget film *Sutjeska*.

Yugoslavia awarded it that victory prompted new reconciliation hopes and gave Serbia the opportunity to lay to rest its pariah past when it hosted the event in 2008.

Beyond Eurovision, every cultural and social sphere is enjoying the fact that insulation is no longer the template for creative expression. Clubs and restaurants, artists and authors, fashionistas and baristas are all pushing and crossing boundaries in the Balkans. Old traditions and new trends are enjoyed free of their former political baggage; artistic movements are moving in creative rather than party-line directions; underground scenes are underground because they want to be, not because they have to be; and turbo-folk music isn't played in the way of propaganda but simply because there's no accounting for taste. New states such as Montenegro are just as excited about Madonna's upcoming concert as American fans would be, and internationally renowned DJs are spinning even in small cities such as Skopje. 'Scenes' ebb and flow, but almost everywhere in the Western Balkans is pumping to some kind of beat.

All in all, while the past doesn't feel so long ago, the future feels even closer.

## HISTORY

Winston Churchill once commented that 'the Balkans produce more history than they consume'. Indeed, the movement of invaders, settlers and traders back and forth across the region over the years has created an intricate – and complicated – patchwork of cultures, societies, religions, ethnicities and conflicts.

### Tribes, Colonies & Empires

The region hasn't been controlled by one government since the Roman Empire. Farming came to the area around 6000 BC, and was well established by 4000 BC. By 700 BC the local population grew as increasing amounts of iron tools, horses and chariots helped spread trade routes. By the time Celtic tribes drove south and mixed with native Illyrian and Thracian tribes, there were Greek colonies along the coast of Albania and Croatia. Evidence of Illyrians (ancestors of modern-day Albanians) in the Western Balkans dates to 1200 BC; some areas of Albania have been occupied by their descendants ever since.

The Greeks were also early occupants of the Balkans; whether family groups joined extant populations or whether armies of conquerors invaded is not known, but it is clear that Greek influences infiltrated the region early on. From the 2nd century BC, the influence of the Roman Empire began encroaching, particularly into the western part of the region, while Greek influences remained dominant in the east. The first division of the region can be dated to AD 395, when Emperor Theodosius split the unwieldy Roman Empire into an eastern, Greek-influenced half ruled from Byzantium (later Constantinople) and a western, Latin-influenced half ruled from Rome. This division laid the first fault line between the eastern and western churches, even before the original Serbs and Croats had settled in. The Roman Empire was weakened by economic crises and plagues around the time it was divided, and Slavic invaders plundering the region, giving rise to the 'barbarian' dark age in the Balkans. The western part of the empire was significantly weakened, but Greek civilisation survived in sections of the eastern part, and many Slavs were Hellenised. Both Roman and Greek influences remain today; the Romans introduced roads and vineyards and constructed towns and fortresses, while the existence of Greek communities in parts of southern Albania today testifies to the endurance of Greek civilisation.

In 2007, the Bosnian town of Tuzla claimed the world record for simultaneous kissing – almost 7000 couples participated.

The Bosnian town of Visoko may (or may not) be home to a 250m-high, 12,000-year-old pyramid built by an extinct super-culture (see p150).

## The Coming of the Slavs

The Avar, Goth and Hun invasions weakened Roman defences along the Danube so much that Slav tribes (farmers and herders originally from eastern Ukraine) were able to move south of the river during the 5th and 6th centuries. Two distinct southern Slavic groups were discernable; one would eventually become Croatians and fall under Charlemagne in the 8th century, leading to the Catholicisation of Croatia and the eventual recognition of the Croatian state by the pope in 879. Meanwhile, the Eastern Orthodox influences of Constantinople prevailed over Slavic Serbs.

In the 9th century Christian monks such as Methodius and Cyril (the early namesake of the Cyrillic alphabet based on Byzantine Greek letters, which eventually became the alphabet of Serbian and Macedonian languages) began to evangelise the Slavs.

Another divide occurred in the same era that Cyril and Methodius were sharpening their quills. The Franks took over the northwest of the region and the Croats and Slovenes came under Western European cultural influence. The first independent Croatian kingdom appeared under Ban Tomislav in 924 and remained a distinct crown right through to the end of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, to which it became attached.

In the rest of the region the Byzantine Empire was weakening militarily but still held a great deal of cultural influence. The first Serb principality was established under the Byzantine umbrella around 850, but it wasn't until the 12th century that Stefan I Nemanja established the first fully independent Serbian kingdom. One of his sons, Stefan II, built Serbia into a stable nation, recognised as independent by the pope but still with religious ties to the Orthodox Church in Constantinople. Another son, Rastko, would go on to become St Sava. Many of Serbia's great religious artworks date from this time, as artists combined Byzantine iconography with local styles. It is also this era that gave rise to a strong Serbian national identity. The most powerful of all Nemanjić kings, Stefan Dušan, was crowned in 1331 (after doing away with his father); he established the Serbian Orthodox Patriarchate at Peć in western Kosovo, introduced a legal code and expanded the Serbian empire.

## Turkish Overlords: The Ottoman Era

The Seljuk Turks swept out of central Asia into the Byzantine heartland of Anatolia in the 11th century. Their successors, the Ottomans, established a base in Europe in 1354 and steadily increased their European territories over the next century. The Ottoman 'victory' (more of a draw, in fact) over the Serbs at Kosovo Polje in 1389 completed the separation of the southern Slavs; the Catholic Croats remained beyond Turkish rule, while Orthodox Serbs and Macedonians were now under it. The Turks had conquered almost the entire region by 1500. The core of Montenegro remained independent under a dynasty of prince-bishops from their mountain stronghold at Cetinje. Suleyman the Magnificent led the Ottoman charge, taking Belgrade in 1521 and pushing on as far as Vienna, besieged in 1529.

Over time, some communities (particularly in Bosnia, Albania and Kosovo) adopted Islam. The reasons for the conversion are complex. For Albanians, conversion to Islam occurred gradually in a piecemeal fashion; a famous Albanian poet once said that the true religion of Albania is simply being Albanian. As late as 1900 there were families in central Albania who had Muslim names in public but used Christian names at home. In the mountainous north, some Albanian tribes remained Catholic, while their traditional rivals embraced Islam. Many Roma communities also converted to Islam.

Serbs kept the dream of independence alive through romanticising the *hajduks* (bandits) who had taken to the hills to raid Turkish caravans, and

Don't put your bag on the floor in Serbia – it brings bad luck (and makes the bag easier to pinch).

through epic poems retelling the betrayals that led to the end of their empire at the 1389 battle of Kosovo Polje. Some Serbs moved to the shifting frontier region between the Catholic Austrians and the Turks, which more or less coincides with the modern border between BiH and Croatia. This stark mountain region became known as Krajina, meaning 'borderland'. The Serbs of Krajina were under constant pressure to convert to Catholicism, another theme in Serbian identity.

Beyond the existence of Muslim communities throughout the region, almost five centuries of Ottoman control left marks. Some towns are distinctly Turkish, with strong Ottoman architectural influences. Turkish tastes infiltrated regional cuisines, with *burek* and Turkish coffee becoming Balkans staples, and various words were adopted into the local languages. A less tangible mark is that left on the national psyche, manifesting as both affinity to Turkey and conversely in pride at having resisted it over 500 years and numerous generations.

### Ottoman Decline

By 1700 the Ottoman Empire was lagging behind the other great European powers. The Austrians pushed south and reconquered Croatia, and began eyeing territory further south. Over succeeding centuries, the once all-conquering Ottoman Empire failed to adjust to changes in the global economy. As Europe industrialised, the Balkans domains instead descended into corrupt agricultural fiefdoms, over which the empire had little direct control but from which it still demanded financial tribute. By the 1860s, the Ottoman sultans in Istanbul needed ever greater loans to fund their opulent courts and lavish harems; British and French bankers were all too happy to oblige, with juicy interest rates. But, with spiralling debt repayments to make, the empire's peasants were taxed ever more harshly. Unrest spread. In 1873, the empire's debts led to a widespread banking collapse. More than ever the authorities were tax hungry, yet the following year saw disastrous harvests. The result in 1875 and 1877 was a wave of Christian revolts, led initially by Bosnian peasants such as Mrkonjić, who would later become Serbian King Peter I. The Turkish backlash designed to stop the revolt was so brutal that sympathetic 'brother' Slav Tchaikovsky composed his famous *Slavonic March* as a sort of 19th-century Band Aid equivalent. International tempers rose. Serbia declared war on Turkey and suddenly the Bosnian revolts had snowballed into a Balkans-wide tangle of war that was widely known as the Great Eastern Crisis.

The crisis saw Turkey's European forces crushingly defeated, notably through a resurgent Russia and an expanded, newly independent Bulgaria. But the egos of Europe's other big powers had to be stroked. This meant that the eventual carve-up of Turkey's European lands was achieved not on the battlefield but with the 1878 Treaty of Berlin, drawn up with staggering disregard for ethno-linguistic realities. The chairman, German Chancellor Bismarck, quaffed prodigious volumes of port wine to calm the pain of his shingles and hurried the proceedings along, anxious to start his summer holidays. As a counterweight to Russian power in Bulgaria, the Austro-Hungarian Empire was persuaded to take military control of Bosnia in 1878, a decision that would alter Bosnia forever and ultimately lead to Austro-Hungary's downfall.

### The Rise of Pan-Slavism

The bloody decline of Turkish power and the emergence of competing nationalisms gave rise to pan-Slavism – the idea of uniting Croats, Serbs and Slovenians under one flag. Croatian bishop Josip Strossmayer was a

The London-based Bosnian Institute has a good website for Bosnian history (one of the founders was historian Noel Malcolm). Follow the links from [www.bosnia.org.uk](http://www.bosnia.org.uk).

strong proponent of pan-Slavism, and founded the Yugoslav Academy of Arts & Sciences in 1867. An independent Serbian kingdom gradually emerged over the 19th century, expanding from its early base around Belgrade. The Austro-Hungarian claim of Bosnia and competition between Serbia, Greece and Bulgaria for the remaining Ottoman territories in Albania, Macedonia and northern Greece intensified. Ethnic nationalism grew as competing powers manipulated identities and allegiances, particularly in Macedonia, where Greek, Bulgarian and Serbian struggles for expansion resulted in 40 years of rebellion, invasions and reprisals, culminating in the landmark Ilinden uprising of August 1903 and its brutal suppression two weeks later.

The First Balkan War in 1912 pushed the Turks back to Constantinople and forced them to concede Macedonia and Kosovo to Serbia. But the Greeks, Serbs and Bulgarians soon began fighting each other. The conflict spilled into the Second Balkan War of 1913, which drew in Romania and ended unsatisfactorily for all, though it did expand Serbian territory once more. Slavic movements were agitating for the union of Bosnia (controlled by Austria) with Serbia. In this climate, Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914. Though the assassin was not connected to the Serbian government, this act triggered a domino effect of retaliation throughout Europe, beginning with the Austrian invasion of Serbia. WWI led to unimaginable loss of lives, and the weakened Serbia became an entity of the greater southern Slav Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes – a pan-Slavic dream named ‘Yugoslavia’ in 1929. Albania also emerged as an independent state, ruled by the self-proclaimed king, Zog. Both countries were largely rural, Ruritanian dictatorships with very little industry. Neither regime would be able to resist the Italian and German invasions during WWII.

*Homeland Calling: Exile Patriotism and the Balkan Wars* by Paul Hockenos explores the fascinating stories of émigrés who involved themselves in the wars back ‘home’.

## WWII

The Balkans stood between Hitler and Russia, presenting states in the region with two very unattractive choices: join or resist Nazism.

The fascist Croatian Ustaše fought communists and Serbs, the Germans fought communists and royalist Chetniks, and Albanian factions fought the Germans, the Italians and each other. The Germans had installed the far-right Croatian Ustaše party as leaders of the Independent State of Croatia, which included modern Croatia, BiH and parts of Serbia and Slovenia. The Ustaše’s brutality towards Serbs in particular was shocking even by Nazi standards; Ustaše attempts to convert Orthodox Serbs to Catholicism on pain of death and its systematic murder of Serbs, Jews, Roma and communists is said to have given rise to the term ‘ethnic cleansing’.

Determined Serbian resistance was met with brutal reprisals delivered on civilian populations; at one point the Nazi policy was to murder 100 Serbian civilians for every German killed. Two crucial resistance movements emerged; one was the Chetniks, led by Draža Mihailović, and the other was the pro-communist Partisans, led by Josip Broz Tito. Conflict between the two groups and their common enemy, the Ustaše, resulted in civil war. Ultimately the latter galvanised the most support throughout the region, eventually winning British and Soviet support. Tito and Albanian communist party leader Enver Hoxha took the reins of the region and dispatched their rivals with bullets or sent them to prison camps. Around 10% of the region’s population perished during WWII.

After WWII Stalin wanted Yugoslavia, Bulgaria and Albania to be united into one communist federation. The Bulgarian leadership scuppered the idea.

## Communism & Collectivisation

Yugoslavia and Albania were the only countries in Europe where communists took power without the assistance of the USSR’s Red Army. This gave communist-party leaders an unusual amount of freedom compared with



Thousands of ex-Yugoslavs pay 'homage' to Tito at [www.tito-ville.com](http://www.tito-ville.com). The site includes songs, speeches, portraits, medals and honours, biographies of his many mistresses, and Tito jokes.

other communist regimes in Eastern Europe. The Yugoslav communist party was quick to collectivise agriculture, but by the late 1940s it faced stagnant growth and dwindling popularity. Fed up with interference from Moscow, Tito broke with Stalin in 1948. The collectivisation of land was reversed in 1953, and within a year most peasants had returned to farming independently. Reforms were successful and the economy was booming in the late 1950s. Albania's leader, Hoxha, looked on Yugoslavia's reforms with utter distaste and kept true to hard-line Stalinism. The Albanian communist party controlled every aspect of society – religion was banned during a Chinese-style cultural revolution in the late 1960s and the country became a communist hermit kingdom.

Tito's brand of socialism was different. Almost uniquely, Yugoslavs were able to travel freely to Western countries as well as within the Eastern Bloc. In the 1960s Yugoslavia's self-management principles contributed to a struggle between the republics within it. Richer republics such as Croatia wanted more power devolved to the republics, while Serbia's communist leaders wanted more centralised control. The Albanian majority in Kosovo started to protest against Serbian control in the 1960s, which began the long cycle of riots, violence and repression that lasted until the UN took control of the territory in 1999. Ripples of tension continue today. There was a saying that the Yugoslav dream began in Kosovo and would end in Kosovo; it seems that this has turned out to be true.

## Things Fall Apart

After Tito's death in 1980 the federal presidency rotated annually among the eight members of the State Presidency. The economy stalled as foreign debt mounted, and rivalries between the constituent republics grew. Serbian communist-party boss Slobodan Milošević exploited tensions by playing up disturbances between Serbs and Kosovar Albanians in Kosovo, allowing him to consolidate his power base.

As the democracy movement swept Eastern Europe, tensions grew between central powers in Belgrade, dominated by Milošević, and pro-democracy, pro-independence forces in the republics. Slovenia declared independence in 1991 and after a short war became the first republic to break free of Yugoslavia. Croatia soon followed, but the Serbs of the mountainous Krajina region set up their own state. Macedonia became independent without much trouble, but when Bosnia followed suit the country fell into a brutal civil war between the three main communities: Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats. The war continued until 1995 and cost 200,000 lives.

The Dayton Peace Accords divided the country into a federation, awarding 49% to the Serbs and 51% to a Croat-Muslim federation. In the same year the newly strengthened Croatian army conquered the breakaway Serbs' regions. Meanwhile, in rump Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro) the worst hyperinflation in history occurred between 1993 and 1995, when prices grew by five quadrillion per cent; think of the number five with 15 zeroes after it. Albania's communist regime was toppled in 1992, and the country descended into a free-market vacuum of anarchy; peasants stole animals and equipment from the old collective farms, people pillaged factories for building materials, and gangsters ruled major port towns.

It all came to a head in 1997, when the collapse of pyramid banking schemes set off a violent uprising. In Kosovo, rebel Albanians began a guerrilla campaign against Serb forces in 1996. NATO eventually intervened with a bombing campaign that forced Serbian forces to withdraw from the region. The territory has been under UN control ever since, with the UN recently setting out on a path to extract itself. Serbian strongman Slobodan

Unhappy with the conflicts during the break-up of Yugoslavia, the villagers of Vevčani in Macedonia voted to declare their home an independent republic in 1991.

The film *No Man's Land* sees a Serb and a Bosnian soldier trapped in a trench. More complications occur when the media and UN bumble in.

Milošević was finally knocked from power in 2001. The war in Kosovo spilled over into Macedonia, where around a quarter of the population is ethnic Albanian. An accord promising more self-government for Albanian areas helped to restore peace.

By 2002 the region was finally mostly peaceful but for lingering fears over the stability of Kosovo and Macedonia. Montenegro declared independence in June 2006, to which Serbia responded by declaring itself the independent successor state of the former union of Serbia and Montenegro. Kosovo's declaration of independence in February 2008 didn't go down the same way; Serbia held the declaration to be illegal.

## Peace Breaks Out

Despite lingering concerns about Kosovo and Macedonia, a historical recap of the region shows just how much progress has been made in the last decade. People who fled the area in search of asylum and livelihood are now drifting back. Where hyperinflation was such that it was cheaper to plaster walls with banknotes than wallpaper, economies are now stable and black markets a thing of the past. Since the international community stepped in to lend a hand to Albania, it has made a successful recovery, going from failed state to EU candidate. Croatia – the first state in the Western Balkans to apply for EU membership – is rising above past persecution and now has a Serb deputy prime minister. After years of communist isolation and the wars of the 1990s, the region has opened up and democratic processes have been established. Former enemies are talking again and almost every ethnic, religious, cultural and national mixture is possible. Obstacles to stability such as organised crime and corruption still linger, but now they are viewed as challenges rather than inevitable by-products of failed statehood.

As countries of the region strive for EU integration, more and more war criminals are being surrendered to the Hague. Where once such criminals hid in government skirts, democratically elected leaders are now stepping forward to acknowledge past wrongs and collaborate in attempts to bring war criminals to justice. Where such trials were once considered to point fingers at particular states, now the region is uniting to acknowledge that the crimes of the past were crimes against the whole of humanity.

## PEOPLE

As with anywhere in the world, generalising about people in a region as diverse as this one is near-on impossible. The Western Balkans is inhabited by Slavs, Albanians, descendants of Ottoman Turks, Vlachs, Jews and Roma. A given person can have a fascinating combination of nationality, ethnicity, language and religion. Think for instance about the Muslim Roma in Macedonia whose neighbour is a Catholic Albanian or the nonbelieving Croatian Serb living in BiH. Physically this cast of characters may be indistinguishable, but divisions between them have run deep throughout the region's history.

When it comes to talking about the past, the people you meet will show you many sides of different stories and help you understand that there are few blacks and whites in the Western Balkans. Many will express frustration at how simplistically issues were chalked up by the outside world, and still are. Serbians especially feel that they were demonised by the media, despite the fact that many Serbs were just as victimised by Milošević as people in neighbouring countries were. Indeed, many Serbs lost their lives opposing Milošević. Elsewhere you will encounter still more shades of grey. You will meet people in BiH and elsewhere who will tell you how local criminals were often as heinous during the war as neighbouring aggressors

Brenda Brkusić's *Freedom from Despair* is a riveting film that mixes documentary footage with re-enactments to tell the story of Croatia's struggle against ex-Yugoslavia.

*The Culture of Lies* by Croatian dissident Dubravka Ugrešić mercilessly examines the little dictators and macho blather of the 1990s.

Nikola Tesla, the brilliant Serbian inventor, was working on a 'death beam' when he died, the plans for which mysteriously disappeared. For more on Tesla, see the boxed text, p389.

In the Albanian *kanun* tradition, 'sworn virgins' are women who assume the role (dress, habits, privileges...) of men. From the day they take their oath, they are respected by the family and community as the male patriarch of the family. See the boxed text, p56.

and blame current problems as much on corruption in their own countries as on foreign policies. On the other hand, you might encounter Albanians who are vocally proud of independence but deafeningly quiet about the 40 years under Hoxha's rule.

In countries of the former Yugoslavia, some of the older generation will recall the extensive opportunities they enjoyed under communism and lament the lack of opportunities for their children today, but nostalgia for the economic certainty of life under Tito is not the same as supporting him.

After many turbulent years, the revolutionary habit of raging against the machine dies hard. Many people are actively engaged in or at least highly opinionated about politics and vocal in support of or in opposition to policies relating to their future. Young people in particular are excited about a European future, with some already joking, 'Where is the Western Balkans? You are in Europe!' On the other hand, you'll also come across people in quiet and prosperous places who have reached opinion-fatigue and just want to get on with their lives without discussing everything along the way.

The movement of people around the region and beyond it has left indelible marks on modern life. Millions of ex-Yugoslavs and Albanians left to work in Western Europe, and just about everyone in the region has an uncle or cousin or hairdresser who left for Canada or Germany or Australia. The wars of the 1990s sparked another wave of departures.

Those who permanently settled in their adopted countries gave rise to new diasporas around the region and beyond. Others returned with new skills, languages, ideas and trends. The increasing cosmopolitanism borne of this movement of people is particularly evident in larger cities; stop someone in the street and they may understand you in a few languages, or step into an innovative new restaurant and chances are it was created by a returnee trying their hand at importing foreign culinary concepts. There is little resentment towards those who left; indeed, the support emigrants provided to friends and family back home was one of the reasons many people survived. And the truth is you will still meet people who want nothing better than to leave.

There is a darker side of movement of people; illegal migrants have used the region as a final staging post for the journey into the wealthier parts of Europe, and many victims of human trafficking originate in the Western Balkans or transit through it en route to destinations in the EU or beyond. Efforts to tackle these problems have increased in recent years.

Most people live in cities and, though fashions are as up to date, bars as sleek and latest releases just as recent as anywhere in Western Europe, strong rural affiliation remains. Many urbanites have country connections and enjoy visits home to revel in the pastoral pace and enjoy homebrewed spirits and homemade condiments. Macho undertones, which still prevail in some areas, are particularly evident in the countryside; women spend Saturday morning grocery shopping while their menfolk idle in cafes. But even in the more conservative Muslim areas you find working women huffily challenging their male counterparts in defiance of traditional gender roles.

The more people you meet in the Western Balkans the more you will be struck by their similarities rather than their differences. You'll have the privilege of meeting opinionated, creative, passionate and slightly eccentric folk in every country of the region, and the one generalisation that can absolutely be made about the lot of them is their shared tradition of warmth and hospitality. Invitations aren't embarrassingly persistent; they are sincere offers that make you feel genuinely welcome wherever you are. A related trait that also transcends ethnic divides is the laid-back approach to time as something to be passed leisurely rather than spent in a hurry.

## RELIGION

Religion is an active part of cultural life and identity in the Western Balkans, as it always has been. The Orthodox churches being raised throughout the region and the numbers of pilgrims making their way to monasteries hint at a religious resurgence. On the other hand, many who espouse a religion practise it very loosely.

The role that religion played in conflicts of the past is complex and often misunderstood. As is true the world over, people of different faiths have been pitted against each other in this region, but they also stood side by side and gave their lives in defence of each other. The relationship between religion and ethnicity is often clear; religion generally says more about a person's ethnicity than it does about their nationality or spirituality – even nonbelievers may strongly align themselves with their ancestral faith.

To break it down to bite size: the three key religions in the Western Balkans are Orthodox Christianity, Catholicism and Islam. Precise numbers are impossible to pin down, but of the 24.9 million people living in the region, around 49% are Orthodox, 22% are Muslim, another 22% Catholic and the remaining 7% belong to other faiths or profess no religion.

The biggest Orthodox Church in the Western Balkans is the Serbian Orthodox Church, with adherents in Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo, BiH and Croatia. Around 85% of Serbians are Orthodox. The Macedonian Orthodox Church split from the Serbian church in 1967, and has the allegiance of about 65% of the Macedonian population. The Albanian Orthodox Church, also a 20th-century creation, is followed by about 20% of Albanians, mostly in the southern half of the country. The Montenegrin Orthodox Church proclaimed itself distinct from the Serbian Orthodox Church as recently as 1993 and tensions still remain between the two.

Around 88% of Croats are Catholic. The Hungarians of Serbia's Vojvodina region are also predominantly Catholic. Around 10% of Albanians are Catholic too – Mother Teresa of Calcutta was born into an ethnic Albanian family in Skopje, Macedonia. There is also a smallish number of Protestants in the region, mostly ethnic Hungarians in Serbia's Vojvodina region.

The Muslim population is divided into a number of groups, the largest two being the Sunni Muslims of BiH and southern Serbia, who speak Slavic dialects, and the Albanians of Kosovo, Albania and Macedonia. There is also a small Turkish Muslim community, mostly in old Ottoman towns such as Novi Pazar in Serbia, Prizren in Kosovo and Bitola in Macedonia. Ottoman Islam, which many converted to, evolved into a far more moderate and tolerant variety of Islam than is found in many other parts of the world; drinking alcohol is acceptable and a minority of women choose to wear the veil (though more do in Islamic pockets of Macedonia than in Kosovo or Albania). There are also smaller Muslim groups in the region, including the Sufi Bektashi, named for Haji Bektash Veli (though more popularly known as the Turkish Dervishes). Originating in the 12th century, Bektashism incorporates elements of both Sunni and Shia Islam. In Sufi-inspired Bektashism, unveiled women are allowed to take part in rituals and alcohol is not prohibited. The Bektashi moved their headquarters to Tirana after Sufi orders were banned in secular Turkey. For more, see the boxed text, p57.

Despite the moderate Islam that rules in the Western Balkans, there has been increased concern in recent years about the disconcerting rise of fundamentalism. Extremist elements extant in the Balkans have been attributed to complex factors such as the influence of Wahabbis during the conflicts when they fought as mercenaries alongside Bosnian Muslims and Kosovar Albanians in the mid-1990s; foreign-funded missionary activities after the conflicts; and the influence of locals who have returned from Arab states

The Orthodox Christian tradition of Slava celebrates family patron saints. During these celebrations, families come together and the family home is open to anyone who wants to visit.

with devout religious educations. The ability of these factors to infiltrate mainstream ideology is heightened by the susceptibility of local populations that have been economically, socially and culturally displaced.

The majority of the Jewish population was murdered by the Third Reich in the 1940s, though one inspiring exception was Albania, where the Jewish population actually grew during WWII as Jewish people sought refuge there and the government and local population actively protected them throughout the war. Today there are few Jews left throughout the Balkans; there are only around 2500 in Serbia, 1700 in Croatia, 500 in Montenegro, another 500 in Macedonia and, ironically, as few as 10 in Albania. Though commemorative museums and monuments are scattered throughout the region, many synagogues have been left to fall into disrepair.

## ARTS

Creative expression has always been integral to expressing identity in the Western Balkans. Invading and prevailing cultures played tug-of-war over buildings that even today show the layers of who was here. Similarly, music not only expresses traditions and cultures but also has been used to garner support for political ideology or to rally resistance against it. Visual arts reflect and record history, and live and breathe triumphantly today after having survived past oppression.

## Literature

Literature in the Western Balkans all began with epic poetry, a tradition which survives in the Dinaric Range from Croatia to Albania and predates Homer. In Serbia, BiH and Croatia, vast epic poems were memorised and recited to the accompaniment of the violin-like *gusle*, played with a bow. They were passed down through generations like this, recording key historical events, dramatising heroic tales and giving rise to myths.

The 1389 battle of Kosovo features prominently in Serbian epic poetry. The slaying of the Turkish sultan by legendary knight Miloš Obilić was portrayed thus:

... Miloš killed the Turkish Sultan, Murad,  
And slaughtered many Turkish soldiers with him.  
May God Almighty bless the one who bore him!  
He leaves immortal fame to all the Serbs  
To be forever told in song and story  
As long as Kosovo and human kind endure.

Serbian epic poetry was first written down by the 19th-century writer and linguist Vuk Karadžić, whose works were brought to a wider audience through translations by the likes of Goethe and Walter Scott.

Contemporary literature in the region has achieved global acclaim. Bosnian-born (but revered throughout the region) Ivo Andrić won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1961 'for the epic force with which he has traced themes and depicted human destinies drawn from the history of the country'. Andrić's classic *The Bridge on the Drina* offers extraordinarily humanising insight into ethnic conflicts in the region. See p108.

Montenegrin literature is dominated by poet-prince-bishop Petar II Petrović Njegoš; his acclaimed work *The Mountain Wreath* is still a source of pride. Montenegrin writer Milovan Đilas also led a fascinating life beyond his literary pursuits. Partisan leader and one-time vice president to Tito, Đilas was on the verge of becoming president in 1954 but fell from communist grace when works critical of communism landed him in jail.

The region has a penchant for quirky statues; look for Rocky and Bob Marley in Serbia and Bruce Lee in BiH!

An excellent resource for Albanian literary enthusiasts is [www.albanianliterature.com/en](http://www.albanianliterature.com/en)

Contemporary writers include Ismail Kadare, Albania's most beloved novelist and a perennial candidate for a Nobel Prize, who was awarded the Man Booker International Prize in 2005. One of Kadare's most renowned works is *The File on H*, a short, humorous book about the epic-poetry tradition in which two Irish-American academics stumble into local politics.

Another widely acclaimed contemporary writer is Serbia's Milorad Pavić, whose books are not so much read as embarked upon as one would a surreal interactive journey (see p378).

## Architecture

The region's architecture is a three-dimensional record of previous societies. Buildings have been erected, redesigned, demolished and resurrected throughout history, making for a rich collage of stylistic contrasts.

The Roman amphitheatre at Pula in Croatia is one of the best preserved in the world, while the Euphrasian Basilica at Poreč earned a World Heritage listing for its preservation of Byzantine and classical elements dating back to the 4th century. The Croatian and Montenegrin coasts are strongly Venetian influenced. Serbia's Vojvodina region has Hungarian-influenced elements, particularly in the art nouveau buildings in Novi Sad and Subotica. The Turkish influence in mosques, madrassas (colleges for learning the Koran), hamams (public baths) and domestic architecture spreads from Macedonia to Albania, Serbia and BiH. Berat in Albania has a particularly fine set of Ottoman-era neighbourhoods, and Sarajevo and Mostar in BiH have a delightful mix of Ottoman-style structures, Orthodox churches and Habsburg-era public buildings. Baroque and Gothic architecture mostly appears in Croatia, which also has a strong legacy of Romanesque architecture, continuing long after this style had been supplanted by Gothic design in other parts of Europe.

Communist architecture is easy to spot; it fills you with dread or makes you laugh. While the unmistakable communist influence in the Western Balkans is not particularly celebrated, some of it is certainly distinct. The wackiest in the region has to be Tirana's Pyramid, built in honour of dictator Enver Hoxha. Some surviving Yugo-hotels in Serbia and Montenegro are also thrilling for their grey but groovy character. It's easy to be cynical about these, but some of them truly capture an era and are original enough to be worth hanging on to.

Builders were brought from Turkey to erect authentic structures, so what remains of the Ottoman era is fascinating for the contrast it lends to other styles. Much character has been lost in rebellious assertions of independence from the Ottomans, but interestingly, many Turkish styles left an imprint in post-Ottoman design. The Turkish *konak* is a distinct style of residence throughout the region, generally white with timber framings. The 2nd floor, often balanced on beams, protrudes over the ground floor. These *doksat* (overhanging windowed rooms) would jut over the street so as not to appropriate too much space on it but still afford the people inside a view of its goings-on. Interiors of such residencies were adapted to the lifestyles that played out in them; most of the living rooms were on the 1st floor, often adorned with *peškum* (carved hexagonal coffee tables) and *sećija* (benches along the wall), often draped with *čilim* (hand-woven carpets). Windows were shuttered so sequestered women inside could enjoy the views without being seen. Many such houses now serve as museums. The classical Ottoman mosque features a large cubed prayer area with a dome on top. Minarets on Ottoman mosques in this region are often taller and slimmer than their Arab counterparts. Inside, the *mihrab* (prayer niche) faces Mecca, and the pulpits are often carved from wood.

*Sarajevo Rose: A Balkan Jewish Notebook* by Stephen Schwartz traces the remnants of a lost Jewish world, which intermingled with the other faiths of the region.

Tragically, the region's architectural heritage has been caught in the crossfire of its conflicts over the years; hundreds of mosques, churches and monasteries have been vandalised or destroyed. The most recent such spat occurred in Kosovo and Serbia as a result of Kosovo's independence declaration in February 2008; Serbian Orthodox sites in Kosovo and Islamic mosques in Serbia continue to be guarded.

On the brighter side, there has been increased effort to restore key buildings destroyed or damaged during the wars. In Dubrovnik, for instance, dozens of buildings that were attacked from land and sea have been rebuilt. Several brave locals risked their lives during the bombardment to replace roof tiles, and similar courage was shown elsewhere in the region; the people of Sarajevo went to untold effort to protect sacred artefacts. The most iconic structure in the Western Balkans to have been resurrected after its destruction during the war is BiH's Old Bridge (see p133), which was painstakingly rebuilt in 2004 using 16th-century engineering techniques.

## Music

Candidates for the oldest living musical traditions in the Western Balkans are the old Slavonic hymns of the Serbian Orthodox Church and southern Albania's polyphonic singing. Croatia's four-voice *klapa* music is another unusual a cappella tradition. The various Islamic dervish orders have traditions of religious chants on mystical themes. One regional curiosity is *blehmuzika*, Serbian brass music influenced by Turkish and Austrian military music. It's often played by Roma bands at weddings and funerals and at the raucous Guča Trumpet Festival (see the boxed text, p414). Other folk traditions include Macedonian *gajda* (bagpipe) tunes, accompanied by drums, and Serbian peasant dances led by bagpipes, flutes and fiddles. Kosovar folk music bears the influence of Ottoman military marching songs, with careening flutes over the thudding beat of goatskin drums. The beloved traditional music of BiH is *sevdah*, derived from the Turkish word *sevda*, meaning love. The melancholy sound of *sevdah* is sometimes described as the Bosnian blues.

Enormously popular throughout the region, turbo-folk is the crass lovechild of a dirty affair between folk and pop music. During the Milošević era, turbo-folk was appropriated by the regime and heavily impregnated with nationalist messages. The intermingling of pop culture and the political scene was never more epitomised than by the marriage of turbo-folk queen 'Ceca' and Milošević henchman Arkan, described by Matthew Collin in *Guerrilla Radio* as having 'spotlighted the umbilical link between war and pop culture in the most dramatic fashion'. Though its nationalist connotations have diminished, turbo-folk is the loudest thing left over from the former Yugoslavia; video clips are gloriously reminiscent of the 1980s: female leads with gravity-defying bosom and height-defying hair are flanked by groups of choreographed dancing women.

Modern pop artists from BiH, Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia have a bigger audience than imports from other European countries throughout the former federation – 'from Triglav to the Vardar', to quote an old Yugoslav anthem. Indeed, much Balkans talent has been well received in foreign lands; Macedonia's baritone Boris Trajanov has sung all over the world and became an Unesco Artist for Peace in 2005, and classical pianist Simeon Trpčeski is world renowned.

Another influential character on the music scene in the Western Balkans is Goran Bregović. Born in Bosnia to a Serbian mother and a Croat father, the former rock star is now famed for his collaborations with famed filmmaker Emir Kusturica (including composition for the soundtracks of *Time of the Gypsies* and *Arizona Dream*, starring Johnny Depp). Bregović is a strong

**'Popular throughout the region, turbo-folk is the crass lovechild of a dirty affair between folk and pop music'**

ambassador for Balkans music and an advocate for Roma music's role in the region's cultural history. Another advocate of Roma traditions is Macedonia's Esma Rexhepova, widely acclaimed for her mastery of the music of her culture.

The music scene in the Western Balkans seems to be in a perpetual state of crescendo, with new artists and sounds emerging all the time. Even hip-hop is building a strong following throughout the region (even for horrifically named outfits like Montenegro's Monteniggers). Some do it tongue in cheek, but others are genuinely dissed. Tuzla in BiH is famed throughout the region as a centre of rap and hip-hop. More challenging types of music also have a strong base among the substantial urban bohemian community. The Skopje Jazz Festival (p293) and Serbia's Exit Festival (p401) draw larger crowds and bigger names each year. Also see the boxed text, p23.

On 16 October 2007, the Western Balkans was shaken by the loss of Toše Proeski, one of its most successful and beloved pop stars, who died in a car accident at the age of 26. Toše represented Macedonia in the 2004 Eurovision Song Contest and was a regional Unicef ambassador. He was loved for his powerful voice, compassion and charisma, and his death was met with anguish. October 17 was declared a national day of mourning in Macedonia, and fans throughout the Western Balkans deeply mourned the loss of the young star. For more, see the boxed text, p316.

## Visual Arts

Serbian and Macedonian medieval architecture is mostly on a provincial scale compared with Orthodox Christian centres such as Kyiv and Moscow, but in fresco painting local artists rivalled anything produced in the Orthodox world. Many classic frescos painted in churches and monasteries from the 10th to the 14th centuries were hidden by whitewash applied by Turkish rulers (which inadvertently helped to preserve them) and obscured by dense layers of smoke and candle residue. The frescos in the churches of Sveti Pantelejmon near Skopje and Sveti Kliment in Ohrid display a skill for expression that predates the Italian Renaissance by 150 years. Albania has a largely unknown tradition of fine Orthodox art, exemplified by the icon painter Onufri, whose colourful, expressive work is contained in a museum in Berat (p77).

An important 20th-century Yugoslav art movement was Zenitism, from the word zenith, which fused French and Russian intellectualism with Balkans passion. Belgrade's Museum of Contemporary Art (p390) has a fine collection of Zenitist works (returned after works of non-Serbian artists were purged under Milošević).

Socialist realist art dedicated to glorifying the worker and the achievements of communism had only a brief heyday in Yugoslavia – artists were allowed to return to their own styles in the early 1950s – but it lasted right up until the early 1990s in Albania. Tirana's National Art Gallery (p66) has a salon devoted to socialist realist works.

The best-known sculptor of the region is Ivan Meštrović, born into a poor farming family in Croatia in 1883. He taught himself to read from the Bible, and went on to create some of the finest examples of religious sculpture since the Renaissance. Though he emigrated to the USA, around 60 of his works are scattered around the former Yugoslavia, including the *Monument to the Unknown Hero* outside Belgrade (p390).

Conflicts of the 1990s hampered the arts and almost every other sphere of endeavour, but artists of the region survived to re-emerge with much to explore and express. A powerful message was offered by young Bosnian artist Sejla Kamerić, who was growing up in Sarajevo during the time of the siege. In

In 1934, 12-year-old Jan Yoors ran away from home, joining a Roma clan. His books *The Gypsies, Crossing and The Heroic Present* offer insight into Roma life.



her most recognised and confronting work, *Bosnian Girl*, she has laid graffiti left in Srebrenica by a Dutch soldier ('No teeth...? A mustache...? Smel like shit...? BOSNIAN GIRL!') over her photographic portrait.

Another interesting work to come out of this era was produced by Serbian Ivan Grubanov, who had the opportunity to sit in the press gallery at the Hague during Milošević's trial. The 200-odd portraits that emerged were fused with recordings of the trial as an evocative depiction of the broken dictator.

## Cinema

Some exceptional films offer a fascinating window into the Western Balkans. *Lamerica* (1995) depicts the postcommunist culture of Albania. Bosnian Danis Tanović won an Oscar for *No Man's Land* (2002), about the relationship between a Serbian and a Muslim trapped in a trench together during the Sarajevo siege. In *Grbavica* (2006) – written and directed by another Bosnian, Jasmila Zbanic – the protagonist learns that her father was not a war hero but that her mother was a victim of rape during the war. Macedonian director Milčo Mančevski explores ethnic tensions in his Oscar-nominated, cinematically sublime *After the Rain* (1994) and the more recent (and controversial) films *Dust* (2002) and *Shadows* (2007). Montenegro's Veljko Bulajić's films have achieved several international award nominations; his most recent work is *Libertas* (2006). Bojan Bazeli (of *Mr & Mrs Smith* fame) has crossed over to Hollywood. Enigmatic filmmaker Emir Kusturica playfully and energetically dissects the Balkans with vivid portraits in his outlandish films, including his famed black comedy *Underground* (1995).

Emir Kusturica's film *When Father Was Away on Business* addresses Tito's brutal rule. Malik believes his father is away on business. The truth is much darker...

## FOOD & DRINK

The cuisines of the Western Balkans mix and match Mediterranean, central European and Turkish influences. Though heavy food may make you feel as though you're packing an artery with every meal, the produce is generally free of fertilisers and pesticides. In most meals, superb use is made of produce from this agriculturally rich region. There's a legion of local cheeses barely known outside the immediate area, and an excellent range of fresh fruits in season: grapes, cherries, apples, peaches, pears, plums, melons, figs and quinces. In colder regions cabbages, walnuts and root vegetables such as turnips are used. Local dishes tend to be fairly simple, relying on abundant quality produce to create tasty meals.

Eating hours across the region are much the same as in the rest of Europe. There are many local terms for restaurants and eateries, from Croatian *gostionica* (restaurant) to Albanian *byrektorë* (bakeries selling *burek*, stuffed filo pastry), and *pekara* (bakeries selling almost everything), which provide a range of sweet and savoury snacks; see the country chapters for details.

*Tito's Cookbook* by Anja Drulović lets you recreate the meals Tito shared with the likes of Elizabeth Taylor, Saddam Hussein, Winston Churchill and Stalin.

## Staples & Specialities

*Burek* or *byrek*, with a range of fillings including cheese, meat, potato, spinach and mushrooms, is the classic Western Balkans snack. It's often enjoyed with yoghurt for breakfast.

Meals usually begin with spongy Turkish bread slathered with *kajmak* – a salty curd. Appetisers include locally smoked hams, pickled vegetables and feta-style cheeses. For lunch and dinner, the most common restaurant dishes are grilled meats such as *ćevapčići* (grilled spicy kebab fingers), *ražnjići* (shish kebab, called *qebap* in Albanian areas) and *pljeskavica* (spiced mixed meat patties). Kebabs are often served with Turkish-style bread and sliced onions. Stews are popular, often cooked slowly over an open fire, with favourites such as *bosanski lonac* (Bosnian stew of cabbage and meat)

## FLAVOURS TO SAVOUR

Had any *ajvar* with a glass of *salep* lately? A few regional rarities to watch out for:

**Ajvar** Macedonia's national relish, made from red peppers, aubergine (eggplant), paprika, olive oil, onion and garlic.

**Hurmastica** A Bosnian dessert made from filo pastry with cream and lemon.

**Jukvi** A breakfast pancake made from semolina, which is cooked and dried, then recooked with water and milk.

**Kajmak** A dairy dish made from clotted cream, ranging from buttery when fresh to like a soft cheese when matured. Very popular in Serbia – incredibly rich and strangely addictive.

**Kukurec** A rather fearsome dish made from sheep intestines stuffed with chopped liver.

**Raca** Pig's head or knuckles, fried in herbs and served cold in slices. A real man's food.

**Ribljí paprikaš** A spicy Slavonian fish stew flavoured with paprika.

**Salep** A drink made from powdered wild orchid root and hot milk, quite hard to find.

**Sheqerpare** Balls of sweet dough baked in butter, popular in Kosovo and Albania.

**Tartufe** Truffles from the hinterland of Croatia's Istrian Peninsula, sold sliced or prepared into oils and pasta sauces.

**Tufahija** Apples filled with walnuts and almonds, doused in syrup, dusted with cinnamon and topped with *kajmak*.

or *kapama* (lamb stew). Where it's available peppery *riblja čorba* fish stew is not to be missed. Goulash made with paprika is a hearty dish found in regions bordering Hungary.

Coastal Croatia, Albania and Montenegro are a dream for fish-fans; grilled fish, shellfish, scampi, calamari, sea bass, bream and hake are drowned with garlic and olive oil. Fried mussels in Albania's Saranda are a treat. *Pastrmka* (trout) is widely available, and usually arrives grilled with a zesty sauce on the side. Macedonian *skara* (barbecue) includes fresh fruit and vegetables.

Salads with diced cucumber and tomato drizzled in olive oil and sprinkled with herbs accompany many main meals. Meals often end with seasonal fruit, or far less healthily with *baklava* (nut-filled pastry heavy with sticky syrup), stuffed *palačinke* (pancakes, which if you're not careful can also constitute a main) and *hurmastica* (syrup-soaked sponge fingers, *urmašice* in Serbia). Cakes and ice creams are also common.

In addition to local fare, ubiquitous Italian food (pizza and pasta) is much loved by locals and international cuisine can be found in larger cities throughout the region.

## Drinks

Every country has its favourite locally made beer (*pivo* or *piva* in Slavic languages, *birra* or *birrë* in Albanian), challenged on the shelves by major international brews such as Heineken and Fosters. Local beers worth looking out for are Karlovačko *pivo* from Karlovac in Croatia, Nikšičko *pivo* from Montenegro, and Korca from Korca in Albania. Most beers are lagers, though there are some dark stouts and ales available.

There is also an incredible array of spirits distilled from a variety of fruits; these are called *rakija* in Slavic tongues and *raki* in Albanian. The alcohol content is generally between 40% and 70%, so not surprisingly it's drunk as a shot from special little glasses after meals and for toasts. Macedonia's local variant is *žolta* (yellow) *rakija* with wheat added during a secondary fermentation – even more than most *rakija*, it kicks like a mad mule. The most common fruit *rakija* is made from plums, and is variously called *šljivovica* (Croatia, BiH, Serbia and Montenegro). This is the national drink in Serbia, where something like 70% of the plum harvest goes into its production. The drink appears at any excuse for a celebration, from Christmas to birthdays to anniversaries. Albania's liquor of note is Skënderbeu *konjak*, a surprisingly smooth and subtle brandy. The region also has a range of herbal

Serbs sometimes call a dose of potent *rakija* 'a glass of chat', and back it up with the old saying 'Without *rakija* there is no conversation'.

liqueurs, from Albania's very curious Fernet to Serbia and Croatia's rather medicinal-tasting *pelinkovac*.

More and more, the region is a great one for wine lovers. Wine routes are increasingly being pushed to travellers in the region and yield some splendid surprises both in terms of the wine and the scenery it hails from. Wine connoisseurs should particularly seize the opportunity of being in the Western Balkans to sample offerings from monastery wineries.

Croatia's wine producers are divided into the inland Slavonia region (mostly white wine) and coastal Dalmatia (mostly red wine). Graševina, a gentle golden-hued white similar to riesling, is the most widely grown variety in Slavonia. The Dalmatian coast wineries are increasingly growing merlot and cabernet sauvignon, and some other unusual varieties. The wine routes of Croatia's Istria region are becoming increasingly popular for wine lovers and foodies, who are also starting to flock here for prized truffles and olive oil.

Serbia's workhorse red grape is prokupac, a dense, robust red with high sugar levels, often blended with French varieties such as gamay, merlot and pinot noir. In Serbia, the Fruška Gora region is a major wine producer – and an extremely pretty one. *Bermet* is a traditional Vojvodinian dessert wine worth trying in these parts.

Some fine wines are also coming out of Macedonia, which is putting its endemic grape varieties to good use with vranec, stanošina and temjanika. Boutique wine producers such as Bovin have taken root in Macedonia's vineyard heartland in the Kavadarci-Negotino region. The Tikveš wine region of Macedonia is worth a visit for its scenery as much as its top-notch wines. See the boxed text, p319.

Hercegovina's wine route offers fine žilavka (white) and blatina (red). *Domaći* (house) wines served in restaurants in BiH can be a nice alternative to imported wines on the menu. Many blatina reds are rich and well-balanced, and Stankela white (a prize-winning žilavka), from Međugorje, is crisp and fresh. For more on Hercegovinan wine, see the boxed text, p131.

Albania's wine industry is fairly small, but offers some curiosities like red kallmet from the northern Shkodra region. The Cobo winery near Berat in central Albania is also well worth visiting.

Besides alcohol, coffee is the main social catalyst. The Ottoman aristocracy introduced caffeine in the 16th century, and coffee houses have been pillars of local communities ever since. Turkish-style coffee is the traditional staple, though younger urban clientele opt for Italian- and Austrian-style brews. Turkish coffee (which is not always acknowledged to be Turkish) is prepared by heating finely ground coffee beans and water for 15 to 20 minutes and served in a small cup with a glass of water and a biscuit or Turkish delight on the side. In Serbia, Kosovo and Albania the custom is to mix sugar with the coffee powder and water as well.

## Vegetarians & Vegans

There are some delicious Turkish-style vegetable dishes to be had, such as roast peppers and aubergines (eggplants), cauliflower moussaka and vegetarian *burek*, which can be filled with cheese, potato or spinach.

Many entrées are vegetarian as well, such as *ajvar*, but 'vegetarian' soups are sometimes flavoured with smoked ham. Top-end restaurants and those in international hubs are getting more veggie-savvy, but if all else fails you can always fill up on salads: generally a fresh mix of chopped tomato, onion and cucumber, sometimes with grated white cheese and peppers as well. Or enjoy starters tapas style; fried peppers and aubergines, goat cheese and olives can be a happy substitute for a main.

California's popular wine grape zinfandel descends from the ancient Croatian varietal crljenak, which now exists in such small numbers that no pure crljenak is made.

*The Best of Croatian Cooking* by Lilianna Pavicic and Gordana Perker Mosher is just what it says it is.

## EAT YOUR WORDS

For a pronunciation guide, see p454.

English	Bosnian/Croatian/Macedonian/Serbian	Albanian
salt	<i>sol</i> or <i>so</i>	<i>kripë</i>
pepper	<i>papar</i> or <i>biber</i>	<i>spec</i>
sugar	<i>šećer</i>	<i>sheqer</i>
bread	<i>kruhor hleb/hljeb</i>	<i>bukë</i>
rice	<i>riža</i> or <i>pirinač</i>	<i>oriz</i>
apple	<i>jabuka</i>	<i>mollë</i>
beans	<i>grah</i> or <i>pasulj</i>	<i>fasulje</i>
grapes	<i>grožde</i>	<i>rrush</i>
orange	<i>naranča</i> or <i>pomorandža</i>	<i>portokall</i>
pepper (vegetable)	<i>paprika</i>	<i>spec</i>
potato	<i>krumpir</i> or <i>krompir</i>	<i>patate</i>
salad	<i>salata</i>	<i>sallatë</i>
tomato	<i>rajčica</i> or <i>paradajz</i>	<i>domate</i>
meat	<i>meso</i>	<i>mish</i>
beef	<i>govedina</i>	<i>mish lope</i>
chicken	<i>piletina</i>	<i>pëllu</i>
fish	<i>riba</i>	<i>peshk</i>
lamb	<i>janjetina</i> or <i>jagnjetina</i>	<i>mish qingji</i>
pork	<i>svinjetina</i>	<i>mish derri</i>
cheese	<i>sir</i>	<i>djathë</i>
milk	<i>mljeko</i> , <i>mleko</i> or <i>mljeko</i>	<i>qumësht</i>
ice cream	<i>sladoled</i>	<i>akullorë</i>
egg	<i>jaje</i>	<i>vezë</i>
tea	<i>čaj</i>	<i>çaj</i>
coffee	<i>kava</i> or <i>kafa</i>	<i>kafë</i>
water	<i>voda</i>	<i>ujë</i>
beer	<i>pivo</i>	<i>birrë</i>
wine	<i>vino</i>	<i>verë</i>

Vegans, good luck. On the upside the region is agriculturally rich and doing your own shopping in produce markets will be a joy.

## ENVIRONMENT

The Western Balkans is a rich repository of biological diversity. More than a third of Europe's flowering plants, half of its fish species and two-thirds of its birds and mammals can be found in the former Yugoslavia alone. The area around the borders of Albania, Montenegro and Kosovo is one of the least-touched alpine regions on the continent. Its environmental assets benefit from varied climates, geology and topography and to an extent the continuation of traditional low-intensity agricultural practices. However, the shift towards industry-scale logging and merchandise farming is straining the natural environment, and increasing urbanisation is making metropolitan environments more fragile than before.

### The Land

A wide belt of mountains parallel to the Adriatic coast covers about 60% of the region; this strip is usually made of limestone and has long valleys, dramatic gorges, vast cave systems and oddities such as disappearing rivers. The Dinaric Range along Croatia's coast has partly sunk into the sea, creating an incredibly convoluted network of islands, peninsulas and bays. A knot

The International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River ([www.icpdr.org](http://www.icpdr.org)) offers detailed information about cooperative protection and shared use of the water that flows through the region.

of fault lines in the southern part of the region sometimes causes shattering earthquakes, such as that in 1963, which demolished Macedonia's capital, Skopje. The region's highest mountain is Korab (2764m), on the border of Albania and Macedonia. The Pannonian plain along the Sava and Danube rivers in Croatia and northern Serbia was the floor of an ancient sea around 2.5 million years ago.

An interesting venture is the Balkans Peace Park project (see the boxed text, p61), which aims to create a protected park area cutting across Montenegro, Kosovo and Albania. For more on national parks in the region, see individual country chapters.

## Wildlife

The Western Balkans is a refuge for many of the larger mammals that were almost eliminated from Western Europe 150 years ago. Rugged forests of the Dinaric Range from Croatia to Albania shelter wolves, red deer, roe deer, lynx, chamois, wild boar and brown bears. Forests are roughly divided into a conifer zone, beginning between 1500m and 2000m, and including silver fir, spruce and black pine; broad-leaved beech forests, which occur lower down; and a huge variety of oak species below this again. Birds of prey found in the region include griffon falcons, kestrels and peregrine falcons. The great lakes of Ohrid and Prespa in the far south are havens for Dalmatian pelicans, herons and spoonbills.

The more populated shores of the Adriatic coast have endangered populations of golden jackals, red foxes and badgers, while bigger predators such as wolves and brown bears have largely been eradicated. Classic Mediterranean species such as junipers, heaths and olive trees grow well in the high summer temperatures of this area. The Adriatic shore also used to be home to the endangered Mediterranean monk seal, but now all the seals are gone (though colonies are believed to survive in Greece). On a happier note, the number of bottlenose dolphins seems to be growing in Croatia's Kvarner Gulf.

## Environmental Issues

The Western Balkans was almost entirely agricultural until after WWII, when communist central planners decreed rapid industrialisation on a massive scale. Between the 1950s and the 1970s, the rate of industrialisation and urbanisation was amongst the highest in the world. Use of energy and raw materials put pressure on natural resources, decreasing forested areas, deteriorating water quality and increasing air pollution. Economic stagnation and UN sanctions imposed during the 1990s contributed to a dramatic slowdown in economic activity; a positive side effect of this was the reduction in air and water pollution, but negative consequences included increased use of low-quality fuels, deprioritisation of environmental policy in industry, and the suspension of international cooperation on environmental management of shared assets. The need for cohesive environmental cooperation has taken on new complexity since the emergence of new Balkans states following the break-up of Yugoslavia, with more states now required to cooperate.

Air pollution is a concern in large cities such as Belgrade and struggling cities such as Pristina. Providing reliable power to Kosovars has often been at the cost of fresh air; time will tell how future decisions fare. Similarly, the flurry of construction taking place in cities throughout the region is not necessarily planned or controlled with respect to its environmental impact.

Sewerage outflows in coastal resorts can be a problem when tourist crowds descend in summer. Dumping of sewage is a problem in Durrës (Albania), and a controversial rock-wool factory has been built in Croatia (see p180).

The Dalmatian coast faces a host of environmental challenges, but Sunce, a Split-based environmental organisation, has risen to the occasion. Track its efforts at [www.sunce-st.org](http://www.sunce-st.org).

Litter on land and water throughout the region can be severe, especially in the south. Some steps have been taken to remedy this, but on the whole the locals who contribute to the problem haven't had the benefit of strong ecological education to help them understand the long-term environmental and economic impact of their actions. While you're in the region, take your litter with you (and don't do it subtly – why not try to start a trend?).

For tips on lessening your impact while in the Western Balkans, see p21.

### IMPACT OF COMMUNISM

Towns and cities all over the Western Balkans have problems with air, soil and water poisoned by messy industrial plants introduced during the communist era. Pollution from lignite (brown coal) power plants and other industries remains the biggest environmental concern today. Albania's communist party had a particular proclivity for seriously big industrial plants; the humongous Steel of the Party metallurgical plant in Elbasan emitted so much filth that it made agriculture impossible in the surrounding valley. Authorities also terraced thousands of hectares of hillside in a bid to mould hills into fields, an endeavour which had predictable results for soil erosion. As in other communist-controlled regions, damage caused by industrial waste wasn't recognised until much later.

In some instances, communists did go green; the Yugoslav authorities could be surprisingly sensitive to environmental issues. Nomadic sheep and goat herding was banned in 1951 in a bid to prevent soil erosion. Tito's regime also created a network of national parks and protected areas.

The fall of communism introduced new environmental problems. In Albania, uncontrolled logging – previously prevented by the threat of a life sentence in a chrome mine – is now a concern. After the ban on fishing in Lake Ohrid was lifted, the Ohrid trout's numbers dropped perilously (see the boxed text, p288), though the Macedonian government has now declared a fishing moratorium.

### IMPACT OF THE WARS OF THE 1990s

Though it's churlish to compare the environmental damage caused by the wars of the 1990s to the human cost, some lingering issues should be flagged. Landmines have meant that areas of BiH, Croatia and Kosovo have become de facto wilderness areas, albeit unexplorable ones.

The NATO air strikes of 1999 heavily targeted industrial areas, causing the release of hazardous substances into the atmosphere and the high-impact movement of people as refugees from rural areas sought safety in cities. Unplanned growth in cities such as Sarajevo, Tuzla, Belgrade, Pristina and Tirana increased demand on already stretched sewerage, waste-disposal and water-supply systems. In addition to the movement of people, the conflicts caused some unusual movement of fauna; wolves wandered into Croatia's Dalmatia region, where they hadn't been seen in decades, after unprotected herds of livestock abandoned by farmers in the Serb-populated Krajina region presented them with an unusual feeding opportunity.

To end this section on a positive note, look to Macedonia's tree-planting day (see the boxed text, p289). On 12 March 2008 more than 200,000 Macedonians planted two million trees (one for every citizen) to heal patches of forest devastated by fires. This initiative of Unesco Artist for Peace Boris Trajanov is expected to plant 30 million trees in the next 10 years.

**'the conflicts caused some unusual movement of fauna; wolves wandered into Croatia's Dalmatia region, where they hadn't been seen in decades'**

# The Authors



## MARIKA McADAM

**Coordinating Author, Kosovo, Serbia**

Marika is an Australian writer and lawyer currently based on the precipice – and antithesis – of the Balkans, in Vienna. Having backpacked through Croatia, Serbia and Bosnia and Hercegovina (BiH) in 2004 and road-tripped down the Dalmatian coast in following years, she jumped at the opportunity to travel the region again. Her earlier memories of Serbia as grim and grumpy were completely eclipsed in these recent travels by experiences with fun and friendly Serbs whom she laughed with about nothing and everything. And whatever its status, the experience of resolutely persistent and unfailingly hospitable Kosovo was a privilege that marked her forever (literally – she burnt her arse in a jacuzzi). Marika also wrote the *Destination Western Balkans*, *Getting Started*, *Itineraries*, *Snapshots*, *Western Balkans Directory* and *Transport in Western Balkans* chapters.



## JAYNE D'ARCY

**Albania**

After watching Celtic Tigers eat up and commercialise Irish culture in the mid-'90s, Jayne's been attracted to countries with more character and lower GDPs. Albania hit her radar in 2006, when she joined her first ever package tour, and while complaining about the herd mentality of her fellow tourists, she was pretty stoked to get a new passport stamp and see some amazing ruins in relative peace. The changes in Albania since then are astonishing, and the similarities to the 'old Ireland' are huge (homemade spirits, dodgy roads), but the Albanian Tiger is yet to emerge. Apart from travel writing, Jayne writes features on children, people and the environment.



## CHRIS DELISO

**Macedonia**

Chris Deliso's long experience of seductive Macedonia began a decade ago and has, since 2002, evolved to full-fledged residential status. As a travel writer and journalist, he has covered most everything there is to cover here, but delights in *uncovering* the country's many hidden places for visitors – from mountain wilds and ancient ruins shrouded by vineyards to rustic village eateries and secret lakeshore beaches. For Chris, researching the present guide involved off-roading in remote locales, swimming in four lakes and rivers, handling real ancient Macedonian gold, eating plenty of grilled meats and sampling one superb wine after another in the Tikveš wine region. He has also co-written *Lonely Planet's Greece*, *Greek Islands* and *Bulgaria* guides.

### LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

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## PETER DRAGIČEVIĆ

Montenegro

After a dozen years working for newspapers and magazines in both his native New Zealand and Australia, Peter finally gave in to Kiwi wanderlust, giving up staff jobs to chase his typically (for an antipodean) diverse roots around much of Europe. While it was family ties that first drew him to the Balkans, it's the history, the natural beauty, the convoluted politics, the cheap *rakija* and, most importantly, the intriguing people that keep bringing him back. This is the 10th Lonely Planet title he's contributed to, including writing the Macedonia and Albania chapters for the previous edition of the *Eastern Europe* guide.



## MARK ELLIOTT

Bosnia & Hercegovina

British-born travel writer Mark Elliott was only 11 when his family first dragged him to Sarajevo and stood him in the now-defunct concrete foot-steps of Gavriilo Princip. Fortunately, no Austro-Hungarian emperors were passing at the time. He has since visited virtually every corner of BiH sipping fine Hercegovinian wines with master vintners, talking philosophy with Serb monks and Sufi mystics, and drinking more Bosnian coffee than any healthy stomach should be subjected to. When not travel writing he lives a blissfully quiet life in suburban Belgium with the lovely Danielle, whom he met while jamming blues harmonica in a Turkmenistan club.



## VESNA MARIĆ

Croatia (Zagreb, Dalmatia)

Vesna was born in BiH while it was still a part of Yugoslavia, and she has never been able to see Croatia as a foreign country. A lifetime lover of Dalmatia's beaches, pine trees, and food and wine, she expanded her knowledge by exploring Zadar and Zagreb, two cities she discovered anew. Researching this book was a true delight. Vesna also wrote the chapter's introductory material, the Croatia Directory and the Transport in Croatia section.



## ANJA MUTIĆ

Croatia (Hrvatsko Zagorje, Slavonia, Istria, Kvarner Region)

It's been more than 16 years since Anja left her native Croatia. The journey took her to several countries and continents before she made New York her base 10 years ago. But the roots are a-calling. She's been returning to Croatia frequently for work and play, intent on discovering a new place on every visit, be it a nature park, an offbeat town or an island. She's happy that Croatia's many beauties are appreciated worldwide but secretly pines for the time when you could have a leisurely seafront coffee in Hvar without waiting for a table.



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