



## Touring the West Balkans, a short ride around the former Yugoslavia and Albania

Direct flights into Dubrovnik from Scotland are available in the summer months and there is a huge variety of riding to be had in this area from mountain biking on and off trails to road touring on good roads in relatively developed parts of the coast or less well travelled minor poorly surfaced roads in the mountainous interior.



These are small countries with interesting and varied cultures and histories which seem very different to the Northern Europe we are used to and it is on our doorstep. We wanted to see the deep river gorges, mountain passes and alpine scenery away from the relatively crowded coastal area (although the Dalmatian and Adriatic coasts are deservedly popular) with the added bonus that costs in the countryside tend to be about a half to one third of the rest of Europe and much cheaper than the seaside resort areas.



We started in Croatia at Dubrovnik and headed south east for about 5 days crossing Montenegro, Albania and Macedonia before heading north into tiny Kosovo and then back west into Montenegro and through the southern tip of Bosnia Hercegovina. Our anti-clockwise loop covered 6 countries (some are quite small!) and a barely respectable 1300km (due to the very hilly terrain and our advanced ages) with a much more creditable total ascent of 20'500m (or 2.5 Everests) over 14 days (Strava stats).



The rugged interior of the Western Balkans features very deep river gorges and canyons, 2000+m peaks, beautiful farmland and broad leaf forests and generally quiet roads away from the coast. The driving is always exuberant with enthusiastic use of the horn but extremely considerate of cyclists and there are plenty of non-motorised road users like horse carts, pedestrians, farm animals which make motorists something of a minority away from towns. On smaller roads, it was common to have fewer than half a dozen cars per hour.



Road surfaces are variable but nothing a touring bike couldn't handle with ease. Because the roads are so well graded there are many hairpins and descents needed care given the state of the roads and general absence of barriers. Roadside memorials to motoring fatalities, especially in Albania, are very common. Sadly, there are also many war memorials related to the conflicts in the Second World War and the late 90s conflicts following the break-up of the former Yugoslavia.



We stayed in hotels and B&Bs in medium and large towns (prices usually £15-30 per night for a double including a large breakfast). This committed us to getting from one town to the next which always seemed to involve some arduous crossing from one river valley over a high alpine pass but accommodation was generally easy to find and cheap. Campsites are very few and far between away from the coast but wild camping would be easy. Our one lasting impression was the friendliness of the people, again especially in Albania. Payment was often refused when we went to pay for a coffee in a small rural cafe, humbling and embarrassing for a pair of affluent retired cyclists. How many Albanian cyclists will experience this level of hospitality and warmth in Scotland?

We went in Mid April, a little early, many of the higher roads were impassable due to snow and this was always impossible to tell from the bottom of the pass! On one, we pushed the bikes for 3 hours through ankle deep snow, always expecting the top around the next corner! The first to cross the Morovo pass that year were a pair of Scots. The border post was deserted which meant more exit than entry stamps in our passports which gave us a rather alarming moment at the border but in the end only resulted in a holiday anecdote.



Maps are almost unavailable when you get there. I had ordered 2 before we left and we relied on our phone and mapping apps for the remainder. Though we never got lost, you missed the essential data such as town size and contour lines so what looked like a straightforward 60 mile day could surprise with a sea level to the top of a 1700m pass towards the end of the day. This could test our patience a bit.

There were a few minefield warnings near border areas, the Foreign Office warned us away from one part of Kosovo and we had to avoid Serbia with a Kosovo stamp in our passports. Friends and family were alarmed by our plans and the general apprehension around the area was completely unfounded. This was a fascinating area in cultural, historic and geographical terms. Lovely people who more than made up for the quality of the food and plumbing, I warmly recommend it.

High points were the fjord-like Gulf of Kotor, the mosques and Islamic culture of Macedonia and Kosovo, Albanian hospitality and pretty much the whole of delightful and tiny Montenegro whose mountains beckon me back with a pair of walking boots on this time.

More details from [macdweeb\(at\)gmail.com](mailto:macdweeb@gmail.com) if wished.

Captions for photos from the top down:

1. A bear footprint in Albania
2. Crossing the Morovo Pass into Montenegro from Kosovo
3. Picnic in Albania
4. A typical river gorge
5. A bigger than average pothole
6. The "Accursed Mountains"
7. In northern Montenegro