

# THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



## THE PERFECT BALKANS ITINERARY FOR 10 DAYS, 1 MONTH, AND MORE

Traveling and backpacking in the Balkans is an extraordinary experience that offers the best of Europe on a backpacker budget. This Balkans itinerary will deliver the best of Europe. Delicious, Italian and Turkish-inspired food and drink. World-class beaches and Riviéras. Towering alps and the southernmost fjords in Europe. The Balkans backpacking experience offers so much to love in such a small area and at a great price that it should be top of every traveler's list.

Read on to discover the best of the Balkans, the essentials for a perfect experience wandering the Balkans, including the best route and itinerary for 10 days, 2 weeks, 3 weeks, and 4 or more weeks.

My experience exploring Croatia, Montenegro, Albania, Bosnia, Serbia, and more was one of the highlights of my European backpacking experience. Amazing food, plenty of great drink (wine and Rakja), never-ending parties, captaining a boat, extraordinary nature of towering mountains in bays, fantastic beaches, plenty of friends and friendly locals, and more. In this Balkans itinerary, I'll share the must-see sights and experiences and how to make them happen to help you craft the perfect Balkans backpacking experience *for you*.

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## CONTENTS OF THIS PERFECT BALKANS ITINERARY

- [Quick Balkans Itinerary for 10 Days to 14 Days](#)
- [The Full Balkans Travel Itinerary \(3+ Weeks\)](#)
- [Why The Balkans](#)
- [Balkans Tour Options to Consider](#)
- **Country by Country Overview of the Balkans**
  1. [Slovenia](#): Fairy tale like nature, lakes, and forests
  2. [Croatia](#): Castles, Game of Thrones, wine, Italian inspired cuisine, an exquisite coastline
  3. [Bosnia and Herzegovina](#): History, Ottoman influenced culture and cuisine
  4. [Serbia](#): Never ending parties on the riverfront, fusion foods, rakija culture
  5. [Montenegro](#): Norwegian styled fjords in warm, welcoming waters
  6. [Albania](#): The Albanian Riviera's amazing beaches and the Albanian alps
  7. [Bulgaria](#): Artsy neighborhoods, nature, and gourmet locavore food culture for cheap

### The Additional Balkans Destinations

- [Kosovo](#) (Optional)
- [Macedonia](#) (Optional)

### Logistics of Traveling the Balkans

- [Balkans Travel Budget & Tips](#)
- [Visas and Crossing Borders in the Balkans](#)
- [Travel Insurance: Do You Need It In The Balkans?](#)
- [When To Visit The Balkans](#)
- [Tips for Staying In The Balkans On A Budget](#)

# THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



- [Balkans Packing List Essentials](#)
- [How To Get Around The Balkans](#)
- [Balkans Travel FAQ](#)

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## BALKANS ITINERARY HIGHLIGHTS: THE TOP 10 THINGS TO EXPERIENCE IN THE BALKANS

1. **Montenegro:** The southernmost fjords in Europe and beautiful waterways
2. **Albania:** Undiscovered escapes, beautiful rivieras that rival the Greek isles, Albanian Alps
3. **Croatia:** Medieval architectural beauty and a “Balkans meets Venetian Italy” vibe
4. **The Albanian Riviera**
5. **The Albanian Alps**
6. **The fjords of Montenegro**
7. **The castles of Croatia**
8. **National Parks throughout**
9. **World-class beaches** in Albanian, Croatia, and Montenegro
10. **Scandinavian style fjords and towering mountains** in Montenegro
11. **Rich food and amazing wine** influenced by the Italians, the Ottomans, and Eastern Europe
12. **Medieval castles and city centers** along the entire Balkans backpacking route
13. **Rich food and amazing wine** influenced by the Italians, the Ottomans, and Eastern Europe

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## WHAT TO SEE AND DO WHILE YOU'RE IN THE BALKANS

Nature & National Parks	Beaches and Coastline	Off the Beaten Path	History & Culture	Nearby & Amazing
<b>Slovenia</b>	Croatia	Albania	Bosnia	Turkey
<b>Croatia</b>	Albania	Bosnia	Serbia	Greece
<b>Montenegro</b>	Montenegro	Kosovo		Italy

# THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



## CONTENTS OF THIS BALKANS ITINERARY

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### KEY BALKAN ITINERARIES

#### THE TWO PERFECT BALKANS ITINERARY OPTIONS FOR YOUR TRIP: 10 DAYS AND MORE

The Balkans is such an impressive destination for backpackers and travelers because it offers so much for *every* type of traveler – and it just so happens to be budget-friendly too. Any one of the core Balkan countries could easily be a multi-week destination.

To balance maximum experience with enjoyment, we've created 2 separate itineraries.

The first option is the [Balkans itinerary for 10 days](#), which focuses on the highlight destinations and experiences of the Balkans that no one can miss and skips the countries with redundant views or experiences.

The second is the [full Balkans itinerary for 2-3 weeks or more](#), the itinerary achieves the same (maximum enjoyment and unique experiences), but at a slower, more enjoyable pace and more sites in each country added to ensure constant enjoyment. This itinerary includes everything you need to see in the Balkans if time is no issue and you're one of the lucky backpackers on the long trail. If you're backpacking in the Balkans, this full Balkans itinerary is the option you need.

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### BALKANS ITINERARY (10 DAYS)

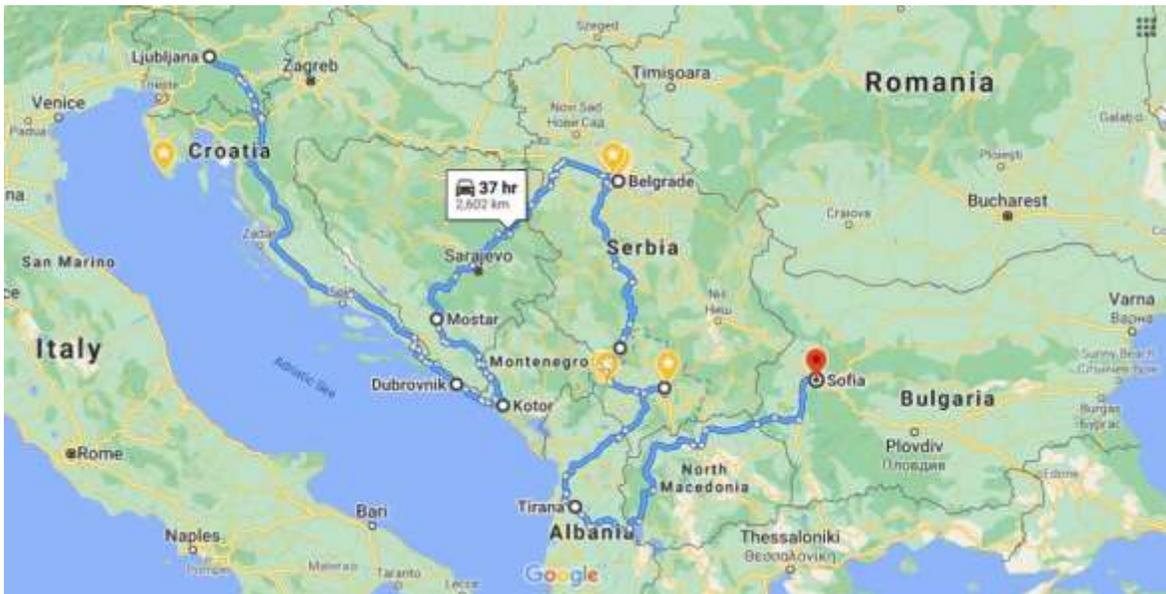
Balkans travel is something that *every* traveler should experience, but not all travelers have the full month necessary to backpack and slow travel the Balkans. This **Balkans itinerary for 10 days** packs the best sites, tastes, and experiences of the region into a smooth, 10-day jaunt.

With this 10 day Balkans itinerary, every single day will be mind-blowing and enjoyable and leave you wanting to return to the Balkans *very* soon.

# THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



## Balkans Itinerary 10 Day Route



DAY	DESTINATION	TIME	WHAT TO SEE
1	Split, Croatia	1 Day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diocletian's Palace</li> <li>• Krka National Park</li> <li>• Sail to Hvar</li> </ul>
2	Hvar, Croatia	1 Day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sail your own boat</li> <li>• Experience Croatia's "Party Island"</li> <li>• Ruins</li> <li>• Walk the lavender fields</li> <li>• Wineries, bars, and beach clubs</li> <li>• Carpe Diem (Island Club)</li> </ul>
3	Dubrovnik, Croatia	1 Day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Walk the walled city</li> <li>• Visit Lokrum Island</li> <li>• Cable car to Mount Sryoy</li> </ul>
4	Kotor, Montenegro	1 Day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Boat tour of Kotor Bay</li> <li>• Hike to Kotor Fortress</li> <li>• Visit Our Lady of the Rock Church (UNESCO WHS)</li> <li>• Walk the walled old town by day and night</li> </ul>
5	Mostar, Bosnia	1 Day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stari Most bridge + cliff diving</li> <li>• Bazar &amp; Citywalk</li> <li>• Bosnian cuisine &amp; Ottoman influence</li> <li>• Rakija culture</li> </ul>
6	Sarajevo, Bosnia	1 Day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visit "East meets West" of Little Vienna and Little Istanbul</li> </ul>

## THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



			<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• History tour (the war, Franz Ferdinand, etc.)</li></ul>
<b>7</b>	Belgrade, Serbia	1 Day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Belgrade fortress</li><li>• Belgrade city walk</li><li>• Floating river clubs and nightlife</li><li>• Rakija Culture</li></ul>
<b>8</b>	Tirana, Albania	1 Day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Walking tour + museum</li><li>• Learn of Albania's recent opening</li></ul>
<b>9</b>	Sarande, Albania	1 Day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The Albanian Riviera</li><li>• Amazing beaches that rival Greece</li></ul>
<b>10</b>	Sofia, Bulgaria + Plovdiv	1 Day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Explore the local food scene</li><li>• Walking tour for history + culture</li><li>• Day trip to Plovdiv</li></ul>

If you are pressed for time, this 10-day itinerary delivers the best of the Balkans – beaches, food, Roman ruins and architecture, and more. However, if you have more time to spare, I highly recommend spending a month or more moving slowly through the Balkans and staying a little longer anywhere that catches your interests.

Read on to discover the places I recommend for a full Balkans itinerary of a few weeks or more.

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### THE FULL BALKANS TRAVEL ITINERARY (2 TO 6 WEEKS)

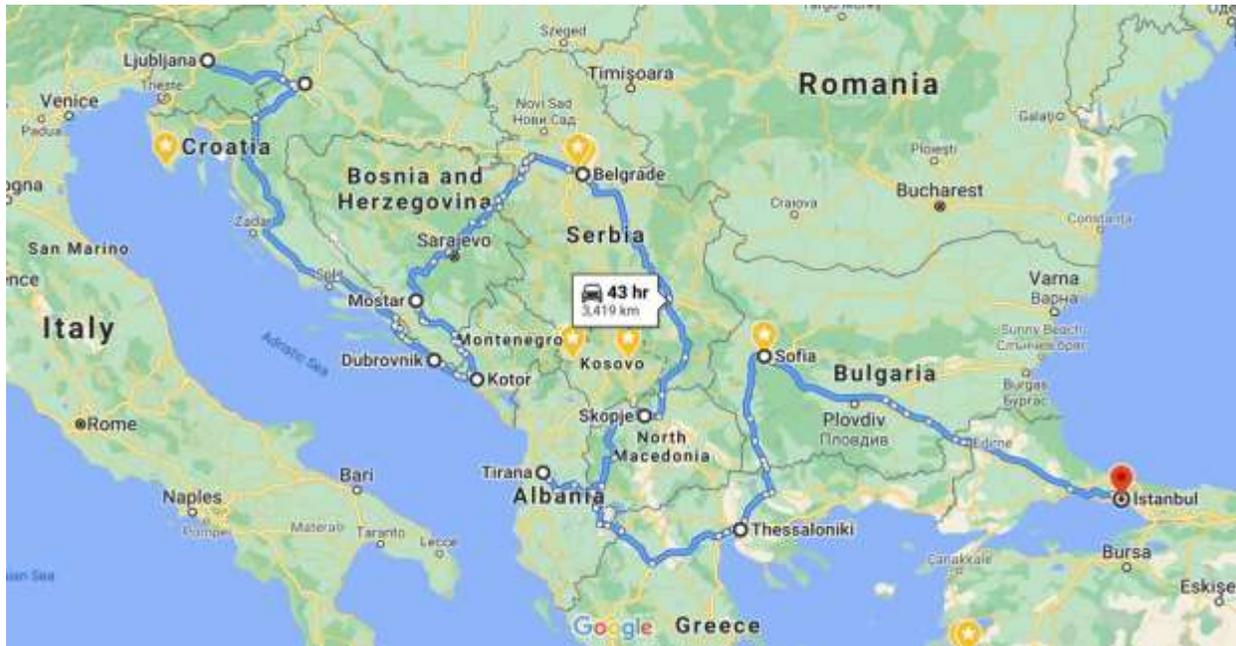
The Balkans has just as much richness, beauty, and culture as much more popular and crowded Western Europe, without the crowds and at a far cheaper price tag – fjords, mountains, and national parks as good as any in Scandinavia, wine that rivals Italy and France, rich hearty food that is unmatched, ruins that rival Rome, beaches that are on par with the islands of Greece, Spain, and France, and nightlife that puts Barcelona and Majorca to shame.

If you have a month or more to spare, I highly recommend backpacking the Balkans with this full Balkans travel itinerary.

This itinerary traces a trail through the Balkans, traversable by bus with manageable stops along the way every few hours, giving you a “best of the Balkans” tour, doable on a budget easily by bus.

For those travelers with more time for wandering and backpacking the Balkans, this itinerary shares every place you need to visit and see.

# THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



FULL BALKANS ITINERARY FOR 1 TO 3 MONTHS		
DAY	DESTINATION	WHAT TO SEE
1	Ljubljana, Slovenia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Walk the cobblestone streets of a quaint European city</li> <li>• Enjoy the Riverwalk from a café</li> <li>• Postojna Cave + Predjama Castle (Day Trip from Ljublana)</li> </ul>
2	Bled + Lake Bled, Slovenia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Take the boat to the Church of the Mother of God on Lake Bled</li> <li>• Hike to Bled castle</li> <li>• Cable car to the top of Mount Vogel</li> </ul>
3	Pula, Croatia + Istria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visit the Roman amphitheater in the center of town</li> <li>• Visit the cliffs, caves, and rocky cliff diving beaches around Seagull's Rock Beach, Punta Christo Lighthouse, Punta Verudela beach,</li> <li>• Enjoy amazing wine and hearty, Italian influenced cuisine</li> <li>• Visit Plitvice National Park</li> </ul>
4,5	Split, Croatia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diocletian's Palace</li> <li>• Krka National Park</li> <li>• Sail to Hvar island</li> </ul>
6,7	Hvar, Croatia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sail your own boat</li> <li>• Experience Croatia's "Party Island"</li> <li>• Ruins</li> <li>• Walk the lavender fields</li> </ul>

## THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wineries, bars, and beach clubs</li> <li>• Carpe Diem (Island Club)</li> </ul>
<b>8,9</b>	Dubrovnik, Croatia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Walk the walled city</li> <li>• Visit Lokrum Island</li> <li>• Cable car to Mount Sryoy</li> </ul>
<b>10</b>	Herzeg Novi	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Herzeg Novi Old Town</li> <li>• Savina Monastery</li> <li>• Boat trip to Žanjice Beach, The Blue Cave and Mamula Island on a day trip</li> <li>• Hike Mt Orjen – the highest mountain on the Adriatic Sea</li> </ul>
<b>11</b>	Mostar, Bosnia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stari Most bridge + cliff diving</li> <li>• Bazar &amp; Citywalk</li> <li>• Bosnian cuisine &amp; Ottoman influence</li> </ul>
<b>12, 13</b>	Sarajevo, Bosnia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visit "East meets West" of Little Vienna and Little Istanbul</li> <li>• History tour (the war, Franz Ferdinand, etc.)</li> </ul>
<b>14, 15</b>	Belgrade, Serbia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Belgrade fortress</li> <li>• Belgrade city walk</li> <li>• Floating river clubs and nightlife</li> <li>• Rakija Culture</li> </ul>
<b>16, 17, 18</b>	Kotor, Montenegro	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Boat tour of Kotor Bay</li> <li>• Hike to Kotor San Giovanni Fortress for a panoramic view</li> <li>• Visit Our Lady of the Rock Church (UNESCO WHS)</li> <li>• Walk the walled old town of Kotor by day and night.</li> </ul>
<b>19</b>	Budva, Montenegro	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A walking tour of the historic old town or "Stari Grad," a mini Dubrovnik</li> <li>• Stay in a luxury hotel (the best in Montenegro are here)</li> <li>• Visit the Montenegro archeological museum</li> <li>• Pomarine Monastery</li> <li>• The 20+ beaches of the Budva Riviera (Mogren, Jaz, Becici, and Slovenska beaches)</li> <li>• Visit the smaller towns of Sveti Nikola and Sveti Stefan.</li> </ul>
	Montenegro National Parks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Durmitor National park</li> <li>• Lovcen National park</li> <li>• Skoda National Park</li> </ul>
<b>24</b>	Shkoder, Albania	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gateway to the Albanian Alps and Theth National Park</li> <li>• Rozafa Castle + 18<sup>th</sup>-century bridge Mesi Bridge</li> <li>• Eat traditional Albanian food at Restaurant Tradita Gege &amp; Toske</li> <li>• Lake Shkoder</li> </ul>
<b>21, 22, 23</b>	The Albanian Alps Valbonne, Thethi	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hike from Theth to Valbona (~8 hours hiking)</li> <li>• Theti National Park</li> <li>• Valbona Valley National Park</li> </ul>
<b>24, 25</b>	Tirana, Albania	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• BUNK'ART museum, built into an old bunker (500 LEK)</li> <li>• Walking tour + museum</li> </ul>

## THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learn of Albania's recent opening</li> <li>• Sky Tower Bar (Rotating bar with degree views)</li> </ul>
<b>26, 27, 28</b>	The Albanian Riviera beaches and cities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Durrës</li> <li>• Vlore</li> <li>• Sarandë + Butrintum</li> </ul>
<b>29</b>	Berat, Albania	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experience Berat, the "City of a Thousand Windows" and preserved Ottoman-era old town UNESCO world heritage site</li> </ul>
<b>30</b>	Gjirokaster	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• UNESCO world heritage city for its architecture and "flat stone roofs."</li> </ul>
<b>Optional</b>	Skopje, Macedonia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The 100+ statues in downtown Skopje that make the town seem like a cross between Rome and Las Vegas</li> <li>• Ottoman old town and Bazar</li> </ul>
<b>Optional</b>	Ohrid, Macedonia + Lake Ohrid	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explore Ohrid Old Town</li> <li>• Ohrid is a cultural and a natural UNESCO World Heritage Site</li> <li>• Tsar Samuil's Fortress</li> <li>• Plaosnik Archeological Complex</li> <li>• Ancient Greek amphitheater in Old Town from 200BC</li> <li>• Visit the fishing village turned tourist hotspot of Trpejca</li> <li>• The relaxing beaches of Lake Ohrid</li> </ul>
<b>31, 32</b>	Sofia, Bulgaria + Plovdiv	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A gourmet and exotic locavore food tour with Balkan Bites</li> <li>• Walking tour for history + culture</li> <li>• Day trip to Plovdiv</li> </ul>
<b>33</b>	Bansko, Bulgaria	<p>Summer</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hiking</li> <li>• Mountain Biking</li> <li>• Climb 3,000 meter tall Mount Vihren</li> <li>• Mountain town main Ave. of Pirin Street for cafes and bars</li> </ul> <p>Winter</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Skiing</li> </ul> <p>Anytime</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Holy Trinity Church</li> <li>• Rila Monastery</li> </ul>
	Black Sea Coast – Sozopol and Nessebar (Optional)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Harmanite and Kavatsite beaches in Sozopol for beach bars and fun in the sun</li> </ul>

### HOW TO USE THESE ITINERARIES

Both of the itineraries above, the Balkans 10-day itinerary and the itinerary, are perfect. Which itinerary you choose obviously depends on how much time you have to travel. For the longer itinerary, you

## THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



should choose or eliminate destinations based on your own travel style – backpacker, budget traveler, outdoorsy, or party hungry.

If you only have ~10 days, stick to our 10-day itinerary, and you'll hit the highlights of the regions and the best thing that each country has to offer.

If you're traveling for 2+ weeks or backpacking, use the full itinerary omitting Kosovo, Macedonia, and Macedonia if you need to save time. Otherwise, hop the bus and enjoy each destination on our list.

**If you find a city or country that you particularly enjoy, you should absolutely stay longer in that city or country.**

**Stay longer in countries where you love the sights, food, people, and lifestyle.** As you travel, if you find a country/culture you love, stay longer and add more cities from that country to your itinerary (I recommend a few for each country).

The experience will change drastically once you leave each country as each Balkan country is *very* unique, so soak it up while you're there – food, drink, people, architecture, and nature.

**Plus, you can always go back and explore other destinations, so live in the moment as much as possible when you travel.**

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## WHY I HIGHLY RECOMMEND THE BALKANS

If you're looking for some of the most diverse (in culture, religion, language) and untouched parts of Europe, Balkans is a great place to go. The Balkans region has seen it all: from Macedonia's Roman ruins and stunning mountain ranges in Kosovo to Croatia's stunning shades of blue lagoons and epic beaches. *What attracted me and my experience backpacking the Balkans*

- **European experience on a Southeast Asia travel budget**
- Plenty of “**vacation nature**” and natural beauty – **fjords, rivas, waterfalls, and alps** – within a short ride
- The **best beaches in Europe** for extremely cheap
- “**Old World**” and **medieval cities and architecture** bring Game of Thrones to life with castles and walled city centers.
- The varied and rich **food**: everything from **Italian-inspired Istrian, hearty Slavic, and Ottoman/Middle Eastern**-inspired Bosnian.
- The drink: Croatian, especially **Istrian, wines** are underrated, and world-class thanks to Italian influence, and the **Rakija** (local firewater) is interesting, complex and varied across the Balkans
- **Compact and accessible traveling**: most of the adventures are hours away from each other by an easily booked and cheap bus or train

## THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



- **Easy visa situation:** whereas the rest of Europe in the Schengen zone only allows 90 days per six months in all of the European Union, each Balkan state offers easily renewable and free visas from 30 days to 6 months
- **Less crowded** than the rest of Europe with all of the experience
- Plenty of **history intact with cities built by Roman emperors**, recent wars, and recently opened borders (Albania)
- Plenty of **adventures** for the “backpacker at heart” from

The Balkan region – Croatia, Montenegro, Albania, Slovenia, Serbia, and Bosnia & Herzegovina - offers amazing food, hearty and rich, that will satisfy any taste buds and wine as good as anywhere else in Europe. If you are looking for a "European vibe" but want an experience that's cheaper, less crowded, and less touristy than the typical destinations, then the Balkans is a perfect place to visit.

The Balkans will give you an unforgettable experience - just make sure to pack your swimsuit, hiking shoes!

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### BALKANS TOURS TO CONSIDER

If you're not in the mood for indie travel, or if you're pressed for time and want to see *all* of the Balkans in two weeks but want to skip the logistics planning, I highly recommend attending one of these reputable Balkans tours.

#### [G ADVENTURES](#)

Traveling from Split Croatia, down through Montenegro, and back up through Bosnia and Serbia to end in Hungary, G Adventures packs the highlights into another solid 15-day itinerary. Known for their lively and knowledgeable guides and adventure-focused approach to travel, G adventures and their [15-day tour of Croatia and the Balkans](#) is a solid travel bet.

## THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



[Click here to learn more about G Adventure's 15-day tour of Croatia and the Balkans.](#)

### [CONTIKI TOURS BEST OF THE BALKANS TOUR](#)

If you're aiming for a little more nightlife and partying in your Balkans trip, check out [Contiki Tours Best of Balkans Tour](#) traveling from Split, Croatia, down into Montenegro, and up to end in Budapest, Hungary, over a 15-day tour.

[Click here to find out more information about Contiki Tour's 15 Day Best of the Balkans adventure.](#)

# THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



## INTREPID TRAVEL'S BALKAN TOUR (15 DAYS)

Intrepid Travel's Balkan Adventure is an excellent option, as Intrepid is one of *the* best tour providers in the industry, and their route will take you through the highlights from Budapest, Hungary, to Dubrovnik, Croatia over 15 days.



# THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



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## THE FULL BALKANS ITINERARY

*Click to Jump to The itineraries*

[|SLOVENIA|](#) | [|CROATIA|](#) | [|MONTENEGRO|](#) | [|BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA|](#) | [|SERBIA|](#) | [|ALBANIA|](#)  
[|BULGARIA|](#)

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## THE ADDITIONAL BALKAN TRAVEL ITINERARY DESTINATIONS

[|MACEDONIA|](#) | [|KOSOVO|](#)

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### 1. SLOVENIA

*Quaint European towns and Insta-worthy lakes, forests, and caves*

For nature lovers and sober travelers, Slovenia is a picturesque and green destination that *may* be worth adding to your itinerary.

Ljubljana, Slovenia's capital and Europe's greenest city, is a charming and quintessentially European city – walkable with cobblestone streets and a Riverwalk with plenty of coffee shops to enjoy the cool weather and peacefully picturesque views.

One hour away from the capital Slovenia's biggest tourist destinations – Bled and Lake Bled – are nestled in the Julian Alps and deliver tons of Insta-worthy views. Hike up to Bled castle, boat to a church on an island, visit the charming village of Ribcev Laz on the shore of Lake Bled and take a cable car ride to the top of Mount Vogel for a panorama view.

End this leg of the trip by visiting the most toured cave in Europe (Postojna cave) and seeing the castle built into it (Predjama Castle) on your way to Croatia.

If you want to jump right into sunny beaches and lively nightlife, I suggest going straight to Croatia.

- **TIME NEEDED:** 3 Days (1 Day in Ljubljana, 1 Day in Bled, 1 Day visiting Postojna Cave And Predjama Castle)
- **ESSENTIAL FOOD & DRINK**
  - Kremna rezina
  - Kranjska klobasa

## THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



- Bograč
- Idrijski žlikrofi
- Pogača
- Štruklji
- Trout
- Prekmurska gibanica
- **VISA:** Slovenia is part of the Schengen zone, so the Schengen visa applies – 90 days in a 180 day period, shared with all of the Schengen zone / EU countries
- **BUDGET/PRICES: ~\$50 per day**
  - **Hostel Dorm: \$25/night**
  - **Budget Hotel: \$45/night**
  - **Food: \$15/day**
  - **Transportation: \$10 to \$15 per day average, to visit attractions**
  - **Attractions: ~\$25**
- **MOVING ON:** From Ljubljana, or anywhere else in Slovenia, if you are on a shorter **itinerary (2 weeks or less)**, hop a [bus \(~8 hours\)](#) or a [train \(~10 hours + \\$38\)](#) to [Split, Croatia, from Ljubljana](#). If you are on a **longer itinerary**, hop a [5-hour bus or train \(~\\$15\)](#) to [Pula, Croatia](#) and enjoy Istria.
- **GETTING THERE:** As Slovenia is the start of many travelers' and backpackers' trails in the Balkans, the cheapest option is to **fly into Budapest, Hungary**, enjoy the beauty of Budapest for a few days and then [travel from Budapest, Hungary, to Ljubljana, Slovenia by 7-hour train \(~\\$30\)](#) or [7-hour bus \(~\\$30\)](#).

### SLOVENIA ITINERARY

DESTINATION	TIME	WHAT TO SEE
<b>Ljubljana</b>	1 Day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Walk the cobblestone streets of a quaint European city</li><li>● Enjoy the Riverwalk from a café</li></ul>
<b>Bled + Lake Bled</b>	1 Day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Boat to the Church of the Mother of God on Lake Bled</li><li>● Hike to Bled castle</li><li>● Cable car to the top of Mount Vogel</li></ul>
<b>Postojna Cave + Predjama Castle</b>	1 Day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Day trip from Ljubljana</li></ul>

Slovenia has some amazing natural beauty that is world-class and that travelers rave about – but so do Montenegro, Croatia, and Albania, without being as far from the central Balkans backpacking route. Additionally, Slovenia offers very little outside of nature – while the rest of the Balkans offer rich food, drink, entertainment, and history.

Though Slovenia is remarkably beautiful, if you're short on time traveling the Balkans, I recommend skipping Slovenia and starting your tour further south, closer to the action.

# THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



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## LJUBLJANA

The Ljubljana city center was planned like an old baroque town, with cobbled streets and a Roman-style canal, catering to a day of walking and a leisurely lifestyle. This is a city that has been preserved in its original form, with buildings from all periods represented, all the while still moving forward. In 2014, Ljubljana was awarded the Greenest City in Europe for its dedication to and advancements in sustainability, proving that Ljubljana's soul matched its surrounding beauty of turquoise lakes and sprawling forests.

Ljubljana also has a rich literary and artistic tradition, possibly cultivated by its welcoming cafes, with writers such as Nobel Prize winner Ivo Andric and poets like France Preseren make it their home for much of the 19th century. These literary giants influenced not just Ljubljana but also much of the Balkans region as well through their work and by inspiring other writers.

- **WHAT TO DO IN LJUBLJANA**

- Self-guided walking tour with the following sites
  1. Preseren Square and Tromostovje Triple Bridge
  2. Ljubljana Old Town, walking its two main streets
  3. Visit the Ljubljana Castle by funicular or hike
  4. Dragon Bridge
  5. Walk the riverfront
  6. Visit Congress Square
  7. Tivoli Park

- Museum of Illusions

- **TIME NEEDED:** 1 Day

- **RECOMMENDED RESTAURANTS LJUBLJANA:**

- [Julia](#)

- **WHERE TO STAY:** The hostel or hotel standards in Slovenia are great, so just choose one that fits your style. However, be choosy about the location to maximize your experience - either the Old Town or the Modern City Center are where you should look for accommodation. **H2O Hostel** comes highly recommended.

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## LAKE BLEĐ / BLEĐ

## THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



Bled, Slovenia, is a charming little town tucked up in the Julian Alps with the fairy tale like Lake Bled situated right beside it. For those backpackers and travelers that love calm, pristine outdoor beauty and just the experience of strolling through a new place, Bled (just like the rest of Slovenia) will capture your heart.

Visitors can enjoy a stroll through the historic and beautiful city center, eating traditional Slovenian cuisine at one of many cafes or restaurants, or just picnic on flat rocks that jut out into the lake. Bled's historic core is the winding castle on the hill on one side of the lake and the church on top of the hill on the other side of the lake. There are also many tours to take to explore the tiny, hidden, and less well-known, but still equally if not more stunning, parts of Slovenia that are offered by many different tour operators.

On the other side of the lake, on an island in the middle of the Krasna zalza (beautiful grove), stands a small, beautifully constructed church. It is said to be one of the most photographed churches in all of North-Eastern Europe.

Bled Castle was built in the 13th century by the Habsburgs as a summer residence. It has medieval turrets, and its view can be seen from throughout Slovenia. The castle is richly furnished and houses many treasures; one that should not be missed is called "Prince Luitpold's Treasure." The treasure becomes more interesting because it contains some of Napoleon's personal effects, including a memento made for the French emperor by a craftsman from Bled.

- **HIGHLIGHTS**
  - Postojna Cave and Predma Castle inside
  - Visit the town of Piran - full of Venetian architecture and coastline the rivals Italy and Croatia + Tartans Square, Saint Georges Church, and amazing seafood.
- **WHAT TO DO IN BLEED, SLOVENIA**
  - Boat to the Church of the Mother of God on Lake Bled
  - Hike to Bled castle
  - Cable car to the top of Mount Vogel
- **TIME NEEDED:** 1 Day
- **RECOMMENDED RESTAURANTS AND CAFES**

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## 2. CROATIA

*Sun-soaked beaches, Game of Thrones-style walled cities, and Venetian influence culture*

Croatia's Dalmatian coast is filled with countless amazing beaches and medieval-style cities worthy of Game of Thrones. The Croatian islands are party havens in the summertime that give you the must-experience opportunity to rent and captain your own boat for about ~\$50 per day.

Between wanderings in Croatia, the rich food inspired by Italy just across the Adriatic Sea, and the great wine a rakija culture will keep you entertained. You could *easily* spend an entire trip in Croatia alone.

## THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



Croatia's capital city, Zagreb, is a contemporary wonder. Its pedestrian-friendly streets lined with galleries and interesting shops hold fantastic treasures to be discovered at every turn. Foodies delight in the wide array of restaurants where one can sample everything from the old regional delicacies (try čevapčići Slavinski) to original Southeast Asian fusion combos.

Endless nightlife options throughout Croatia offer partying high atop skyscrapers, in underground subterranean nightclubs nicknamed 'catacombs,' to islands that exist solely for nightlife and run until sunrise when they morph into normal beaches.

From its regal castle in Dubrovnik on the coast to modern marvels like The House of Croatian Parliament (Sabor) by architect Vjenceslav Richter, Croatia is filled with cultural riches that dance along pristine, unspoiled coastlines.

The Balkans are not only about wild mountains and alpine vistas – but they're also home to some of Europe's most spectacular coastline - the Dalmatian Coast of Croatia. The Dalmatian Coast, with its countless islands (think Hvar or Vis), packs in everything from laid-back fishing villages to cosmopolitan beach resorts. And did we mention the water? Well, it's just turquoise, but it's warm, clear, and everything you hope for in a riviera paradise.

No matter what kind of traveler you are, Croatia has *something* for you.

### CROATIA ITINERARY

DESTINATION	TIME	• WHAT TO SEE
<b>Pula, Croatia + Istria</b>	1 Day (Optional)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Visit the Roman amphitheater in the center of town</li><li>• Visit the cliffs, caves, and rocky cliff diving beaches around Seagull's Rock Beach, Punta Christo Lighthouse, Punta Verudela beach,</li><li>• Enjoy amazing wine and hearty, Italian influenced cuisine</li><li>• Visit Plitvice National Park</li></ul>
<b>Split, Croatia</b>	(1 Day)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Diocletian's Palace</li><li>• Krka National Park</li><li>• Sail to Hvar island</li></ul>
<b>Hvar, Croatia + Croatian Islands</b>	(1 Day)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sail your own boat</li><li>• Experience Croatia's "Party Island"</li><li>• Ruins</li><li>• Walk the lavender fields</li><li>• Wineries, bars, and beach clubs</li><li>• Carpe Diem (Island Club)</li></ul>
<b>Plitvice National Park &amp; Plitvice Lakes</b>	(1 Day)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Day trip from Split (2.5 hours drive) or Zadar (1.5 hours drive)</li></ul>

# THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



<b>Dubrovnik, Croatia</b>	(1-2 Days)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Walk the walled city</li><li>• Visit Lokrum Island</li><li>• Cable car to Mount Sryoy</li></ul>
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## CROATIA TRAVEL INFO

- **HIGHLIGHTS OF CROATIA**
  - Cheap truffles
  - Great wine in Istria inspired by the Italian style, and heavier, "Balkan style pasta."
  - Castles and medieval cities
  - Rocky beaches with warm, clear water
  - Never-ending nightlife
- **ESSENTIAL FOOD & DRINK ACROSS CROATIA**
  - Truffles
  - Wine
  - Istrian cuisine
  - Raznjici (meat skewers),
  - Zagrebacki odrezak (veal stuffed with ham and cheese)
  - Janjetina (lamb and herbs)
  - Truffles
  - Istrian wine
  - Raznjici (meat skewers)
  - Zagrebacki odrezak (veal stuffed with ham and cheese)
  - Janjetina (lamb and herbs)
- **GETTING AROUND CROATIA:**
  - Throughout Croatia, your travel mode of choice will be either by bus or rideshare. <https://www.buscroatia.com/> is your best option for researching bus routes, and Rome2Rio.com is your second best option for researching routes, times, and prices. In both cases, book your ticket at the bus terminal as listed times can change and there are usually more routes and times listed than on these sites.
- **MOVING ON FROM CROATIA**
  - From Croatia, I highly recommend going into Montenegro then Albania if you are on a shorter trip (less than two weeks). If you are traveling for longer (more than two weeks), travel by bus into Bosnia and Herzegovina (Mostar, then Sarajevo), up to Belgrade, Serbia, then back to Croatia, and continue south into Montenegro and Albania.
  - Leaving Croatia, you are perfectly situated in the Balkans to go *anywhere* – Slovenia, Bosnia, Montenegro, or a little further to Albania. If you travel to one of the adjacent, nearby countries (Bosnia, Montenegro, or Albania), traveling by bus is your best option, and you can research routes on Rome2Rio and book accordingly. Be sure to read the country sections in this guide to find out visa guidelines for each country.
  - For travel to Slovenia (Ljubljana) and Serbia, a flight (~\$90) is your best bet, as the bus to Ljubljana is 14 hours and the bus to Belgrade is 8 hours.
  -
- **VISA:** No visa is required for tourist visits less than 90 days – Croatia is not part of the Schengen zone
- **BUDGET/PRICES:**

## THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



- €10-15 for a dorm bed in a hostel, ~25 per night for a private hostel room or budget hotel room
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### **PULA, CROATIA**

Pula is a low-key highlight of Croatia. Whereas the rest of Croatia boasts Game of thrones vibes and never-ending nightlife, Pula has a uniquely Istrian feel, hearty food that combines Italian influence with Croatian traditions, fantastic wine (in the Italian tradition), low key beaches, and plenty of ruins.

Pula has been occupied by exactly 22 countries, and each has left its mark, although now the area feels very much like forgotten Italian countryside as the city was part of Italy up until 1942. Many of the residents do still speak Italian.

The colosseum that sits in the middle of town, a remnant of the Roman Empire's occupation, is one of many ruins and archeological sites to explore. Last, there is a vast, still unmapped underground tunnel network beneath the city.

- **HIGHLIGHTS OF PULA, CROATIA**

- Castles
- Roman ruins and restored Roman empire era structures
- Istrian cuisine
- Rocky Beaches and cliff diving
- Food: Cheap truffles, great wine in Istria inspired by the Italian style, and heavier, "Balkan style pasta"
- Malvasia - The local white wine - normally the house wine

- **WHAT TO DO AND SITES TO SEE IN AND AROUND PULA**

- See the Roman Coliseum (The Amphitheater), walking distance from downtown Pula.
- Pula - Built in the 1600s by the Venetians, designed by a French architect
- Roman Temple in Town
- The Triumph Arch
- Pula Daily Market from 7am to 3pm
- Archeological Museum of Istria
- Stoja - Cliff jumping and swimming through caves
  - Hop a bus and take the Nr1 line to Stone for 11 Kuna (1.5€) or take an Uber for 5€. Take the bus from the bus station is in front of Corso Kavana & Tapas Bar / Your Private Kingdom Cocktails.
  - Go to the café in the campground behind the bus station in Stoja for decent Calamari (60 Kuna) and cocktails.
  - Rt Kamenjak - rent a bike in the city at the last bus stop in the city of Premantura. Pick a bike shop at any place in that city.
- Visit the best beaches around Pula
  - Rovinj
  - Medulin

## THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



- Zrce

- **WHERE TO EAT IN PULA**

- **Jupiter:** Delicious, hearty, Istrian cuisine at an amazing price. Great wine selection too. The Local Wine (Malvasia), Istarski odrezak, and gnocci were the highlights
- Vodnjanka: Great seafood
- Kazan
- Parabuto: Call for reservations as it books up quickly each night
- Tappo: Next to the coliseum. Great for wine and tapas
- Hook & Cook: "Sea to table" restaurant
- Kod Kadre: Meat Restaurant. LOTS of meat

- **BEST CAFÉ'S IN PULA**

Have coffee in the main square, in view of a Roman Temple and Ruins. These were my favorite café's

- Cjvajner Café
- Sirena
- Bistro Nonno
- Caffè Djana

- **GOING OUT AND NIGHTLIFE IN PULA**

If you're planning to party, then you may want to skip Pula. This mellow town is wonderful, filled with great food and wine and plenty of rocky beaches, but the nightlife is scant compared to the rest of Croatia. However, if you plan to go out, these places are your best bet:

- **For the local scene, go out Thursdays.** Start with drinking in the park until about 1 and then move to Uljanik, the local club that specializes in Electronica and Croatian Rock.
- **For more excitement, go out on the weekends.** Pietras Julias - Pizzeria by day, club by night. The music can be a toss-up, depending on the DJ, but this is still the place to go during the weekend.

- **BARS AND NIGHTLIFE IN PULA**

- The Shipyard
- Old City Pub
- Click (the James Joyce Bar)
- Enoteca Istriana - A bar near the Amphitheater that showcases regional wines
- Tapos - next to the amphitheater. Stylish and creative Tapas bar with a very cool/chill vibe

*Drinking Tip: Check if the house wine is local; if it is, go for it. It's usually delicious and always cheap.*

### PULA WALKING TOUR PATH

- Amphitheater
- Hercules Gate
- Arch of the Sargai (for a family that ruled for 1600 years, the family that won the battle that arose after the death of Julius Ceasar).
- Roman Mosaik - hidden underground House. Punishment of Darci

## THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



- Forum (City Center)
  - Temple of Augustus
  - City Hall
    - Front wall from the Middle Ages
    - Back Wall from The Temple of Dianna (Goddess of Hunting)
    - Sidewall - 1970's
  - Church and Monastery of St Francis
  
  - **WHERE TO SLEEP IN PULA**
    - [Crazy House Hostel](#)
    - [Antique hostel](#)
  - **OTHER TIPS ON PULA**
    - Summer is the best time to visit, and the most popular restaurants generally close between October and May.
- 

### SPLIT, CROATIA

Travelers should visit Split, Croatia, to explore Roman ruins, beautiful beaches, and amazing architecture.

Split is the second-largest city in Croatia, the main port on the Adriatic Sea coast of Dalmatia. The entire town is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and its most famous landmark is Diocletian's Palace, a centuries-old historical site that was once one of the most important sites in the Roman Empire. Interesting fact – Roman Emperor Diocletian was the only Roman emperor to leave his station peacefully and avoid being murdered after. He did this by dividing the Roman Empire into fourths appointing a ruler over each so that they may quarrel with each other and leave him in peace. While Diocletian was executing this plan, he built the walled fortress of the palace in Split to retire peacefully and live out the remaining years of his life – as he did – and defend it if necessary. You will see when you arrive that this "palace" is the size of a small town and remained just as peaceful.

A guided tour will take you through its awe-inspiring corridors to some of the highlights, like its vast peristyle with an intricate mosaic floor and golden four-headed animal symbol of old imperial power.

Besides exploring this incredible palace, there are a number of other must-see sights in the area, like the ancient Titus' Arch on its main promenade and Marjan Hill—a popular park that offers great views of the town.

Moderate to low-budget travelers can still enjoy Split by simply strolling along the seafront promenade where you will see all different kinds of cafes and shops, as well as many outdoor activities including volleyball, table tennis, star gazing or just hanging out on one of many sandy beaches. For those more interested in historical sites or some nightlife and partying, there are plenty of clubs where nightly

## THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



events featuring both local DJs and international acts. The city's Old Town is also jam-packed with restaurants offering some great Dalmatian cuisine; however, it can be for the more expensive side.

After soaking up the history and views of Split, hop a boat to the island Hvar to purely soak up the sun, party through the night, and captain your own boat...literally.

- **WHAT TO DO IN SPLIT, CROATIA**

- Visit Diocletian's Palace
- Enjoy a great, local lunch or dinner on the oceanfront boardwalk – aim for the north end for better prices.
- Specifically, eat at Konoba Matejuska or Hvar Harbor Restaurant
- Explore the city on foot and see all the sights of Split or with a free walking tour
- Visit Paskval Street in the old town for local jewelry and souvenirs.
- Visit the nearby Paklenica National Park for a little fun in nature (2 hours away)
- Take a boat to one of many Croatia islands like Korcula, Mljet and Vis for a day trip, or overnight to Hvar or Brac.

- **MOVING ON**

- Firstly, hop a ferry (1 hour, ~\$8) to Hvar island to the sun and sip in a place that exists solely for pleasure. Hvar is a Croatian highlight not to be missed. After Hvar, continue by [ferry \(3.5 hrs, ~\\$30\) from Hvar to Dubrovnik](#), or return back to Split and travel from [Split to Dubrovnik by bus \(~4 hours, ~\\$25\)](#)
- 

### HVAR, CROATIA

Hvar is a beautiful island in the Croatian Adriatic with amazing architecture, beaches, outdoor activities, and calm urban centers.

Hvar is a Croatian island located in the Adriatic Sea with some of Croatia's most incredible scenery.

Hvar is also famous for its wines, handcrafted jewelry made out of volcanic stone & silver sea urchins. Tourists can visit different wineries to sample local wines by the glass. The island is very well known for its jewelry, made from the rare Lapis lazuli stone found in nearby mines all over the Balkans, which was highly prized by ancient societies as well as today's fashion designers.

The vibrant nightlife scene is not necessarily as chaotic as other party islands, but it has its moments - especially if you make your way to the legendary "Carpe Diem." There are plenty of bars and cafes that have live music every night of the week, and there is also an annual cultural event called "Cherry Night" held every July, during which Hvar celebrates the first sour cherries harvest every year. Local restaurants offer up amazing Mediterranean dishes that will make any foodie happy, including fresh fish and traditional Croatian cuisine like a filet of beef served with a delicious truffle sauce.

- **WHAT TO DO**

## THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



- **Visit the day bars**, Hula Hula Hvar (bar) and Majerovica
- **By night** visit the never-ending party island of Carpe Diem
- **Visit the beaches** to the east and west of the main harbor. Beaches in the east rent kayaks for cheaper
- **Rent a boat and motor you and your crew** around the islands surrounding Hvar
- **WHERE TO STAY**
  - Villa Skansi
  - The White Rabbit Hostel (Party centric)
- **MOVING ON**
  - After Hvar, continue by [ferry \(3.5 hrs, ~\\$30\) from Hvar to Dubrovnik](#), or return back to Split and travel from [Split to Dubrovnik by bus \(~4 hours, ~\\$25\)](#)

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### DUBROVNIK CROATIA

Known as the Pearl of the Adriatic, Dubrovnik offers more sights and activities than any other city in Croatia. The "Game of Thrones" esque old town is a prime destination for anyone looking to explore some Croatian history and culture and enjoy some amazing views from up high. The city was nearly destroyed during the 1992 war. Since then, Dubrovnik was rebuilt impeccably, maintaining a look that conjures feelings of a "Slavic Venice" considering Dubrovnik (and much of Croatia) were once ruled by the Venetian Empire.

Along with walking along the old city's high walls and exploring fortifications (complete with cannons), there are also plenty of beautifully secluded beaches not too far away by car or public transportation from Dubrovnik. Just minutes outside of Dubrovnik, you can take it easy lounging on a beach that feels worlds away from busy Old Town. There are smaller gems like Ston where you can see some beautiful medieval architecture, go diving off its limestone rocks nicknamed "The Rocks," and peaceful Lokrum island, littered with tons of peacocks.

Top your Dubrovnik experience with a sunset towering over the city after a cable car ride up Mount Sryoy, and you cap an epic experience before moving on to even better Balkans destinations.

- **WHAT TO DO IN DUBROVNIK**
  - Walk Stradun street, the main street in the Old Town, flanked by Venetian style buildings and Game of Thrones backdrops, ending at the clock tower
  - Walk the Old Town city walls
  - Old Town sites to see: Rector's Palace,
  - Hop a boat to Lokrum Island for the view, the experience, and peacocks
  - Cable car ride up to 412 meters tall Mount Srđ for a birds-eye view of Dubrovnik
  - Do a Game of Thrones walking Tour
  - Enjoy the beaches that flank the city
- **TIME NEEDED:** 1 to 2 days
- **ISLANDS NEAR DUBROVNIK TO CONSIDER**

## THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



- Korcula: Beautiful Venetian architecture and the childhood home of Marco Polo, Princeton Beach, and winemaking
  - Elite archipelago of 14 small islands: orchards and fruit groves, white sands beaches, more beautiful architecture and each island has a character all its own
  - **COOL NOTES:**
    - The Old Town was a set for Star Wars as well as Game of Thrones
  - **GETTING AROUND DUBROVNIK:** On foot is your best and easiest bet as the best parts of Dubrovnik are walkable
  - **WHERE TO STAY:** The Old Quarter is a highlight and a great place to stay but pricey. Budget travelers should aim for the surrounding neighborhoods of Pile, Ploce, and Lapad. I highly recommend [Hostel Angelina](#), and there are plenty of options on Airbnb
  - **MOVING ON:**
    - After you've finished exploring Dubrovnik, you've likely reached the end of your adventures in Croatia if you are taking the "from north to south" route through the Balkans. If you are in the Balkans for less than two weeks, hop [a bus from Dubrovnik to Kotor, Montenegro \(~3.5 hours, \\$8\)](#), for insanely beautiful fjords, towering green mountains, and warm, deep blue waters.
    - If you are on the extended tour through the Balkans, hop a bus on to Mostar, Bosnia, to begin the tour through Bosnia & Herzegovina and Serbia.
  - **RECOMMENDED TOURS**
- 

### 3. BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA

*Ottoman food, culture, and heritage in the Balkans, with dense European history*

Bosnia and Herzegovina deliver a unique experience in the Balkans thanks to heavy Ottoman influence in their culture, food, religion, and architecture, and due to the Bosnian history of war – from the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo, which started World War I, to the Bosnian War in the mid-1990s.

Bosnia used to be a small, medieval kingdom (and existed before Sarajevo); however, in the late 15th century, the Ottomans conquered the Bosnian kingdom, destroying much of the original history and leaving behind much of the culture and architecture we observe today.

Beyond the history-laden walking tours, Sarajevo delivers a rich experience of "Little Vienna meets Little Istanbul."

Whereas other Balkan destinations deliver pure sunshine and pleasure, Bosnia and Herzegovina deliver culturally enriching and educational experiences in a way any travel will appreciate.

**INTERESTING BOSNIAN FACTS: WHY THE BOSNIAN COASTLINE IS ONLY 17 KM LONG**

# THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



Bosnia & Herzegovina have only 17km of coast: During the period of the Ottoman and Venetian empires, the Venetians controlled present-day northern Croatia. The Ottomans controlled Bosnia (without a coast at the time). Croatia (south of Bosnia) was the Dubrovnik republic. The Dubrovnik republic agreed to give the Ottomans the 17km of coastline to aid trade via access to the oceans, under the conditions that they would fight the Venetians if they ever attempted to invade. This is why present-day Bosnia has this coastline

## BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA ITINERARY

DESTINATION	TIME	WHAT TO SEE
<b>Mostar</b>	1 Day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Stari Most bridge + cliff diving</li><li>• Bazar &amp; Citywalk</li><li>• Bosnian cuisine &amp; Ottoman influence</li></ul>
<b>Sarajevo</b>	1 Day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Visit "East meets West" of Little Vienna and Little Istanbul</li><li>• History tour (the war, Franz Ferdinand, etc.)</li></ul>

## BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA TRAVEL INFO

- **HIGHLIGHTS**
  - **Mostar:** Cliff diving and a small-town feel
  - **Sarajevo:** Vienna meets Istanbul, intense history (Balkan wars, WW2), unique foods,
- **ESSENTIAL FOOD & DRINK**
  - **Dolma:** Served many ways, but stuffed in onion and stuffed in peppers are the most common ways.
  - **Bey's Soup or Begova Corba** - slow-cooked chicken or beef and vegetables make a thick, slightly creamy, but extremely (simply) delicious soup.
  - **Klepe:** Bosnian meat dumplings served with a creamy yogurt-like cream infused with garlic
  - **Cevapi:** Simple, grilled rounds of minced meat served with a traditional bread somewhat like pita. Simple, yet filling. Good for an uneventful but tasty lunch
  - **Burek:** A savory pastry filled with cheeses, meats, spinach, and the like (comes from Turkey and was brought to the Balkans by the Ottomans). Try it for a quick breakfast.
  - **Baklava:** A layered pastry of flaky bread covered in honey and sugary sweet sauce. Common in many Middle Eastern countries and Greece. Absolutely delicious! Similar to everywhere else in the Balkans and the Middle East, it's no less enjoyable here. Perfect with a cup of coffee
- **VISA:** Most nationalities can stay for 90 days free without a visa but need to have at least 6 months validity on their passport on arrival
- **BUDGET/PRICES:** \$45/ Day for hosteling backpackers and ~\$75 for budget travelers staying in budget hotels
- **CONNECTIVITY:** HT Eronet SIM cards for 3G coverage:

# THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



## MOSTAR, BOSNIA

The famous Old Bridge, built-in 1566 over the Neretva River, is one of Mostar's most recognizable features. It was destroyed in 1993 when Croat forces bombed it in order to create a dividing line across the Balkans. Reconstruction began in 2002 and ended ten years later; today, it is again one of Bosnia and Herzegovina's top tourist attractions.

But there isn't just cultural significance here--this city also has plenty of natural beauty: nearby peaks can reach 3,000 meters high (10,000 feet). Take a hike through Medjugorje (30 minutes away) or its surrounding hillsides for some epic views that are rarely seen by anyone but locals--as well as perhaps sightings of wild animals like deer.

Also, check out Kravice waterfalls - some of the tallest in the Balkans at 80 feet tall - between Split, Croatia and Mostar, 45 minutes away from Mostar. There is a swimming pool at the foot of these falls, and you can take a walk along a path that goes behind them to see where it all comes from. Many day hikers picnic along the shores and enjoy the paradise.

If you need one more destination around Mostar and in Bosnia, consider experiencing some local cuisine on Pliva Lake's shore, featuring plenty of fresh fish and other delicacies, but expect a 2+ hour drive to get there.

The Balkans are known for their hospitable locals--and this is no different in Mostar! Take the time to talk with some of the friendly people who help run shops and cafes. You'll be able to get a taste of local life that you wouldn't otherwise see as a tourist.

- **HIGHLIGHTS OF MOSTAR BOSNIA**

- **The Stari-Mos Bridge:** The iconic bridge, the "stari most" (meaning "old bridge"), has existed since the 1400s. The bridge was used to connect the commerce and residential neighborhood sides of the river. Now, you can jump from the Stari Most after getting certified by the local coaches - or jump from the lower platform. During my time in Mostar, Red Bull was running a cliff diving competition *from* the Stari Most Bridge.
- Terrace café by Day and Ali Baba disco by night
- Central mosque
- Top of Franciscan Church
- Heavy Ottoman influence
- Fantastic rich food with strong Turkish notes
- Do the [free Mostar walking tour](#)

- **AROUND MOSTAR**

- Kravca Waterfalls
- Roman Ruins

## THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



- Jajce
  - Pocitjeli: A medieval fortress and walls surrounding a town that dates back to 1444. 30 minutes from Mostar.
  
  - **TIME NEEDED:** 1 Day for Mostar, an additional ½ day today for each day trip out of town
  - **WHERE TO EAT:**
    - [Restaurant Sadrvan](#) - a plethora of local, Bosnian cuisine at great prices despite the touristy location and feel. Perfectly situated next to the UNESCO heritage bridge "Stari Mos."
  
  - **GETTING TO MOSTAR**
    - From Dubrovnik or Split, go to Mostar, then Sarajevo, then depart to Serbia (east) or Montenegro (South)
    - Traveling by bus, booking on the GobyBus site is your bet
- 

### SARAJEVO

The capital city of Bosnia and Herzegovina is one of the most varied and historically significant cities in Europe. The heritage of the rule of the Ottoman empire remains clear in the cuisine, architecture, and *half* of the city's downtown. Museums host the memories of the Yugoslav wars, a product of the splitting of Yugoslavia, as well as the assassination of Franz Ferdinand by student revolutionaries that kicked off World War 2.

The highlight of the Sarajevo is absolutely standing at the border of east meets west in the downtown border between little Vienna and little Istanbul.

- **HIGHLIGHTS OF WHAT TO DO IN SARAJEVO**
  - Monday night party at the "unofficial bar."
  - Walking tour (hopefully with Neno)
  - A museum (there are so many)
  - Crimes against Humanity Museum (I had no idea of the atrocities, genocide, and torture that took place in Bosnia & Herzegovina)
  - Sarajevo Tunnel
  - Latin Bridge - site of the assassination of Franz Ferdinand and the start of WW2
  - Walk the Main Street
  - "The cultural meeting point" is the line between mini Istanbul and mini Vienna
- **TIME NEEDED:** 1 Day
- **BEST RESTAURANTS IN SARAJEVO AND WHAT TO EAT:**
  - [Blind Tiger \(Restaurant\)](#):
    - Dalmatinska.
    - Amazing Burgers
  - [Barhana \(Traditional Restaurant\)](#)
    - Walnut Rakija Aperitif

## THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



- Parke Soup
  - Stuff peppers and Zucchini
  - [Gastro Pub Vucko](#)
  - [Metropolis](#)
  - **Sarajevo eating tip:** Stick to the Old Town for cheap, authentic, and delicious food
  - **GETTING AROUND**
    - Unofficial shuttles 8, 12, 5 for 25 Euros or 50 Marks
  - **WHERE TO SLEEP**
    - Hostel Kucha
    - Doctors Hostel - comfy private beds, clean facilities, and a relaxed yet welcoming atmosphere
  - **MOVING ON**
    - 6:00AM bus to Belgrade from the east bus station
- 

### 4. SERBIA

*A proud country with a very Eastern European feel, robust history, and intense nightlife.*

Serbia is a Balkan country that, through the countless empires and booms of tourists, has been able to hold on to its history and culture more than its neighbors. At times Croatia feels consumed by summering Europeans and GoT tours, and other cities can feel more Ottoman than Balkan at times. Serbia, on the other hand, feels 100% Slavic and 100% Serbian in a unique way for the Balkans. Serbia offers travelers a chance to experience the Balkans untouched, so it is nearly impossible not to have an amazing time during a trip there.

A uniquely Serbian experience awaits in Belgrade and beyond - from Rakia bars to floating nightlife to college-style warehouse parties, then waking the next day to absorb and discuss culture; Serbia will surprise you with its variety and uniqueness.

Serbia, formerly part of Yugoslavia, has a long tradition of hospitality and welcoming people epitomized by the Balkan proverb: "Whoever visits Serbia in wintertime knows what hospitality is."

If you're looking to get away from the tourist traps that can sometimes make traveling feel less personal, Serbia is one of the best places to go.

#### SERBIA ITINERARY

DESTINATION	TIME	WHAT TO SEE
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## THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



<b>Belgrade</b>	2 Days	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Food scene</li><li>• Citywalk</li><li>• Insane nightlife at boat clubs along the Danube River</li><li>• Rakija Bar</li></ul>
<b>Novi Sad</b>	1 Day (Optional)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Smaller version of Belgrade</li><li>• Student city</li><li>• Lively nightlife</li><li>• EXIT festival in July – biggest music fest in the Balkans</li></ul>

### SERBIA TRAVEL INFO

- **HIGHLIGHTS**
    - Insane Nightlife
    - Deep History
    - Experiencing a Slavic country that remains *very* true to its culture, unbent by tourism and other invaders
  - **TIME NEEDED:** 2 Days
  - **ESSENTIAL FOOD & DRINK**
    - Sarma
    - Ćevapi
    - Burek
    - Karađorđeva šnicla
    - Prebranac
    - Gibanica
    - Punjena Paprika
    - Čvarci
  - **VISA:** Serbia is not part of the Schengen zone and offers a free 90-day visa for most visitors
  - **BUDGET/PRICES:**
    - \$35 for backpackers staying in hostels
      - Hostel: \$12/night
      - Budget breakfast: \$1
      - Diner or Café Meal: \$5
      - Coffee: \$1.50
      - Beer: \$1.50
      - Inter-city Train: \$4.50
    - \$60 for budget travelers staying in budget hotels
  - **CONNECTIVITY:** SIM Card from VIP, Telenor, or MTS for best 3G connectivity
-

# THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



## BELGRADE, SERBIA

Belgrade has a rich history, ranging from Roman times to the Ottoman occupation and Serbian Christianization when Serbs converted to Orthodox Christianity in order to counter moves by Catholic clergymen coming from Rome. It was later captured by Turks in 1459, conquered briefly by Habsburgs in 1688, taken by Austrians in 1717–39 during the Great Turkish War, when it was known as "Belgrad" (Turkish: "Novo Brdo"), and liberated by the Serbian army in 1876 during the Serbian–Ottoman War of 1876–78.

Belgrade was also the capital of several Yugoslav states until the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia in 1992. Belgrade is still the capital and largest city of Serbia. It is the only major Serbian city with a population above one million.

### • WHAT TO DO

- Do the free Belgrade walking tour, hosted by Hostel Hedonism
- Visit the Belgrade Fortress and hang out at the Park in front of it
- Visit old town (Zaman)
- Visit Sajmiste (remnants of a concentration camp)
- Walk Belgrade's "Stari Grad" (Old Town), seeing the main walking
- The main pedestrian walk of Kneza Mihaila and plenty of places to eat, drink, and people watch
- Visit Republic Square, at the end of Kneza Mihaila
- The Belgrade Fortress, which has never been overtaken
- Kalemegdan Park surrounding the fortress, which includes the military museum and a zoo
- Walkthrough Skadarjila, Belgrade's most stylish and bohemian neighborhood
- Enjoy the never-ending nightlife at the riverfront bars and clubs
- Visit Zeleni Vanac farmers market
- Visit the Nikola Tesla Museum
- Visit the neighbors of Zemun and Novi Beograd for a taste of what local life is like outside of the city center.
- Noteworthy landmarks to see: National Assembly, Church of St Mark, Church of St Sava,

### • COOL FACTS

- Belgrade is the largest city in the Balkans
- The Belgrade fortress has never been captured by a rival

### • TIME NEEDED: 1-2 Days

### • ESSENTIAL FOOD, DRINK, AND WHERE TO EAT

- Fabrika (Restaurant)
- Leila Records (Radio-Televizija Beograd) - A café, bar, and record located a 10 minutes walk from the tourist strip but authentically (hipster) Serbian.
- Go to new Belgrade or Zamun for food
- Cafeteria (coffee bar in tourist center)
- Fabrika Restaurant

### • BARS AND NIGHTLIFE

## THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



- Go to Passenger Café (have a Kas beer) next to Hedonism Hostel
  - Rakia Bar – The name says it all!
  - Splavoli (floating clubs built into houseboats on the Rivershore)
  - Drugstore (Warehouse District - Bus 16), Old factory clubs complex
  - **GETTING AROUND:** Most of the parts of Belgrade you'll want to see are situated in the downtown and historic areas, so you'll be able to explore the entire city on foot
  - **WHERE TO SLEEP**
    - Bongo Hostel
    - Hostel Hedonism
  - **MOVING ON**
    - Take the train (11 hours) or fly back to Podgorica, Montenegro and continue on the Balkans backpacking route.
  - **RECOMMENDED TOURS**
- 

### NOVI SAD

Novi Sad is the second-largest city in Serbia. It's known for its significant role at the end of World War I, when it was occupied by Serbian troops and became an important anti-Bolshevik base. This great deed earned it a reputation as a Christian bastion that turned out to be undefendable against merciless Ottoman forces.

The dynamic atmosphere attracts many visitors and workers from abroad, who come to experience this Mediterranean Balkans feel during their Balkans tours. Novi Sad is also famous for its thriving art scene as well as the annual jazz festival attracting celebrities and musicians from around the world every October.

As one of the youngest European capitals, Novi Sad's restaurants, bars, galleries and concert halls all reflect its cultural diversity, which in turn gives the city an alluring nightlife that is often described as unique.

Novi Sad's strategic position on the Danube River makes it a natural hub for inland waterway transport, and there are good road connections to all major cities around the Balkans.

- **HIGHLIGHTS**
  - Smaller version of Belgrade
  - Student city
  - Lively nightlife
  - EXIT festival in July – biggest music fest in the Balkans
- **WHAT TO DO IN NOVI SAD**
  - Visit the Petrovaradin Fortress
  - Walk Dunavska pedestrian street

## THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



- Enjoy peace and quiet in green Danube park
  - Visit the Museum of Vojvodina which documents 8,000 years of history in the region
  - Enjoy the architecture: Name of Mary Church, Novi Sad Synagogue, Vladičanski Dvor (the Bishop's Palace), St. George's Cathedral
  - Enjoy Strand, the sandy beach on the shore of the Danube
  - Visit the Matica Srpska Gallery housing 7,000+ pieces of Serbian art from 1500 to present
  - Visit Fruška Gora 30 minutes from town, a National Park of vineyards, pastures, and woodlands that was the shores of an island in the Pannonian Sea 90 million years ago
  - Drive 35 minutes away to the vineyard laden small town of Sremski Karlovci
- **TIME NEEDED:** 1 day

### 5. MONTENEGRO (HIGHLIGHT OF THE BALKANS)

*The southernmost fjords in Europe tower above pristine, beautiful waterways and castles*

Montenegro is a small yet intensely beautiful country dominated by the southernmost fjords in Europe, waterways, and towering mountains with centuries-old, medieval-style cities dotting in between. Montenegro's views and stories feel unreal, whether walking a cobblestone road in the afternoon, taking a cheap boat tour through the waterways with the captain narrating the hidden history, or hiking to a monastery.

For many travelers, Montenegro is the highlight of their Balkan itinerary.

You'll find the popular sites, Kotor and Budva, frequented by cruise ships and locals (Croatians and Serbians). Montenegro delivers all of the enjoyment of Croatia at about 1/3 the price.

#### MONTENEGRO ITINERARY

DESTINATION	TIME	WHAT TO SEE
<b>Kotor</b>	1 Day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Kotor Bay Boat tour</li><li>• San Giovanni Fortress hike</li><li>• Boat to Our Lady of the Rock Church (UNESCO WHS)</li><li>• Walk the old town by day and night</li></ul>
<b>Budva</b>	1 Day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Historic old town or "Stari Grad,"</li><li>• Most luxurious hotels in Montenegro</li><li>• Archaeological museum</li><li>• Pomarine Monastery</li></ul>

# THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 20+ beaches of the Budva Riviera</li><li>• A Majorca/Ibiza like vibe</li></ul>
<b>Other Destinations in Montenegro</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Durmitor National Park</li><li>• Zabljak (highest altitude town in the Balkans, nestled in the Durmitor mountain range)</li><li>• Biogradska Gora National Park</li><li>• Herzeg Novi</li><li>• Strong Monastery hike</li></ul>

## MONTENEGRO TRAVEL INFO

- **TIME NEEDED:** 2 to 3 days for the essentials
- **ESSENTIAL FOOD & DRINK**
  - Duvet
  - Moussaka (in general)
  - Musaka od Ketola
  - Cute
- **GETTING TO MONTENEGRO**
  - International travelers coming from outside the Balkans will need to fly into Dubrovnik and then bus to their destination in Montenegro.
  - No matter where you come to Montenegro from (within the Balkans), traveling by bus is your best bet.
  - [From Dubrovnik to Kotor, take a 3-hour bus \(\\$10\).](#)
  - From Albania, bus from Skoder (3 hours) or Tirana (6 hours).
  - From Mostar, Bosnia, or Sarajevo, taking the bus will be your best option.
  - From Belgrade, take the train from Belgrade to Podgorica, and hop a bus from Podgorica to your next destination in Montenegro
- **VISA:** Montenegro is not part of the Schengen zone, and a free 90-day visa is offered on arrival
- **CONNECTIVITY:** Telenor SIM Card best for 3G access countrywide
- **BUDGET/PRICES:**
  - \$40/night for backpackers staying in hostels
    - Hostel: \$12/day
    - Food: \$15/day
    - Transportation: \$7 between cities, most cities are walkable and need no transport
    - Tours: \$35 for Kotor Bay and Lady of the Rocks Tour
  - \$75/night for budget travelers option for hotels

# THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



## KOTOR, MONTENEGRO

Kotor is one of the most picturesque cities in Montenegro and a popular destination to visit for people all over the Balkans and beyond!. It's located on a dramatic bay where the Adriatic crashes into towering limestone walls, forming cliffs and caves. Kotor is home to UNESCO World Heritage Site Old Town, which begins at the foot of Stari Grad (Old Town) and ends at Lovrjenac Rock in the center of the bay, and is considered one of the most beautiful places along the Adriatic Coast. Nearby seaside villages include Tivat, Budva, and Sveti Stefan. With its beautiful beaches, magnificent fortresses and interesting history, Kotor is perfect for travelers of all ages.

Roman Emperor Augustus spent time in Kotor in the 3rd century BC and praised it as a “city defended by strong walls” back then.

If you are planning a Balkans itinerary, be sure to put Kotor on your list. The beauty of this coastal town, as well as its historical significance, will not disappoint.

- **HIGHLIGHTS (BLURB)**

- **Kotor Bay Boat Tour**
- **Visit Our Lady of the Rock Church (UNESCO Site)**
- **Walk the Kotor Old Town (UNESCO Site)**

- **WHAT TO DO**

- **The Kotor Bay Boat tour (€35) is a must-do.** 3 hours on a boat spent cruising the crystal clear, blue waters up to the border with Croatia, visiting some interesting sites in between (includes lady of the rock church, underwater tunnel)
- **Beaches abound around Kotor**, walking distance with water so warm and calm. I went for midnight, moonlit swims every night in Kotor.
- **Lady of the Rock Church:** A church built on an island built over 250 years in the shape of a boat

Two fishermen found a picture of the Virgin Mary on a rock in the middle of the water. It was gone the next day but reappeared a week later. The locals decided to build a church on the rock but needed to build an island first. For 100 years, sailors in the bay would drop small rocks from their boats each time they went out, and the town sank enemy ships over the rocks to build the island. Today, the church and the island are UNESCO world heritage sites.

**Old Town and the Castle:** The old town is an ancient, walled complex and castle that crawls up the steep mountain behind the city. This complex houses most of the nightlife in Kotor and caters to partiers and backpacker life.

**Learn Kotor's story of Naval defense, then do a boat tour:** the bay into Kotor has a narrow inlet flanked by high walls. For defense, the town placed underwater hooks and chains. Whenever ships, usually British, came in to attack, they tightened the chains,

## THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



trapping the ships and sank them with cannons fired from island and town directly in front of the inlet.

- **TIME NEEDED:** 1 to 2 days for the essentials
  - **GETTING THERE:** The destinations in Montenegro are close together, so, anywhere in Montenegro you go, travel by bus. Rome2Rio will be your best tool for planning bus travel, but be smart and book at the train station beforehand.
  - **GETTING AROUND:** Kotor is a small and beautiful town that is tightly packed and very walkable. Plan on just walking to get anywhere you'd like to go.
  - **WHERE TO SLEEP IN KOTOR**
    - [Hostel 4 U Montenegro](#): A hostel on the beach and an anomaly. When I stayed, they had 2000+ reviews and a rating of 9.9 out of 10. On arrival, you won't check-in. Instead, you'll be handed a shot of homemade Rakia.
    - [Old Town Hostel](#)
  - **MOVING ON**
    - Use [www.getbybus.com](http://www.getbybus.com) to find your bus out
  - **LOGISTICS**
    - **VISA:** Montenegro is not part of the Schengen zone, and a free 90-day visa is offered on arrival
    - **BUDGET/PRICES: (1 NIGHT ACCOMMODATION, 1 MEAL, 1 BEER)**
  - **NOTES**
    - Next to the old town is Kotor's only shopping complex with a grocery store and anything else you'll need
- 

### BUDVA, MONTENEGRO

Budva is a coastal town with great nightlife and vibrant atmosphere, long sandy beaches, beautiful residences, hotels and hostels. Its off-season city is charming as well - not too big yet numerous things to see and do. The city's old town centers around its signature pedestrian street, which is the center of activity for visitors, lined with shops, restaurants, bars, and cafes. The Old Town is bordered by the site of a 14th-century Franciscan monastery on one side and a 17th-century Orthodox church on another. A walk through this picturesque area also gives a breathtaking view of mountainside villages and the shores leading up to the Adriatic Sea.

- **WHAT TO DO**
  - Soak up the sun on the Budva Riviera
  - Walk the Budva Old Town
  - Visit the Cathedral of Saint Stephen
  - Sail the bay and view Kotor fjord
- **TIME NEEDED:** 1 day

## THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



- **GETTING THERE:** The destinations in Montenegro are close together, so, anywhere in Montenegro you go, travel by bus. Rome2Rio will be your best tool for planning bus travel, but be smart and book at the train station beforehand.
  - **GETTING AROUND:** Just like Kotor, Budva is tightly packed and walkable, so plan out using your feet to get around for the best experience
- 

### 6. ALBANIA

***Undiscovered and packed with experience: the Albanian Alps and the Albanian Riviera are Balkan highlights***

Albania is one of the highlights of the Balkans – "young," undiscovered, and filled with some of the best beaches (the same coastline as you'll find on the Greek Riviera) and Alpine views in all of Europe, at a travel price that is easily the lowest in the Balkans and Europe.

Albania opened up to the west and abandoned communism much later than its neighbors, leaving Albania with a very young and "new" and somewhat adventurous feel as a country. Though traveling through Albania can be slightly more difficult than its neighbors, the natural beauty you get in return makes Albania a highlight of the region thanks to two things – the Albanian Riviera and the Albanian Alps. As you travel through this country, you will experience the highs of travel and the calamity of "adventure travel." Some parts will feel like the Greek isles and riviera or Alps of other countries, while other places will feel as chaotic as urban India – in all situations, though, the experience is exquisite and worth the trip.

**The Albanian Riviera** is the coastline shared with Croatia (to the north), but more interestingly, it is shared with Greece to the south. This is the same immaculate beaches and coastline that would cost 5x as much to travel in Greece, but (in Albania) you experience it with a more authentic, less touristy feel, and without the crowds.

**The Albanian Alps** are tucked just across the Albania-Montenegro border, near the Albanian towns of Theti, the Valbona River Valley and deliver sights as amazing as the Swiss Alps and Dolomites, surrounded by charming rural towns, yet just a few hours drive from warm beaches. All of this is *still* under traveled, undiscovered, and perfect for budget travels.

#### **ALBANIAN**

- Albania was the first atheist country in the world in 1967
- The clock tower in Tirana has been rebuilt several times because, at the start of wars, it was usually the first thing destroyed, and after wars, it was usually the first thing rebuilt
- Albania has over 170,000 bunkers strewn throughout the country
- Albania is the international name based on the first tribe that was found here.

# THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



## ALBANIA ITINERARY

DESTINATION	TIME TO SPEND	WHAT TO SEE
<b>Tirana (capital)</b>	1 Day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• BUNK'ART museum</li><li>• Walking tour + learn of Albania's recent opening</li><li>• Sky Tower 360 degree rotating bar</li></ul>
<b>The Albanian Riviera</b>	3 Days	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Amazing beaches in Durres, Vlore, Sarande + Buthrotum</li></ul>
<b>Gjirokaster (UNESCO world heritage city)</b>	1 Day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Walk the UNESCO world heritage for architecture and "flat stone roofs."</li></ul>
<b>Berat National park (UNESCO heritage site)</b>	1 Day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Experience the "City of a Thousand Windows"</li><li>• Most well preserved Ottoman-era old town &amp; UNESCO world heritage site</li></ul>
<b>Shkodër</b>	1 Day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Gateway to the Albanian Alps</li><li>• Rozafa Castle</li><li>• 18<sup>th</sup>-century bridge Mesi Bridge</li><li>• Eat traditional Albanian food at Restaurant Tradita Gege &amp; Toske</li><li>• Lake Shkoder</li></ul> Continue on to Theth National Park
<b>The Albanian Alps</b>	2 to 3 Days (with hike)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Vlore</li><li>• Hike from Vlore to Thet</li><li>• Theth</li></ul>

*Consider Albania route --> Tirana --> Shkoder --> Albanian Alps --> Albanian Riviera (Vlore, Sarande, Himare) --> Berat --> Gjirokaster --> Tirana to do the adventurously strenuous experiences (trekking) first, and end the trip on the beachy riviera*

*Or reverse the route if you would prefer to get adventurous first and then end on the beach.*

### HIGHLIGHTS ALBANIA

- Tirana (capital) and learning of the country's history
- The Albanian Riviera and exquisite beaches for insanely cheap
- Sarandë (Best coastal destination)
- Rough camping on the beaches of Albania
- The Albanian Alps
- Shkodër
- Berat and Berat National park (UNESCO heritage site)
- Finiq
- Gjirokaster (UNESCO world heritage city)

### ESSENTIAL FOOD & DRINK IN ALBANIA

- Byrek: Savory pastry
- Tase Kosi

## THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



- The Mediterranean Staples: Olives, cheeses, fresh fruits, fresh vegetables, baklava, byrek
- Musaka
- Stuffed Peppers
- Fried Eggplant

**WHEN TO VISIT:** Shoulder seasons of April to June and September to October are best, with great temperatures and thin crowds. July and August are great, too but expect heavier crowds.

**GETTING THERE:** From within the Balkans, international busses connect to Tirana from Montenegro, Kosova, Greece, and Macedonia. From outside of those countries, expect to fly in. Momondo is your best bet for finding cheap flights.

**GETTING AROUND:** Albania is small and easy to get around. You can travel from north to south in a single day, all via public transport (no need to rent a car). Fulgoni and busses are your best options for travel.

Fulgoni are shuttle buses or minivans that run between cities in Albania. They're accessible and cheap but often only leave when full. To find them, it is best to ask your hostel or hotel where to find the appropriate one for your next destination.

Long-distance busses are another great option, more reliable, easier to book, and my preferred option.

If you are pressed for time and don't want to waste time sorting transport, consider a tour from [G Adventures](#) or Intrepid Travel.

**MOVING ON:** From Albania, take a cheap flight into Bulgaria (Sofia and Bansko) for great food adventures, a Bohemian café scene, low-key yet engaging nightlife, and some great day hikes.

**VISA:** 90 days free with no visa required for citizens of EU countries and 59 other countries, including the US, Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom ([Source](#))

**ALBANIAN BACKPACKING BUDGET/PRICES:** Albania is the cheapest country to travel in the Balkans

- **\$35 per day total**
- **Hostel: \$11/night**
- **Good meal: \$5**
- **Transport:** \$75 to \$100 for bussing the entire loop of Tirana to the Riviera to the Alps

**WIFI AND CONNECTIVITY:**

- Vodafone SIM for 3G is best, also Eagle Mobile, Telekom
- Larger, chain cafes will have wifi, don't expect strong wifi in small cafes

**RECOMMENDED TOURS:** (G Adventures, Intrepid, Contiki)

**TRAVEL INSURANCE:** Albania is adventurous enough that I recommend travel insurance, and [Safetywing](#) and [World Nomads](#) both suffice

# THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



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## TIRANA

Tirana is the Albanian capital and full of history in Tirana, dating back to about 3000 BC. Tirana was once the crown jewel of the Balkans and was considered Europe's newest and most modern city. But the Balkans lost a lot of its charm following World War 1 which destroyed major portions of the Balkans, including Tirana and many other cities in Albania.

After the war, a communist government was established, and Albania became a communist state, isolating itself from not but the west, but even China, the Soviet Union, and neighboring Yugoslavian countries.

In 1992, Albanians voted to end communism and instead embrace democracy. Since then, Albanian has been gradually reopening and recovering from decades of isolation.

Tirana is the perfect place to learn about, experience, and absorb this history from walk tours, wherein guides share the history that they lived through, museums, and daily life that has eery remnants of a time passed.

- **WHAT TO DO**

- **The City Square:** Has a plant from every region of Albania and has 100+ small fountains, so the square stays cool in summer.
- **The National Museum** located next to the square
- **A Free Walking Tour** for a firsthand account of Albania's history
- **Block Ware** (former place of the elite - now a place to go out)
- Sky Bar - a bar that rotates completely every hour, giving a 360-degree view of the city
- **The Bunker Museum**
- **Visit the Bunk'Art 2 museum:** A nuclear bunker turned Albanian dictatorship history museum.
- **Take a free walking tour** to discover the history
- **Visit the National Museum**
- **Visit Skanderberg Square**
- **View Et'hem Bej Mosque** in the Square
- **Cable car up to Dajti Mountain for sunset** after bussing to Daytime National Park for a panoramic view of Tirana
- **Visit Tiranas New Bazar** for food and people watching.
-

## THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



- **TIME NEEDED:** 1 to 2 days for the essentials
- **RECOMMENDED RESTAURANTS IN TIRANA**
  - Oda Restaurant
  - Sofra Beratase Restaurant
- **MOVING ON:**
  - Head to Himare, on the Albanian Riviera
  - By bus from the south bus station (1000 Leke) at 5:45, 6:15, 1:00pm, 6:00pm
  - From center to bus station ~700 Leke
- **RECOMMENDED TOURS**
  - Any free walking tour
  - The Bunk'Art Tour

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### SHKODER

The gateway to the Albanian Alps and an ancient city that was home to Illyrian tribes that ruled Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Later, this city was ruled by the Serbs, Romans, Byzantines and Ottomans, and the remnants of these cultures still remain today.

A prep town before heading into Theth and the Albanian Alps. One of the oldest cities in the Balkans.

When not prepping gear and planning transport for the Theth to Valbona hike, walk the city streets to absorb the vibe. The main street (G'juhadol), the shopping street (Kole Idromeno) are great places to walk through.

- **WHAT TO DO**
  - Hike up to Rozafa Castle
  - Prep for the Theth to Valbona hike (food and equipment are best gathered here)
- **TIME NEEDED:** 1 Night
- **SHKODER LOGISTICS NOTES**
  - Plan on going to the SPAR Market in town to stock up on everything you'll need for the hike
  - Bring enough cash for your time in the Alps because there is no ATM in Shkodra.
  - Transport to Theth will be best arranged through your hostel or hotel, including transport back from Valbona.

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### THE ALBANIAN ALPS

## THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



The Albanian Alps is a high-altitude mountain range in southern Albania, with the highest peak, Mount Korab towering at 2,764m above sea level. The range spans 100km from north to south and rivals the beauty of the alpine regions elsewhere in Europe, making for the same amazing outdoor experience at a fraction of the price and with a fraction of the crowds.

You already know Albania is already a country that has maintained its beauty with charming rural villages untouched natural landscapes. A relatively small Balkans country, to begin with, having an area of only 28,750 km<sup>2</sup>, the Albanian Alps continue to be an unexplored gem tucked in the northeast corner of Albania. The Albanian Alps stand as a national park immaculate and pristine trekking and hiking by summer and international ski resorts to explore by winter. Throughout your wanderings here, you'll find scenic views of snowy peaks surrounded by green pine forests as backdrops to crystal blue watering holes and waterfalls. Tourists choosing to hike and make the most of their time in the region here, around Theth and Valbona, can choose from different levels of difficulty in treks, from easy to difficult, making the adventures here suitable for everyone.

The Albanian Alps offer many activities beyond just hiking, such as sightseeing, kayaking, horse trekking, and skiing. This destination is a perfect escape where you will get to travel throughout the Balkans but have the feeling that you are far away from civilization.

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### THETH

An Alpine Mountain town with hiking as its main draw, and that's plenty.

- **WHAT TO DO**
  - The Theth to Valbona hike through the Albanian Alps (7 hours)
  - Hike the trail to Danielle (5 hours)
  - Hike to the Blue Eye (7 hours) + Grunas Waterfall on the route
- **TIME NEEDED:** 3 Days

## THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



### VALBONA

The destination city of an amazing, 7-hour one-way hike from Theta to Valbona. You will complete the hike with a walk through the town with a beautiful view on both sides, ending with dinner at your guesthouse.

Be sure to go out after sunset and take in the night sky. Then rest up and prepare to go back to Shkodra the following day.

- **WHAT TO DO**

- The Theth to Valbona hike through the Albanian Alps (7 hours)
- Hike the trail to Danielle (5 hours)
- Hike to the Blue Eye (7 hours) + Grunas Waterfall on the route

- **TIME NEEDED:** 3 Days

- **MOVING ON**

- Arrange transport back to Shkodra through your guesthouse for the following day.
  - The travel back will require a furgon from Valbona to Fierce, a ferry across Loman Lake to Koman, and another Furlong from Koman to Shkodra.
- 

### HIMARE

A central town on the Albanian Riviera surrounded by beautiful beaches and a great base for comfortably exploring as many as your trip allows.

- **HIGHLIGHTS (BLURB)**

- Gjipe Beach (accessible by kayak)
- Jala Beach (accessible by kayak from Himara)
- Filikuri Beach (accessible by rented kayak)

- **WHAT TO DO**

- Rent a kayak and explore the coastline by day, visit the beaches and coves that dot the shoreline.

- **TIME NEEDED:** 1 day

- **RECOMMENDED RESTAURANTS & ESSENTIAL FOOD & DRINK**

- Sunset Restorat Bar (more for sunset than the food)
-

## THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



### BERAT

UNESCO World Heritage site and city of 1000 windows and home to Ottoman era homes and fortresses on the route to the Albanian beaches

- **WHAT TO DO**
    - Berat Castle
    - Holy Trinity church, and Byzantine church from the 13th century
    - Walk the Mangalem Quarter (home to Muslims) and Gorica Quarter (home to Christians)
    - Make the hour-long hike up the hill behind the Gorica quarter for sunset
    - Walk Bulevardi Republika just after sunset to experience "xhiro hours" when friends and family come out to walk and socialize
  - **TIME NEEDED:** 1 day
  - **MOVING ON**
    - Two buses daily run from Berat to Gjirokaster from the Berat Bus Terminal, one at 8 am and the second at 2 pm for ~200 LEK. The ride will be ~3 hours.
- 

### GJIROKASTER

A UNESCO world heritage site known as the "Stone City of a Thousand Steps." One of the Balkans' oldest cities, Gjirokaster, is worth a visit for its architecture, ancient ruins, and abundant Ottoman-era houses.

#### WHAT TO DO AND SEE IN GJIROKASTER

- Gjirokaster Castle, a beautiful Ottoman-era fortress sitting atop a hill
  - Gjirokaster Museum
  - Explore the hundreds of bunkers in Gjirokaster
  - Gjirokaster Old Bazar
  - Do the Free Walking Tour hosted by Stone City Hostel if staying there
  - Hike to the Ottoman era Ali Pasha Bridge
  - **TIME NEEDED:** 1 day
  - **WHERE TO STAY**
    - Stone Coty Hostel
-

# THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



## 7. BULGARIA

*Calm, quiet, and potent for foodies and lovers of pub culture*

Quaint, calm, and charming in a peaceful way, Bulgaria is a wonderfully relaxed destination in the Balkans that is less about natural beauty, architecture, and nightlife than its neighbors and more about food and absorbing culture by osmosis. Additionally, you will constantly be surprised by the history, culture, and cuisine of Bulgaria that you'd never even heard of. At night, the restaurants and nightlife make Sofia and Bansko places that a nomad could hang their hat.

**Food in Sofia, Bulgaria is surprisingly amazing;** a strong locavore food scene encourages restaurants to commonly experiment with the foods of the region in a gourmet way. The yogurt you commonly eat started here. My favorite meal in Bulgaria was local wild boar that fed on a particular berry in the forest, served with greens and salad foraged from the same forest, paired with a wine made from the same plucked berry from that forest, and finished with ice cream made from the same berry – and this was a standard meal for my entire time in Sofia for cheaper than an average meal in a western European country.

**Bulgaria's history** can be explored with day trips (to Plovdiv) and walking tours wherein you'll discover ruins and remnants from the Ottoman Empire's former footprint, as well as how the Bulgarians protested the deportation of Bulgaria's Jews to concentration camps and came up with a scheme to save the Jews in Bulgaria.

Bulgaria's pub and local bar is an adventure on its own. Whereas Croatia's nightlife rivals Barcelona's, Bulgaria's dark pubs seem reminiscent of Game of Thrones pubs. As contrasted and low-key as the vibe is, the locals are welcoming, and a few beers on the town in Sofia can be a great time.

All in all, Bulgaria is a less exciting destination, but calmly pleasing in many ways and a great way to end a trip through the Balkans.

### BULGARIA ITINERARY

DESTINATION	TIME	WHAT TO SEE
<b>Sofia + Plovdiv</b>	2 days	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Explore the Food scene on the Balkan Bites food tour</li><li>• Do a few walking tours (free, food tour, graffiti, etc.)</li><li>• Plovdiv day trip</li><li>• St. Alexander Nevski Cathedral</li><li>• St. George Rotunda built in the 300s</li><li>• Coffee or a beer of Vitosha Blvd</li><li>• Opera at Ivan Vazov National Theater</li></ul>
<b>Bulgarian Black Sea Coast: Sozopol &amp; Nessebar</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Harmanite and Kavatsite beaches for beach bars, watersports, and fun</li><li>• Sozopol Old Town</li><li>• Ottoman era Church of Sveta Bogoroditsa</li><li>• Ravadinovo Castle</li></ul>

## THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Take Bulgaria Fast Ferry between Sozopol and Nessebar</li> </ul>
<b>Bansko</b>		<p><b>Summer</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hiking</li> <li>• Mountain Biking</li> <li>• Climb 3,000 meter tall Mount Vihren</li> <li>• Mountain town main Ave. of Pirin Street for cafes and bars</li> </ul> <p><b>Winter</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Skiing and snowboarding</li> </ul> <p><b>Anytime</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Holy Trinity Church</li> <li>• Rila Monastery</li> </ul>

- **ESSENTIAL FOOD & DRINK**

- Shopska Salad
- Tarator Soup
- Shkembe Chorba
- Chushka Biurek (Stuffed Peppers)
- Kebapche
- Madradjisko (Egg & Cheese in Clay Pot)
- Palačinka (Bulgarian Pancakes)
- Baklava
- Makita
- Banitsa
- Shopska Salad
- Moussaka
- Kebapche
- Tarator

- **BULGARIAN VISA:** You can travel in Bulgaria for up to 90 days every 180 days. Visits to Bulgaria do not count towards your 90-day visa-free limit in the Schengen area.

- **CONNECTIVITY and SIM Cards:** Telenor, Vivacom, A1 Bulgaria

- **BUDGET/PRICES:**

- \$40/day for backpackers staying in hostels
  - Accommodation: \$11/night
  - Food: \$15/day
  - Transportation: \$10 between cities, \$17 to taxi across the entire city
  - Attractions: \$10
- \$75/day for budget travelers staying in budget hotels
  - Accommodation: \$25/night
  - Food: \$25/day
  - Transportation: \$10 between cities, \$17 to taxi across the entire city
  - Attractions: \$10

- **RECOMMENDED TOURS**

- [Balkan Bites Walking Tour](#)

# THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



- [Sofia Free Walking Tour](#)
- [Free Sofia Graffiti Tour](#) (or just wander on your own)

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## SOFIA

Sofia, the capital and largest city of Bulgaria, is a fascinating blend of European and Slavic styles with architecture that encompasses many different periods. The Balkans itinerary would be incomplete without at least a short stopover in Sofia.

This city may seem dull on the surface, but it is actually cultured, entertaining, and has a heavy hipster influence beneath the surface.

A strong gourmet and locavore food scene at insanely low prices (as expected in the Balkans), a great pub and dive bar scene, tons of kitsch coffee shops, and more add up to a destination that doesn't quite blow your mind but is a perfectly enjoyable and relaxing stopover for backpackers, digital nomads, and anyone who can appreciate artsy and "low key."

- **WHAT TO DO**
  - Food Tour with Balkan Bites
  - Free walking tour with Sofia free tours
  - Go on a graffiti tour or simply wander the town and admire the street art
  - 10 pm pub crawl every night from Hostel **Mostel**
  - Consider day use of the spa and sauna at Central Hotel Sofia if you've been running too hard.
  - Wander and explore the countless cafes as there's a strong bohemian scene in this city
  - Hike up Vitosha Mountain, just outside the city
  - Visit "[The Red Flat](#)" for a peek into what life was like under communism
  - Do the Seven Rila Lakes Hike, glacial lakes high in the surrounding mountains
  - Day trip outside the city to the colorful Rila Monastery
  - Landmarks and architecture to see: Alexander Nevsky Cathedral
- **TIME NEEDED:** 1 day for Sofia proper, 2 days including hikes
- **GETTING THERE:**
  - Fly in as Sofia is one of Europe's most affordable cities to fly into. I paid \$32 for my flight in and \$1.50 to get from the airport to my hostel.
- **WHERE TO STAY:**
  - Hostel Mostel: At \$11, I got a dorm bed, made tons of friends, and all-you-can-eat breakfast and free dinner. The crowd here was the best part.
- **MOVING ON:**
  - Consider heading to Turkey as a train ticket to Istanbul is only \$29.
- **RECOMMENDED TOURS**
  - Balkan Bites tour

## THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



- Free walking tour
- 

### BANSKO

Bansko is best known as a budget-friendly ski location and mountain town for digital nomads. If you're traveling to Bulgaria in the winter, stop off for some snowboarding and skiing. Outside of winter, your trip to Bansko will be filled with hikes and day trips to nearby cities.

If you're on the long trail, backpacking for months, Bansko is worth stopping at for some outdoorsy relaxation. If your schedule is tight, skip this destination and allocate more time for other Balkan cities.

- **WHAT TO DO IN BANSKO**
    - Ski-in the wintertime
    - Hike to Vihren Peak
    - Rila Monastery Day Trip
    - Pirin National Park Day Trip
  - **TIME NEEDED:** 1 Day + 1 day for each of your chosen hikes/day trips
  - **RESTAURANTS**
    - Lavanda
    - Hadjidragana Tavern
    - Skaptoburger
    - Salted Cafe
- 

### ALTERNATE DESTINATION: THE BULGARIAN BLACK COAST

- **City 1: Varna - The Marine Capital of Bulgaria (1 Day)**
  - The Retro Museum
  - The Stone Forest
  - Cathedral of the Assumption of the Virgin
  - The Butterfly House
- **City2: Sunny Beach - A sunny vacation spot filled with nightlife (1 Day)**
  - Erma Turkish Bath
  - Necessary
  - Church of Saint Sophia

# THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



## THE ADDITIONAL BALKANS DESTINATIONS

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### THE ADDITIONAL BALKAN TRAVEL ITINERARY DESTINATIONS

| [MACEDONIA](#) | | [KOSOVO](#) |

## 8. KOSOVO (OPTIONAL)

Honestly, many other countries in the Balkans have more to offer, but the act of visiting this formerly war-torn country will help you open your mind and shed stereotypes that will enhance your travels down the road. Though Kosovo lacks the sights to see that its neighbors do, Kosovo is very safe to travel to, and visiting can open your mind.

If you are traveling the region for less than three weeks, skip Kosovo and save the travel days for another highlight destination (Albania, Montenegro, or Croatia).

If you are backpacking in the Balkans and have plenty of time, stop through Pristina, Kosovo and walk the town, and be sure to read the history of Kosovo to truly appreciate how far this country has come.

### KOSOVO ITINERARY

DESTINATION	TIME TO SPEND
Pristina	1 Day
Prizren	1 Day

- **WHAT TO DO IN PRISTINA**
  - Take the cathedral elevator up for a good vantage point of the new city
  - Check out the statue of Bill Clinton
  - Walking tour - 11 AM daily from the steps of the National (Library)?
  - Walk down the main drag (??name and Mother Theresa road) in the evening to see normal life.
  - National Museum
  - Bazaar
- **LOGISTICS**
- **VISA:** For most nationalities, no visa is necessary for up to 90 days

# THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



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## 9. MACEDONIA (OPTIONAL)

With all of the other amazing sights to see in the Balkans, it is difficult to justify detouring to Macedonia instead of spending extra days in one of the country's neighbors.

Skopje's Bazar, reminiscent of Turkey, is topped by Little Istanbul (and Little Vienna) in Sarajevo, Bosnia. The countless statues in Skopje's downtown are interesting but more reminiscent of Las Vegas than a Balkan backpacking adventure and are one-upped by the old walled cities in Croatia and Montenegro.

At the same time, Lake Ohrid's, and Ohrid's, beauty are topped by that of Kotor Bay in Montenegro and Lake Shkoder/Shkodra on the Montenegro /Albania border.

Plus, all of these other options above are a shorter distance to other worthwhile sites.

If you are traveling or backpacking the Balkans for less than three weeks, skip Macedonia and spend more time in the other, highlight locations.

If you are traveling the Balkans for more than three weeks and want to include Macedonia, do a quick layover in Skopje and add Ohrid and Lake Ohrid if you are enchanted enough.

### MACEDONIA ITINERARY

DESTINATION	TIME TO SPEND
Skopje (Statues, Bazar)	1 day
Lake Ohrid (peace and quiet, UNESCO World Heritage Town)	1 day

- **ESSENTIAL FOOD & DRINK**
  - Turli Tava
  - Poletti Peperki
  - Sarma
- **VISA:** Visas are not required for tourist or business trips of less than 90 days within a six-month period.

## THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



### VISA INFO FOR THE BALKANS

General: For most borders in the Balkans, you can show up to the border and easily get a 90-day visa or a 90-day entry, visa-free as long as you have 6 months validity on your passport. Slovenia is the only Schengen zone country in the Balkans, sharing its 90 visa with the entire Schengen zone.

#### COUNTRY BY COUNTRY BALKANS VISA INFORMATION:

- **Slovenia:** Schengen Zone country meaning 90 days in a 180 day period, shared with all of the Schengen zone / EU countries
- **Croatia:** No visa is required for tourist visits less than 90 days – Croatia is not part of the Schengen zone
- **Montenegro:** Montenegro is not part of the Schengen zone, and a free 90 day visa is offered on arrival
- **Bosnia & Herzegovina:** Most nationalities can stay for 90 days free without a visa but need to have at least 6 months validity on their passport on arrival
- **Serbia:** Not part of the Schengen zone and offers a free 90-day visa for most visitors
- **Albania:** 90 days free with no visa required for citizens of EU countries and 59 other countries, including the US, Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom
- **Bulgaria:** You can travel to Bulgaria for up to 90 days every 180 days. Visits to Bulgaria do not count towards your 90-day visa-free limit in the Schengen area. Bulgaria is an EU country but is not in the Schengen zone.
- **Macedonia:** Visas are not required for tourist or business trips of less than 90 days within a six-month period.
- **Kosovo:** For most nationalities, no visa is necessary for up to 90 days

### CROSSING BORDERS IN THE BALKANS

Border crossings in the Balkans are fairly easy, for the most part. Just be sure to have at least 6 months validity on your passport.

The only border crossing difficult will happen *attempting* to travel from Kosovo into Serbia. You will have no issues traveling from Serbia into Kosovo, however, **traveling from Kosovo to Serbia is forbidden** and you will not be allowed through the border.

## THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



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### MONEY AND CURRENCIES ACROSS THE BALKANS

With the exception of Slovenia, Kosovo, Montenegro, and Greece, each country in the Balkans uses its own currency, so be sure to limit the amount of cash you convert to avoid losing too much on the exchange when you exit.

Better yet, aim to keep the bulk of your cash in Euros or US dollars and only exchange as necessary.

**The respective currencies for each country in the Balkans are:**

- Euros are the standard currency in Slovenia, Greece, Kosovo, Montenegro
- Croatia - Kunas/HRK
- Bosnia and Herzegovina - Bosnia Herzegovina convertible mark/KM –
- Serbia - Serbian Dinar
- Bulgaria - Bulgarian Lev
- România - Romanian Leu
- North Macedonia - Macedonian Denar
- Albania - Albanian Lek

You will receive the best exchange rate at ATMs, so avoid exchanging at money changers if all possible.

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### TRAVEL INSURANCE: DO YOU NEED IT IN THE BALKANS?

If you can't afford travel insurance, you can't afford to travel.

As often as this saying is repeated, it doesn't make it any less true.

Despite the fact that most of the travel in the Balkans is slow-paced and far from danger, it is wise to pick up travel insurance just in case you get a stomach bug, have an unexpected accident, or fall victim to something related to the recent pandemic.

I normally recommend [World Nomads](#) for adventurous travel and high-risk travelers, thanks to World Nomads' robust coverage.

However, the Balkans is low-risk enough that I recommend inexpensive (yet still reliable) [Safetywing](#) travel insurance, as that is the insurance I currently use and have had for the past two years. At ~\$40 a month, you can't afford not to.

# THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



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## GETTING TO THE BALKANS

Budapest Ferenc Liszt International Airport and Dubrovnik's Čilipi Airport are the cheapest airports in the region with the most flight options per day.

If you are flying into the Balkans, where you should fly into depends on whether you plan to travel from south to north or north to south through the Balkans.

If you plan to travel from the north (Slovenia, northern Croatia) to the south, I recommend flying into Budapest's international airport. Budapest will have the cheapest inbound international flights in the region.

If you plan to travel south to north, beginning in Albania, fly into Dubrovnik's international airport (this will be the cheapest airport for inbound international flights in the south), then travel south into Albania, looping back up to Dubrovnik and Montenegro and continue your tour of the Balkans.

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## WHEN TO VISIT THE BALKANS

Anytime is a great time to visit the Balkans, but the shoulder season is by far the best season to visit the Balkans. Spring and fall, between April to June and September to October, are the shoulder seasons and the best times to visit the Balkans. If you can visit in either window, you'll have warm waters and sunny skies, yet not too hot, while exploring mostly empty streets. Additionally, prices will ½ the normal tourist season (summertime) prices.

During the Balkans summer of July to September, you'll have perfect beach weather with amazingly warm waters but plan on sharing the views and beaches with throngs of travelers. Plan on Dubrovnik, Hvar, and Budva to be exceptionally crowded. Also, plan on any of the old town destinations at sea level, such as Split, Dubrovnik, and Hvar, to be scorching hot on the pedestrian streets.

For more open-minded travelers, winter has appeal as well. Winter brings a cold and eerie calm to the Balkans with an equal amount of beauty. If you can brave the cold, you'll have the cities to yourself. However, plan on the guesthouses, hostels, and hotels closing shortly after tourist/summer and being closed for the winter. You should book accommodation well in advance to avoid booking issues.

# THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



## WHERE TO STAY IN THE BALKANS

Based on my experiences booking accommodations in the Balkans, both good and bad, I recommend the following booking guidelines

- Hostels & Boutique Hotels for Backpackers and Budget Couples
- Booking.Com for Stays 3 Days or Shorter
- Airbnb for Stays Longer Than 4 Days Or Longer

### **SOLO TRAVELERS, BACKPACKERS, AND BUDGET COUPLES: OPT FOR THE GREAT HOSTELS IN THE BALKANS**

The Balkans are extremely developed, just as well developed as Western Europe, so you will have plenty of accommodation options to fit your tastes or budget.

For solo travelers and backpackers (especially if on a budget), I highly recommend hostels. The hostel standard in the Balkans, especially in Croatia and Montenegro, is *very* good while being very cheap. For instance, [Hostel 4U in Kotor Montenegro](#) is about \$12 per night, has maintained a well-deserved 9.8 or 9.9 rating for the last 5 years, and is literally situated on a beach. The beds are comfy, the dorms are clean, and the building seems more similar to a chalet from Game of Thrones than a hostel. Best of all, this is the general standard throughout the Balkans – with the exception of Albania and Kosovo.

For couples and more private budget travelers who still want to be social, private rooms in hostels throughout the Balkans deliver a great balance between the social and the isolated feel of hotels while being friendlier on the pocket.

Bottom Line: For solo travelers, backpackers, and budget travelers, hostels are a great bet. I recommend booking on [Hostelworld](#) as the site has most of the hostels (or at least the good ones) available on the site.

### **TRAVELERS STAYING FOR 3 DAYS OR LESS: BOOK VIA BOOKING.COM**

If you're staying less than four days and not interested in hostels, you'll find the best value for your money and selection on Booking.com. Simple as that.

### **TRAVELERS STAYING FOR 4 DAYS OR LONGER: AIRBNB**

If you're staying for four days or longer, I recommend booking via AirBnB for a more cost-efficient experience and to better experience what life is *truly* like off the tourist circuit. While hotels (on Booking.com) tend to be in touristy areas, AirBnB's and hostels are more often in *real* neighborhoods where people *actually* live. As a result, you'll naturally be exposed to the restaurants, bars, and experiences that locals frequent in their daily lives – which adds a whole new layer to your travels.

# THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



## BALKANS TRAVEL BUDGET

The Balkans are *the* cheapest place in Europe to travel and one of the best places in the world in terms of “bang for buck”.

BALKANS TRAVEL BUDGET		
Eat like a local and travel like a backpacker, and you can get by on \$30 per day		
ACCOMMODATION	FOOD	TRANSPORT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Budget private room: \$25</li><li>• Hostel Dorm Room: \$12-\$16</li><li>• Nice Hotel: \$50-\$75</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Street Food: \$3-\$6</li><li>• Restaurant: \$10</li><li>• Nice Restaurant: \$15+</li><li>• Beer: \$2-\$4</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Inter-country bus ticket: \$20-\$30</li></ul>

## 10 TIPS FOR TRAVELING THE BALKANS ON A BUDGET

1. **Book hostels.** Hostels for your Balkans accommodations instead of booking hotels. Hostels in the Balkans can be as cheap as \$10 to \$15/night and often offer free breakfast too.
2. **Spend more time in fewer places.** The longer you stay in a destination, the cheaper it gets, as room accommodation is cheaper by the week or month than by the day, you learn the great "local" restaurants with cheaper and better food, and you spend less money per week traveling between towns.
3. **Go in the shoulder season** between April to May and September to October when the tourists are fewer, and everything (sites, accommodation, food) is as much as ½ high season prices.
4. **Sleep, eat and drink off the main street.** Sleeping, eating, and drinking on the tourist thoroughfare, a couple of streets over, will cost you 25% to 50% more than walking an extra 5 minutes.
5. **Use “Trip Advisor Cheap Eats”** to find the best food that fits your budget

## THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



6. **Pick destinations wisely** – according to your budget and tastes. Croatia is amazing, but the most expensive in the Balkans. Albania delivers amazing beaches and outdoors for 25% of the Croatia coast.
7. **Bus everywhere as your primary mode of transportation.** Flights are *extremely* inconvenient in the Balkans, and taxis are expensive and unnecessary. Checkout out the [best list of Balkans bus and travel booking sites here](#).
8. **Travel carry-on only** to save fees on flights traveling in and make life easier when transiting by bus – so you can keep your bags with you.
9. **Grab a beer and quick food to go, make friends, and eat in the park** or on the water for a cheap night out or pregame, instead of burning money at a bar. The Balkans has a great tradition of gathering in parks and green spaces around sunset and some great parks to take advantage of.

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### ESSENTIALS FOR YOUR BALKANS PACKING LIST

You can get by with very little in terms of packing while you travel the Balkans. However there are a few items that are *essential* for a good experience and making the most of your opportunities in the Balkans.

- **Sport sandals:** Walkable, adventure-ready sports sandals such as [Chacos](#) or minimalist [Xero Trails](#) are perfect for the Balkans because so many experiences involve walking and hiking but are equally close to beaches. Whether you are walking Hvar to get to a beach or on a boat tour in Montenegro, you'll appreciate having comfy sandals that are ready to get wet. Any of these [seven great travel sandals](#) will work as well.
- **Walkable shoes:** Many of the experiences in the Balkans will involve walking, whether on tour, looking at the architecture, or walking to catch a bus. Make sure you have comfortable shoes for walking to make it a 100% enjoyable experience. This [mega list of travel shoes](#) has plenty of options if you don't have a solid pair of travel shoes.
- **Light Rain Jacket / Rain Shell**
  - If you come in December or January or between April and June, be sure to bring a rain shell as those are the rainiest months in the Balkans. Outside of those months, it's still smart to keep a waterproof layer in your backpack
- **2 or more swimsuits OR swim trunks that double as walk shorts**
  - If you max out your Balkans experience, you will spend A LOT of time in swim trunks and shorts. Especially if you visit during summer or just outside of the window, you'll be so hot that pants will be unbearable. Make the most of it by bringing at least 2 pairs of swim trunks, ideally that double as walk shorts too. I highly recommend the [Outlier New Way shorts](#), as they're as stylish as they are swim-ready and functional, but check out these [6 other shorts that are perfect for travel](#).
- **A simple waterproof bag with backpack straps**
  - In Croatia, Montenegro, and Albania, the best adventures are aquatic, whether on relaxing beaches, at waterfalls, or cliff diving. Do yourself a favor and bring a [simple roll-top](#)

## THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



[waterproof bag like this](#) to keep your phone, passport, and headphones safe while you swim between boats. The bag takes up minimal space and pays HUGE dividends in function.

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### HOW TO GET AROUND THE BALKANS

Best options for transport through the Balkans (in order).

1. BUSES
2. RIDESHARE
3. TRAIN
4. SHORT FLIGHTS
5. CAR RENTAL

Though there are international airports in Dubrovnik and the neighboring countries, flights between Balkan countries are fairly expensive – so don't expect the budget airline deals of western Europe. Additionally, when you account for time and hassle spent checking bags, processing through security, and getting to and from the airport from in town, it takes just as long as a bus trip from anywhere to anywhere in the Balkans, but it's 10x the price. To save time and money in the **Balkans, don't fly; just take the bus.**

Best booking platforms for booking buses in the Balkans.

- General Buses in Balkans: [Flixbus](#)
- Montenegro – <https://busticket4.me/EN>
- Croatia – <https://www.buscroatia.com/>
- General Planning: [Rome2Rio](#)

For more info on transport in the Balkans, check out the Balkans section of this article [How to Get Around while Traveling](#).

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### BALKANS TRAVEL FAQ

- [Which Balkan country is cheapest?](#)
- [What countries are in "The Balkans"](#)
- [Will language be a problem in the Balkans](#)

# THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



- [How do you get around the Balkans?](#)
  - [What is the best time to visit the Balkans?](#)
  - [Where to start when backpacking the Balkans?](#)
  - [What is it like crossing borders in the Balkans?](#)
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## WHICH BALKAN COUNTRY IS CHEAPEST?

The cheapest country in the Balkans by far is Albania. Considering the country shares the same riviera as Greece and Croatia and accommodations and food are ¼ the price of the other two countries if you want a budget travel experience Albania is a no brainer.

At the same time, Montenegro is as expensive as Serbia and Bosnia; however, the value of the experience surpasses the cost. Montenegro has the southernmost fjords in Europe make the nature comparable to what you would see around Bergen, Norway, but at a fraction of Scandinavian prices. This makes Montenegro a high "value to money" option as well.

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## WHO IS BACKPACKING THE BALKANS BEST FOR

- **Budget backpackers** looking for a cheaper alternative to Europe
- **Adventurous travelers, aiming to get off the beaten path** to truly new destinations, like Albania, Kosovo, and changing destinations like Bosnia.
- **Nature lovers** that could spend days on end exploring beautiful lakes, alpine mountains, endless coastlines
- **Partiers** that find the all-night music and dance of Belgrade's riverfront clubs and Hvars club island unusually alluring
- **History lovers** desiring to see old Roman cities and castles in pristine condition (like Diocletian's palace in Split) or learn the "interesting" histories of the Balkans' past struggles, like Albania, and Bosnia & Serbia

*Note that though you can find food, parties, history, and peace & quiet in the Balkans, you can very easily fill a trip with one type of experience (i.e., quiet, nature) and fill a multiple months-long itinerary. If any of the above.*

## THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



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### WHAT ARE THE BALKANS? WHAT COUNTRIES ARE IN “THE BALKANS”

The "Balkans" is the cluster of 11 countries situated in the Balkan peninsula, the name for the Balkan mountain range situated in Bulgaria.

The following 11 countries are regarded as the “Balkan states” that are mostly situated within the Balkan Peninsula.

- Albania
- Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Bulgaria
- Croatia
- Greece
- Kosovo
- North Macedonia
- Montenegro
- Romania
- Serbia
- Slovenia

Turkey is also partly situated in the Balkan peninsula. Though some people may not regard Turkey as a Balkan country from a cultural standpoint, [Turkey](#) is so amazing and so close that it should absolutely be part of your Balkan itinerary.

As you travel through the Balkans, you'll notice that, with the exception of Greece, the countries and cultures are strikingly familiar while also being drastically different – especially Albania and Bosnia. During your Balkan tour, I highly recommend adding Turkey to your itinerary because it's so close, it's so cheap, and offers such a fantastic travel experience.

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### WILL LANGUAGE BE A PROBLEM IN THE BALKANS

No, language will not be a problem in the Balkans. For every single destination on this itinerary, you will be able to easily navigate the experience in English.

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## THE ULTIMATE BALKANS ITINERARY & GUIDE



### WHERE TO START WHEN BACKPACKING THE BALKANS?

Ljubljana, Slovenia or Dubrovnik, Croatia are your best options for starting your Balkans itinerary.

Ljubljana as a start point offers you a very straight forward top to bottom itinerary. If you start in Slovenia, consider flying into Budapest and taking the train into Ljubljana.

If you don't want to start in the peace and calm of Slovenia, Dubrovnik is the other best option for starting. Dubrovnik has a large international airport and is central to every location in the Balkans, allowing you to do one large loop.