

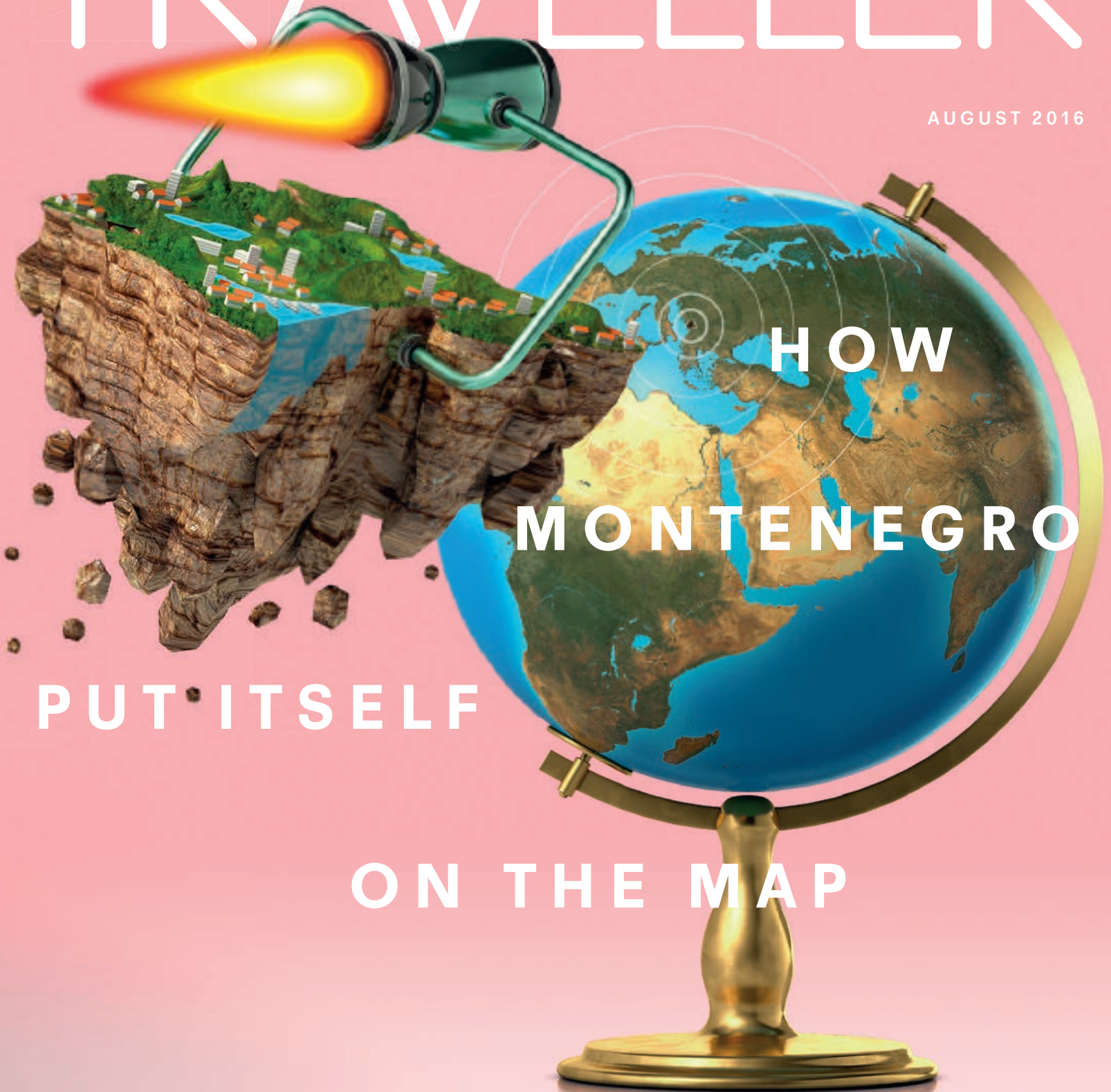
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A MAGAZINE FOR THE GET-UP-AND-GO GENERATION

TRAVELLER

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HOW
MONTENEGRO
PUT ITSELF
ON THE MAP

WHY OUR NEW BALKAN DESTINATION IS A WORLD BEATER

It could well be the
Adriatic's last undiscovered
secret.

While neighbouring Croatia
has experienced a mass
tourism boom in the past
decade,

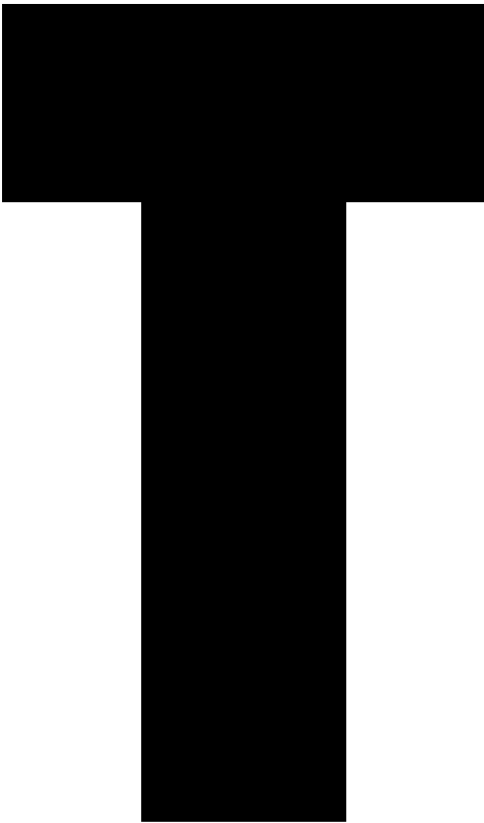
THE FULL

Montenegro has chugged
along under the radar.

But with its stunning
natural assets and a slick
new tourism drive this
won't last for long, says
Simon Kurs

MONTE





umbling down the steep hillside, partially hidden in the dense canopy of fir, cedar and pine that cling to this craggy stretch of Adriatic coast, the town of Sveti Stefan is a sleepy kind of place.

It's certainly not somewhere you'd expect to find one of the world's best hotels. But there, at the bottom of the hill, joined to the mainland by a narrow sandy isthmus, the Aman Sveti Stefan is exactly that. This fortified, 15th-century fishing village was reopened in 2011 by Aman Resorts as a modern-day pleasure island of cobbled lanes and lavender-scented courtyards, and it's quickly become a celeb magnet: tennis star Novak Djokovic hired it out for his wedding in 2014.

Anyone familiar with Aman's business model will know this is what the Singapore-based group does uniquely well: it identifies a location, normally far off the beaten track, but with big potential, then moves in – and the jet-set soon follow. With no competitors nearby, the hotel occupies a singular space in the local market, while Aman junkies – as the group of privileged travellers who traverse the globe staying at each new property that opens are known – then have a new, obscure, stamp in their passport to brag about.

An Aman arrival also has another effect: it kick-starts its host location's journey towards tourism maturity, as it has done in Montenegro. In fact, five years on, this newly minted Balkan



nation, which claimed its independence a decade ago and is now on the verge of becoming the next EU

member, is putting itself on the map in a big way.

"This is such an exciting time to be here," says Tapa Tibble, Sveti Stefan's GM, as we chat on the dining terrace, looking out onto one of the three

Clockwise from below
The indoor pool at the Aman Sveti Stefan's spa; the Aman is in a 15th century fishing village; the hotel has three beaches; from the Aman's dining terrace you can see stunning coastline in all its glory; the waterside town of Perast

beaches that are part of the hotel's 32-hectare estate. "It's a country that's starting to boom as far as tourism is concerned."

To emphasise his point, he gestures up at a building glinting on the hillside. "You see that little silver roof up there?" he says. "That's opening as a Nobu pop-up on Sunday. It's great for the country to have another global brand."

And the tourism brands are indeed arriving: this year alone, announcements have been made

that both a Four Seasons and a One&Only hotel are imminent, setting up down the coast, with a Hilton due in Podgorica, Montenegro's capital, in late 2016. Millions are also to be invested in two winter resorts in the northern towns of Kolašin and Žabljak. It's all part of a drive that has seen nearly €2bn arrive from foreign investors, all keen to get in on the ground level here.

According to the World Tourism and Travel Council, Montenegro's tourism sector is expected to be one of the three fastest-growing in the world over the next decade.

It makes perfect sense – and not just because of shiny, new developments. Montenegro may be sandwiched between Italy and Greece, but it feels welcomingly removed from most other European destinations, including its better-known neighbour, Croatia. Leaving Tivat airport, in the

western corner, there are no huge overpasses – just meadows of wild grass and pretty red-roofed cottages poking from the hillside. It's home to some astonishing scenery, from the majestic Kotor Bay, where the steep mountains crowd



the water on all sides, cypress trees lending it the feel of Lake Como, to bucolic villages such as Perast, with its waterfront restaurants and gardens blooming with honeysuckle, lavender and lush bougainvillea, all looking out on the cornflower-blue dome of the Church of Our Lady of the Rocks in the middle of the still bay. Inland, there are almost 14,000km2 of adventure-friendly terrain: the Tara River, with Europe's deepest canyon – second only to the Grand Canyon in Arizona – is a whitewater rafting hotspot; the glacial landscapes and deep canyons of UNESCO-listed Durmitor National Park make it perfect for walking; while it's said that Lake Skadar is one of Europe's best kitesurfing spots.

Driving around, the only sign of a construction boom is the odd building site, but this is the start of a period of growth and development that could change the face of this nation. In May last year, work began on the country's first motorway network. When finished, it will criss-cross Montenegro, opening it up as much to its direct neighbours as to its inhabitants, just as new flights are opening it up by air right now.

Yet, while these new developments are undeniably exciting, this part of the world has a long and storied history. Just 10km down the



"THIS NEW BALKAN NATION, WHICH IS NOW ON THE VERGE OF BECOMING THE NEXT EU MEMBER, IS PUTTING ITSELF ON THE MAP IN A BIG WAY"

PHOTOS GETTY

coast from Sveti Stefan, is Budva. Sitting on a peninsula, its walled *Stari Grad* – Old Town – dates back to the 5th century BC, housing a maze of meandering alleys and medieval churches. We spent a terrific evening there, which started with dinner on Budva’s seafront promenade. This palm-fringed boulevard is something of a victim of its own attractiveness, lined with slightly garish-looking restaurants, pumping out music to attract the many visitors taking a stroll here, so you’d almost miss Demizana (tinyurl.com/j3qvfsp), hidden as it is behind a thick wall of foliage at the corner of the new and old town. But it’s an oasis of authentic Mediterranean calm that’s worth seeking out. Inside the courtyard, waiters scoot around beneath a vine-covered pergola, arms laden with plates of rice coloured by squid ink and trays heaving with that day’s catch: turbot, dorado and sea bass. The expertly cooked fish, served with a chard and potato combo that you find everywhere here, goes down a treat with local wine – especially when it’s followed by a shot of grappa afterwards.

If you’re thinking this all sounds rather Italian, then you’d be right. In fact, Montenegro is a beguiling sum of its historical parts. At various times, it’s been part of the Venetian republic, the Napoleonic empire and both the Ottomans and Austro-Hungarians held these lands. Indeed, Budva’s Old Town was ruled by the Venetians for nearly 400 years, from 1420 to 1797, and it’s they who built the fortified walls, which lend it the feel of a mini-Dubrovnik. But after dark, it all changes in the Old Town, those alleyways taking on the buzz of Mykonos, as every turned corner reveals a place of libatory promise. Citadela ([facebook.com/citadelabudva](https://www.facebook.com/citadelabudva)), in the shadow of the fortress, is an open-air lounge bar where we sank Negronis to the sound of live guitar; while Casper ([facebook.com/casper.budva](https://www.facebook.com/casper.budva)), in a nearby courtyard, serves craft beer and hipster-friendly cocktails to a young crowd who buzz expectantly beneath canopies haphazardly slung between olive trees, experimental jazz blaring from the DJ.

Of course, the jewel in Montenegro’s historical crown is Kotor’s UNESCO-rated Old Town, another walled municipality largely built by the Venetians during their rule, but whose history actually stretches back to Roman times. Walking in, it’s striking how much it looks like Venice proper, all crumbling palazzos and baroque church spires, but what’s even more striking is the number of people. “This is nothing. Later, it will be really busy,” says our guide, Alma. “There’s a big Royal Caribbean ship due in the afternoon.” Such cruises have long been a feature, but numbers have rocketed of late. In 2008, 60 ships arrived in the summer

season. Last year, that figure was 410 and there are already 60 more than that expected in 2016.

Part of this has to do with the fact that the world is waking up to the region – *Lonely Planet* identified Kotor as its number-one pick for 2016 and you can see why: not only is it marvellously atmospheric – a jigsaw of squares and narrow alleys where shopkeepers bustle in doorways – it’s also a microcosm of Montenegro’s history



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PHOTOS: TIM E. WHITE, GETTY

Clockwise from above Porto Montenegro’s beach club is riviera-chic meets Miami bling; Budva’s Old Town comes alive at night; Kotor’s spires lend it a Venetian feel; the Durmitor National Park is ideal for walking

with Renaissance, Baroque, Gothic and Austria-Hungarian architecture all evident. And it’s not just a tourist showpiece, if the washing lines hanging across many of the cobbled passages are anything to go by.

“So much has changed,” says Elena Ljiljanic. “First the country got independence, so we had a name. People still always ask where is

it and many think it’s in South America, but it was a start. Then we were blessed that somebody said part of the Bond film *Casino Royale* was made in Montenegro. Now we’re starting to feel like part of the world.”

I’m sitting with the marketing manager of the Regent Porto Montenegro, in the hotel’s glorious Italian garden, and we’re discussing Montenegro’s future. In many ways, the Regent presents an attractive vision for the next stage of development. With its Venetian-Renaissance architecture, its terracotta façades combining grand arches and balconies, and its opulent, luxury liner-inspired interiors, the Regent nods regally at Montenegro’s heritage, but has also clearly been designed with modern travellers in mind. Take its astonishingly good restaurant where Chef Željko Knezović, who trained at Noma, riffs on local culinary traditions and produce, but elevates them with Asian inflection.

It’s just one way in which a more global outlook is arriving. Porto Montenegro, the swanky new marina development on the edge of Tivat, where the Regent is based, is an even better example. Since opening in 2009 with 85 berths, it has since grown to accommodate 450 vessels, including 127 superyachts, establishing itself along the way as a favourite with the international have-yacht set. It’s a place of

undeniable polish, with swish restaurants and designer boutiques, including the only Tom Ford outlet in the country, as well as a terrific riveria-chic meets Miami-bling beach club, which serves one of the best salmon tartares this

journalist has eaten (its secret? Bonito flakes sprinkled on top). And business is booming, with plans for expansion and all berths already filled with opulent floating palaces.

Some might call this superficial, but Danilo Kalezić, PR manager of the port, is quick to counter. “We’re not copying Dubai, we’re not building skyscrapers,” he says. “There’s nothing more than four storeys and we’re using natural stones and the same materials you’ll find across the bay. We want to respect the environment.”

You could say that the marina itself is a continuation of local maritime traditions. This part of the coast was, for more than a century, used as a naval yard and submarine base, first for the Austro-Hungarian empire, and then the Yugoslav Navy. It was the region’s original big employer, in the way that tourism is now.

“This whole bay was full of rusting





Clockwise from above
left Black rice, coloured by squid ink is a traditional speciality; the refined cooking at the Regent's restaurant riffs on local flavours, but lends international polish, such as in this red mullet dish

submarines when we started the project,” says Kalezić. “Six years ago, I never would have thought we could achieve this.”

So how has it all happened? Credit must be given to Montenegro’s government, which decided in 2008 to seriously upscale its focus on bringing visitors in. Maja Kovačević, senior adviser at Montenegro’s Directorate for Tourism Development and Standards, calls tourism “a priority sector of the economy” and points to economic reforms that helped the process, such as low VAT on accommodation and hotel services, and fast-tracking of building permits for these developments. The results can already be seen in the fact that income from tourism has increased by nearly 20% since 2011, with employment in the sector also up by 40%.

Another key pillar of the strategy was to encourage the yachting community with one of the lowest rates of capital gains tax in Europe, and only 7% VAT on marine-related services and tax- and duty-free fuel. As a result, across the water, two similar developments are taking

shape: Portonovi, another luxury marina where the One&Only hotel will be; and the €1.1bn Luštica Bay, another conflation of boats, hotels, apartments and a golf course.

These kinds of millionaires’ playgrounds can feel at odds with their surrounds, but not here. On a Saturday night, beats ring out across the bay from bars such as the Clubhouse, as locals promenade, their tiny dogs in tow. It’s buzzing well into the night and that certainly bodes well for the future.

That’s not to say that Montenegro’s rustic side should be overlooked. If anything, these natural assets really mark it out as a must-visit: the charming guesthouses, unspoiled beaches and dramatic scenery all providing a necessary counterpoint to any development. One thing’s for sure, this is indeed a fascinating new chapter.

As Elena Ljiljanić expertly puts it, “You know the curse, ‘May you live through interesting times’. In the Balkans, we’re always living through interesting times, but it looks like the best part of our history is in front of us.”

DESTINATION TIVAT



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Four-star Boutique Hotel Astoria is in the renovated 13th-century Buca Palace in the heart of Kotor’s Old Town.



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Seven nights room only at 4-star Hotel Magnolia, departing London Gatwick on 17 October, from £215 pp.



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flies to Tivat from London Gatwick and Manchester. See our guide on page 146. easyJet.com

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