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Morning has come to Montenegro, and all is calm on the Bay of Kotor. Emerging from behind a craggy peak, the sun gradually illuminates the steep limestone mountains surrounding the bay. Tiny stone homes, each one different, and packed so close together that their walls are touching, reflect in the glass-like water. Eventually, a fisherman—whose wooden boat is trailed by a mob of intent seagulls scanning for scraps—delicately cuts through the scene.

For millennia, diverse groups of people have plied the strategic waters of the Bay of Kotor. Everyone from the Illyrians and the Romans to the Venetians and the Austro-Hungarians have lived here at one point or other. Today, the Boka Kotorska, as it's known locally, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It has the unusual distinction of being recognized not only for its cultural heritage, but also for its dramatic natural features.

Though it's technically not a fjord, the Bay of Kotor is often described as one, thanks to its steep surrounding slopes that plunge dramatically into the water. Quaint old towns dot the shores of this butterfly-shaped bay, inviting history lovers, culture seekers, and people watchers. If you like active adventures, there are countless opportunities for hiking, sailing, kayaking, swimming, and boating. I've been to this enchanting corner of Europe three times; most recently, my husband, Shawn, and I spent two months in the Bay of Kotor area.



Despite having only one main street, tiny Perast boasts 16 churches and 17 former grand palazzi.

Mountains and Mosaics in Montenegro's Bay of Kotor

Tricia A. Mitchell

Kotor—Fortified Walls and Old Palaces

Kotor's triangle-shaped Old Town is bordered by water on two sides and by a rugged mountain on another. Inside the town you'll find white-stone palaces with Venetian-Gothic flair, Orthodox and Catholic churches (St. Tryphon's Cathedral and St. Nicholas are the most famous),

boutiques, restaurants, and an abundance of friendly cats. It's a joy to wander—and get lost in.

Rising above Kotor's terracotta rooftops is the formidable Fortress of St. John (Tvrđava Sveti Ivan), part of an extensive fortification network. Kotor's walls—perfected over the course of about eight cen-

PRACTICAL TIPS FOR EXPLORING THE BAY OF KOTOR

Currency: Montenegro is not yet a member of the European Union. However, it uses the euro as currency. It also is not part of the Schengen Zone, which means it's possible to extend your European stay by taking a "Schengen hop" to the country.

Getting there: Montenegro has two international airports—one in Tivat and another in its capital city, Podgorica. Flying into nearby Dubrovnik, Croatia, and traveling overland to Montenegro is a popular alternative. From Dubrovnik you can either take a bus or drive a rental car. Be aware that the wait time at the Croatia-Montenegro border can vary—particularly during the peak travel season. The distance

from Dubrovnik to Kotor's Old Town is about 60 miles.

Transportation: Buses link towns in the Bay of Kotor area, as well as Montenegro's main cities. For schedules and prices, see Busticket4.me/en. For short journeys around the Bay of Kotor, we used the Blue Line. One-way fares from Kotor's Old Town to Perast, for example, were only \$1.15. If you choose to rent a car, be aware that driving conditions can be demanding, given Montenegro's narrow roads and "daring" drivers.

Accommodation: You can find apartments to rent short-term and hotels in the Bay of Kotor area. We stayed at the Apartment Emma, which has one bedroom and

extraordinary views of the bay. The apartment is family-owned and just a five-minute walk from Kotor's Old Town. It's listed on Airbnb, Booking.com, and Facebook.

Climate: The bay's climate is Mediterranean, but because of its mountainous setting by the water's edge, it can be wet during the winter months. Summers are generally hot and dry.

Getting beyond the Bay of Kotor: Montenegro's Adriatic Coast and beach towns like Budva, Petrovac, and Ulcinj are within a day's drive, as is glorious Lake Skadar National Park. It's southern Europe's largest lake and is a haven for freshwater and migratory birds.

tures—trail up the mountain and around the town, looking a little like China's Great Wall, but climbing steeper inclines. If you fancy a bit of exercise, plus marvelous views of the bay, be prepared to tackle 1,350 (or so) stairs. Tickets are \$3.50. Once you've reached the fortress, be on the lookout for the Lion of St. Mark adorning the top of an entryway. This symbol of Venice was placed there when Kotor was part of the Venetian Empire.

Coffee culture thrives in Montenegro, so you'll happen upon many cafés as you explore Kotor's cobblestone lanes. The Forza Café is on Weapons Square (Trg od Oružja), just around the corner from Kotor's main entrance, the Sea Gate. Overlooked by the fortress and the square's 17th-century clock tower, this is the perfect spot for people watching.

My preferred restaurant—originally recommended to me by several locals—is Bastion 3. It's refreshingly removed from Kotor's popular tourist core, just a few steps outside the north-facing gate. Bastion is casual, and its ample portions range from \$8 to \$15 per dish. I enjoyed the Šopska Salata (a salad of cucumbers, tomatoes, red peppers, and grated soft white cheese) as well as the Crni Rižot (cuttlefish risotto, cooked with red wine). If the weather is pleasant, you can grab a table outside on the terrace. See: Bastion123.com.

Perast—Pilgrims and Picnics

Perast is one of the most serene spots on the Bay of Kotor. Venetian-style stone churches and palaces hold court beside the bay. Depending upon the season, some of the mighty peaks behind Perast may even be capped with snow.

Two islands rise from the water close to Perast's shore. Saint George (Sveti Dordi) is naturally occurring and is off limits to visitors, while Our Lady of the Rocks (Gospa od Škrpjela) is artificial. According to legend, Our Lady of the Rocks was laboriously built by locals tossing rocks into the bay. They are said to have been inspired by the discovery of an icon of the Virgin Mary in 1452. For centuries, several churches have existed on the island. The striking, blue-domed structure you see today dates from the 17th century.

Skippers near the town's center regularly shuttle visitors to Our Lady of the Rocks—a five-minute boat journey. Round-trip fares cost \$6 per passenger.

MEDITERRANEAN DIET—THE BAY'S DELICIOUS CUISINE

Having long been at the crossroads of civilizations and a complex trading network, the Bay of Kotor has developed a diverse cuisine over the centuries. Its flavors reflect its geography—a middle point between placid sea and rugged mountains, and of west and east.

For a local twist on the established staples of the Mediterranean diet, here are some traditional Montenegrin foods to look out for:

Njeguški pršut and cheese: *Pršut* is a dried ham similar to Prosciutto. The ham, together with a semi-soft cow's-milk cheese, is produced in a mountain village high above Kotor called Njeguši.

Olives and olive oil: Some of the best come from the coastal city of Bar, on the Adriatic Sea about 38 miles from Kotor.

Wine: Vranac, a dry and delightful red, is Montenegro's most famous wine. There

are also white varietals such as Krstač.

Seafood: The Bay of Kotor is well known for its mussels and oysters. You'll also find grilled octopus, stuffed calamari on rice, and risotto dishes into which seafood has been incorporated. *Bokeški Brodet* is also popular—it's a hearty fish stew made with vegetables and white wine and served with polenta.

Ottoman-inspired dishes: You'll also encounter food that's beloved throughout much of the Balkan peninsula. The region stretches east from the border of Italy to Greece, Turkey, and Romania at its outer edges, and encompasses a wide range of cultures and cuisines. That said, certain dishes are universal, such as Ćevapi. These delicious minced beef, lamb, or pork sausages are served with flatbread and a helping of ajvar (a roasted pepper and eggplant condiment).

There is an additional \$1.70 fee to visit the church museum and it is well worth a look. Inside, you'll see magnificent paintings created by local baroque master Tripo Kokolja mingling with thousands of silver offerings donated by pilgrims.

Another highlight of the museum is an embroidered piece that took a local woman, Jacinta Kunic-Mijovic, more than two decades to make. She fashioned the image of Mary, Jesus, and cherubs out of fine silk and even her own hair. The artwork

reflects the passage of time, with the artist's hair eventually turning from brown to grey. Perast was once a wealthy naval town; Kunic-Mijovic is said to have been awaiting the return of her seafaring sweetheart.

Perast is best enjoyed at the water's edge, so either pack a picnic and stake out a bench or dine at one of the waterside restaurants. Shawn and I picnicked, then savored cappuccinos and dessert at the Hotel Conte restaurant. As we watched boats ferry passengers to Our Lady of the Rocks, Shawn raved about the *Perastka tradicionalna torta* (an almond flour cake based on a beloved Perast recipe). I had similar praise for my own dessert: vanilla ice cream dressed with roasted hazelnuts, pistachios, pumpkin seeds, and an elegant swirl of pumpkin seed oil. See: Hotelconte.me/en/.

If you like history, you should also make the three-mile journey up the coast to Risan, once an Illyrian and Roman settlement. Here you'll find impressive 1,800-year-old Roman mosaics inside the ruins of a Roman villa that dates from the second century. The most famous mosaic features a tiny rendering of Hypnos, the Greek god of sleep. It's thought that the villa's owner slept here. Tickets are \$3.50. See: Discovermontenegro.com/risan-mosaic/

