

By Libby Fisk (2021)

Having been on a number of overseas trips at this point, I was running out of typical travel destinations. So this time, I decided to go a little more “off the beaten path.” I enlisted a few friends who have also been bitten by the travel bug, and, before we knew it, we were on our way to the Balkans.

Our first full day of the tour began in **Serbia**. We met our guide and the rest of our tour group (only 8 people total), then set out on a walking excursion through Belgrade, where we saw many government buildings and city squares. We visited St. Sava’s Temple, an Orthodox Church known for its exquisite mosaics. The church towers above the rest of the city, beckoning worshippers and travelers alike to come see its magnificent white marble dome.



Later, we strolled through Kalemegdan Park and the adjoining Belgrade fortress, a nearly 2,000-year-old monument. Our day ended with some free time to explore on our own and then dinner at a restaurant in the city’s Bohemian quarter.

Early the next day, we said our goodbyes to Belgrade and continued on to Skopje (**Macedonia**). Here, we visited the Mother Teresa Memorial House, which includes a museum, exhibits, and a gallery. We walked across the famous Stone Bridge, built in the Ottoman period, and gazed at the Vardar River beneath us. My favorite part of Skopje was the Church of Sveti Spas. Partially dug into the ground (as the Ottomans did not allow churches to be taller than mosques), it was built in the mid-1500s. Though the outside is unremarkable, the inside is just stunning, with gorgeous frescoes depicting both the Old and New Testament and intricate woodwork.



After the church, we took a scenic walking tour of the old town and its bazaar, and then headed to Bitola. We stopped first for a quick bite to eat, and then proceeded to the site of the ancient city of Heraklea. The old town dates to around the 4th century BCE. We wandered the site, discovering its amphitheater, Roman baths, mosaics, and temples.

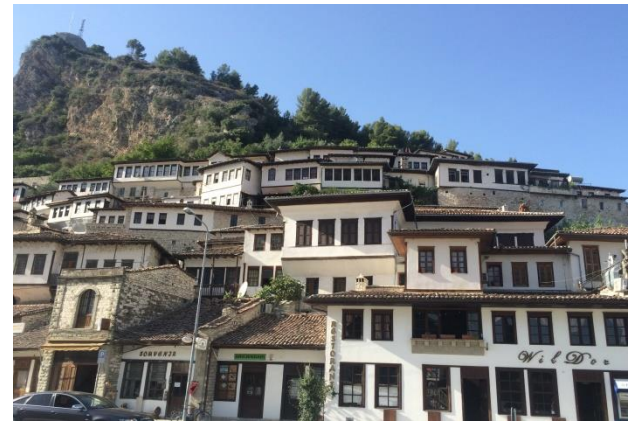
Later, we walked through Magnolia Square, seeing the Ottoman-style houses, and stopping to take pictures of the Clock Tower, the statue of Philip II, and the pretty St. Demetrius Church. We left Bitola and continued on to our next destination. We arrived in Ohrid later that night, had dinner, and went to our new hotel rooms to rest up after a satisfying day of sightseeing.



The next morning, we set out on a tour through the Ohrid, exploring some of the city's historic churches, its Old Bazaar, and its Roman ruins, which includes an ancient amphitheater. We climbed to Tsar Samuel's Fortress on top of a hill and took in the fantastic sights below. Then we headed out on a boat tour of Lake Ohrid, before visiting the Monastery of St. basilica, and the clock tower. We roamed around the Old Bazaar, had dinner, and then returned to our hotel rooms.

After about 4 hours of travel, we arrived in Berat (**Albania**), where we had a quick lunch; and then got started with our day. Berat is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and has been inhabited for more than 2,500 years. It truly was a sight to see, with many churches and mosques, an old fortress; white houses climbing up the pretty mountains, and Berat Castle rising above it all. We also visited Onufri Museum, and we admired its large collection of Byzantine art.

Early the next day, we set out for Gjirokastër, where we toured Gjirokastër Castle, a nearly 1,000-year-old fortress that overlooks the city. Gjirokastër itself is lovely, situated in a green valley between a mountain range and a river. We ate lunch and explored the local bazaar, then made our way to Saranda. Dinner this night was at a local restaurant in Saranda.



Our morning in Saranda began with a tour of Butrint Archaeological Park. This site was amazing, with ruins ranging from ancient times up to the Middle Ages. Here, we strolled past the remnants of Roman aqueducts, a Greek theater, a Christian basilica, and many more centuries of history. After lunch, we were off for a scenic 4-hour drive to Vlora where we checked in to the hotel, had dinner, and settled for the night.

We kicked off the next day with a visit to the Ardenica Monastery, a 13th century Byzantine Orthodox-style structure lined with ornate frescoes. Later, we proceeded to the city of Durrës. After a quick bite to eat, we strolled through the ancient ruins of the town forum, from its Roman amphitheater, to its Byzantine walls, and snapped some pictures of the pretty waterfront. Then we made our way toward Tirana, where we had a quick meal, then checked in to our hotel for some sleep.



Our first stop of the day was in Kruja. We strolled along the cobblestone streets of the ancient city, peering into the various shops. Later, we toured the National Ethnographic Museum and learned about the country's various customs and traditions.

We drove back to Tirana, Albania's capital. Here, we wandered around Skanderberg Square, taking in the sights of the city and visiting the National Archaeological Museum and the Et-Hem Bey Mosque. Our last destination of the day was the National Museum of History, where we saw artifacts ranging from the Paleolithic Era to present day. Later, we feasted on a wonderful authentic Albanian dinner at one of Tirana's best restaurants, and then returned to our hotel.

The next morning began with a drive to Prizren (**Kosovo**). Our walking tour of the Old Town was an amazing experience seeing so many gems like the Ottoman bridge, water fountain, their unique mosques and orthodox churches. The city is known for its rich culinary tradition, mainly home-made products and dishes. After a delightful lunch in the old town, we climbed up to the fortress and looked out over the city, and visited the Decan Monastery, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, which holds thousands of medieval works of art, as well as the reminders of the country's conflicts in the 1990s. We ended our night in Pej.

We had an early start the following day as we headed out to a ferry ride along Fierza and Koman Lake. We spent several hours on the water, seeing the dams which created the lakes and enjoying the peace as we sailed through a majestic mountain range as well as several other interconnected lakes. Later, we made our way to Budva (**Montenegro**), where we stopped for the night.



After a hotel breakfast, we proceeded to Kotor, a historic sailing and trading village located on a bay. We strolled through the old city, admiring its medieval architecture, later touring the Romanesque St. Tryphon Cathedral. We took a scenic boat ride to the Lady on the Rock Island, and then returned to our hotel in Budva. Since we had some free time, we wandered the old town before dinner.

The next day we were off to **Bosnia Herzegovina** and the historic city of Sarajevo. Once a literal war zone, today it's a ray of hope. Between its gorgeous historical mosques, churches, and synagogues, its remnants of ancient times, its tasty food, its Eternal Flame (a somber reminder of WWII), and its backdrop of hills and mountains, I was in awe of this city. My favorite meal of the tour was in Sarajevo, at a traditional restaurant where we dined on Cevapi (kebabs) and Klepe (dumplings).

We left Sarajevo the next morning and headed off to Mostar, another Bosnian masterpiece of a town. Mostar, on the banks of the mighty Neretva River, is the largest city in Herzegovina. The town flourished during centuries of Ottoman rule from 1482 to 1878, when many beautiful and significant Islamic structures were built including the Kara Ozbegora Mosque. The iconic bridge was heralded as a classic example of Ottoman design and became a world-recognized symbol during the Bosnian war.



The story goes that after a number of failed bridges, the Ottoman Sultan vowed to execute the engineer Mimar Hayruddin if his bridge collapsed too. The day the bridge's wooden supports were due to be removed in 1566, Hayruddin had already begun to dig his own grave when he found out the bridge had survived. It would in fact stand for a further 429 years, through Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian rule, as well as two world wars. Today Mostar is well worth a visit. The Ottoman quarter has been sympathetically restored, and there are a number of artisan shops and cozy cafes. Remnants of the 90's conflict are also visible in dilapidated buildings and with its Viennese style architecture evidencing the Austro-Hungarian rule. Stepping into this city transports you into another time and hence our original 2 hours walk ended up being at least 4 hours as none of us wanted to leave.

The next day, we crossed the border and continued to Dubrovnik (**Croatia**).

Upon arrival, we checked in and then ventured out on a walking tour. Those I met who have been to this gorgeous city alerted me that the sense of awe never fails to descend when you set eyes on the beauty of its old town. Indeed, it is hard to imagine anyone becoming jaded by the city's white limestone streets, baroque buildings and the endless shimmer of the Adriatic, or failing to be inspired by a walk along the ancient city walls that protected a civilized, sophisticated republic for centuries.



That evening, we said our goodbyes over a seaside dinner looking out at the majestic waters. We flew out the following morning, forever in love with the hidden gem that is the Balkans.

I first was a bit apprehensive visited the Balkans having lived in the 1990's hearing about its turbulent wars but I promptly fell in love with the region despite having a rather short tour that touched upon each of the countries but I am determined one day to explore more of it and in depth. Between the mountains of Montenegro, the turquoise coastline of Albania, the lakes of North Macedonia, and the architecture of Serbia and its stunning lakes, as well as the gamut of cities filled with Ottoman heritage, I couldn't get enough of this region. The peninsula of the Balkans is unique, unlike traveling anywhere else in the world. It's full of contradictions. Its history is triumphant and tragic, long and recent.

The Balkan Peninsula is one of the most historically rich regions of Europe, with countless empires converging and fighting for dominance, shaping the culture, language, and history. Where else can you find prehistoric artifacts, Greek and Roman ruins, Ottoman relics, and Communist monuments all in one region, let alone one city? I can think of precious few other places where the history is so rich and layered as in the Balkans.

Call us on our toll free at
1-800-645-3233

Find the itineraries on our website at
<http://www.mideasttrvl.com>
Or request them via e-mail at info@mideasttrvl.com

Follow us: 
Facebook page: [Spiekermantravel](#)