



BY TRAVIS BILL VIAJARMOTO.COM

MOUNTAINOUS

MONTENEGRO



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Full-time motorcycle overlanding during a world-wide pandemic has been interesting to say the least. Our future travel plans had suddenly shifted from “Where would you like to go?” to “Where can we go?” With much of Europe being closed to Americans after July 2020, our options were getting fewer and fewer with each passing day.

Miraculously, we managed to find freedom in the Balkan Peninsula of southeastern Europe. Unconstrained by the 90-day limit of the rest of Schengen Europe, the Balkan region offered us hope of continued travel with each country offering anywhere from 90 days to one-year of travel within their borders.

After nearly three months of motorcycle touring in Croatia **Upshift Issue 57**, we continued south into the country of Montenegro. The border process went pretty smoothly until we returned to the border officials with our three months of motorcycle insurance we had purchased from the nearby office. Typically travelers buy the minimum insurance of two weeks. Since we purchased three months, this was a red-flag for the officials. With crinkled eyebrows, the official asked in his best, but broken English, “How long do you stay in Montenegro?”

“As long as we can, we want to travel and see your beautiful country!” I replied. He seemed to shake his head a bit as if he was thinking “What on Earth are these two motorcyclists thinking?” He sighed, opened our passports to the next blank page, stamped them, and handed them back to us with a look of bewilderment. We now had another 90 days of travel time!

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BLACK MOUNTAIN

Montenegro is a western Balkan country situated on the Adriatic Coast. It is known for its medieval towns, rugged mountain ranges, lush green forests, and narrow beaches along its coastline. The country's name, derived from Venetian, means "Black Mountain." It's fitting because most of the country is mountainous and offers some of the most rugged terrain in Europe. The highest peak, Bobotov Kuk, in the Durmitor mountains, climbs to 8,278 ft (2,523 m) despite being only 56 miles (90 km) from the Mediterranean coastline.





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WEATHERING WINTER

It was not our original plan to be in the Balkans for winter. We imagined spending the winter season much further south in countries like Jordan, Israel, and Egypt. However, the Coronavirus pandemic has a way of changing one's plans. Since we arrived in late November, we tended to stay along the coastline where the Mediterranean climate hinders sub-freezing temperatures and snow of the mountainous regions. We ended up being pleasantly surprised that, even in November and December, we were able to ride dirt roads near the coast and experience the high mountains of Durmitor National Park, as long as we stayed on paved roads. However, despite keeping our eyes on the weather forecast, there was one particular weekend, in the city of Cetinje, we woke to the surprise of our motorcycles covered in snow, despite only being 6 miles (9.7 km) from the coast. Fortunately the morning sun was enough to clear the snow from the paved roads and we were riding back to the coast that afternoon.







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GETTING DIRTY

Part of the joy of riding a dual-sport or adventure motorcycle is riding in the backcountry on dirt roads and trails. Fortunately, Montenegro has plenty of them. The Trans Euro Trail (TET) has a portion of 180 miles (290 km) that winds through the country joining Bosnia & Herzegovina to the north to Albania in the south. Unfortunately, due to the snow in the high mountains, we were not able to ride much of the TET. We did, however, enjoy exploring mountain trails on the west side of the country where we came across the remains of Fort Stražnik – a fortification of the Austria-Hungarian Empire. A little bit further north, we stumbled across the small town of Grahovo, and walked among a memorial dedicated to Sava Kovačević, a Yugoslav Partisan commander, and the men who died fighting against fascism during WWII.



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BAY OF KOTOR

This area of Montenegro is not to be missed! We thoroughly enjoyed riding along the twisty roads of this stunning bay while marveling at the majestic mountains that towered above us. The towns of Perast, Tivat, and Kotor are definitely worth visiting, especially for their seaside boardwalks with quiet coffee shops and restaurants with excellent food at Balkan prices. If you're short of time, then make sure to spend at least a day in Kotor to include walking among the Venetian building of this UNESCO World Heritage Site and then hiking up to the Kotor Fortress that provides stunning views of the town and bay.

One of our favorite memories was scheduling a boat ride with Montenegro Submarine and Speedboat Tours. Although it was January, the sun kept temperatures above 50° F (11° C) so we could enjoy touring around Kotor Bay to include the sites of Our Lady of the Rocks Church, former Yugoslav submarine pens, and the Blue Cave. This half-day tour provides a wide variety of history, natural beauty, and enjoyable fun on the water.

Although the submarine pens and the Blue Cave were interesting, the highlight of the tour was visiting The Lady of the Rocks Church. This 18th century catholic church sits on a man-made island that is only accessible by boat. A legend says that after a severe storm, on the 22nd of July 1452, local fisherman discovered an icon of the Holy Mother of God with the Christ laying on the exposed rock in the middle of the bay. To honor the event, the fisherman vowed to continue adding rocks, old fishing vessels, and seized pirate ships to the islet so that a future church could be built on the foundation.

Over the centuries, the collection of rocks, and scuttled ships, was enough that an islet emerged and a small orthodox chapel was built. During the 17th century, the region was controlled by Venetians, and in 1630 a larger catholic chapel replaced the original orthodox one. In 1722 the church was renovated and includes a venerable 15th century icon of Virgin Mary, an impressive altar made of Carrara marble, and a museum full of artwork and mementos that have been dedicated by parishioners.







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BRAKE TROUBLE

While we were riding on the twisty roads around Shkodra Lake, I noticed that my rear brake pedal no longer had any pressure. I half expected this, since, over the past month, I had noticed that the rear brake pressure was slowly fading away despite repeated bleedings of the system to restore the pressure. It was well past time to replace the seals on the master cylinder. In the United States or western Europe this would be an easy fix with BMW Motorrad dealerships in almost every large city. In southern Montenegro, the closest dealer was 7.2 hours southeast in Greece and the next closest was 9.5 hours to the north in Croatia. Greece's border was also locked down to travelers due to the Coronavirus pandemic. What to do?

Fortunately, many people are resourceful in Macedonia. It's apparent in the cars that you commonly see on the roads here. Remember the Yugo car from the mid-1980s? They are still driving them here! I also noticed many late model Lada 4x4s, and Soviet era UAZ-469 SUVs. Surely if mechanics can keep these relics on the road, then someone can fix my brakes. The next morning we removed the master cylinder and then with the help of our Airbnb host as an interpreter, we found the local guy who knew about motorcycles. He offered to repair the brake cylinder and I could pick it up the next day. He even installed it for me and bled the system. Months later it is still doing well and he even texted me a couple of weeks ago to ask how it was doing. How about that for customer service?

CONTINUING SOUTH

With many of our fellow motorcycle overlanders being stuck in locked-down countries and having to give up travel plans, we felt extremely blessed to be in an area of the world where we could continue to travel. The next country along the Adriatic Coast is Albania. We've heard a lot of things about this country and plan to experience it for ourselves. More adventure awaits...

ABOUT VIAJARMOTO

Travis and Chantil Gill started full-time motorcycle overlanding in early 2020 and plan to continue traveling until they see as much of the world as they can. You can follow them on their website (www.viajarMOTO.com), and on YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook.



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