

GLAM ROCK

Could this be one of Europe's success stories of the century? The mountainous nation of Montenegro is small but packs a powerful punch, and has ambitious new plans for its golden Mediterranean coastline. **Rory Ross** goes to investigate





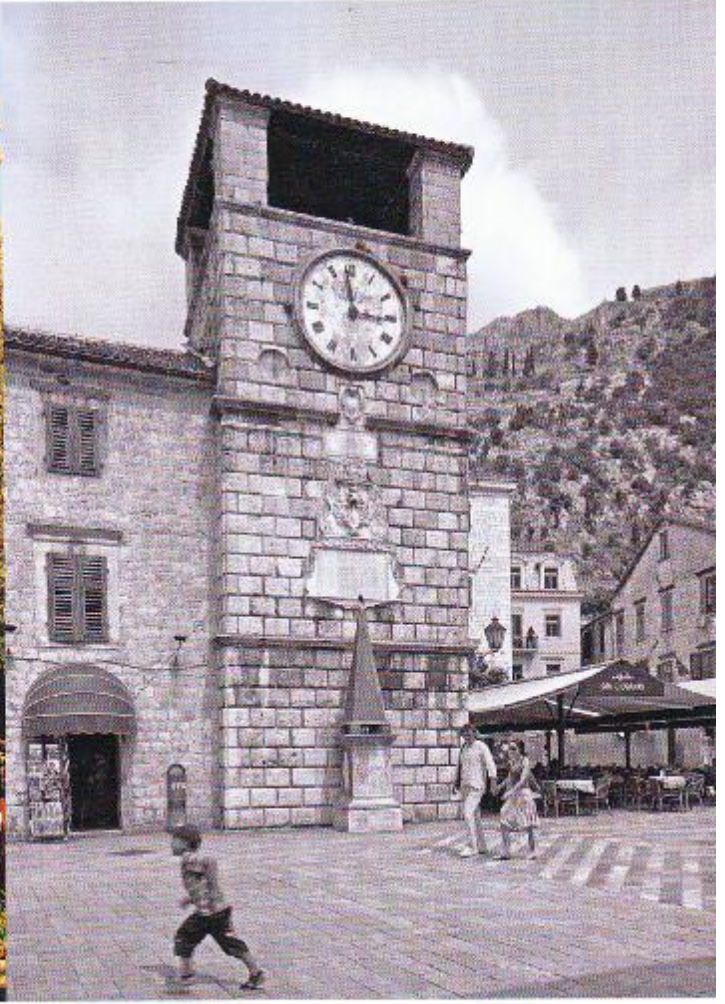
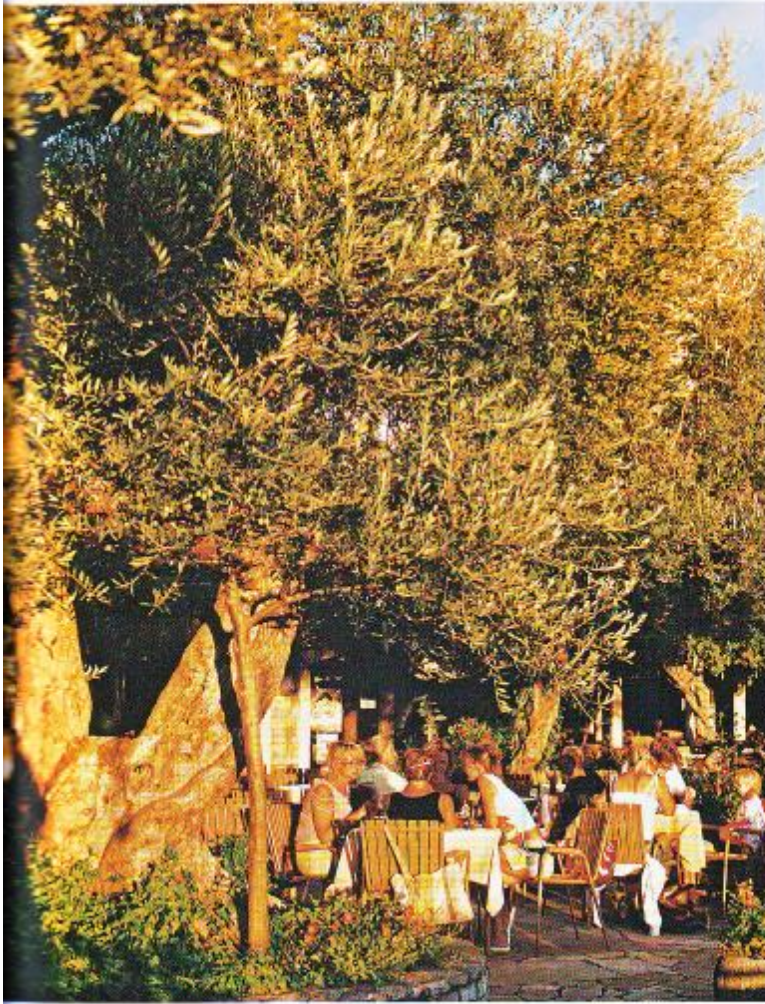
‘And finally,’ I said to Montenegro’s Minister for Economic Development, at the end of a two-hour interview during which he had outlined to me his blueprint for Montenegro’s brilliant new touristic future, ‘can you nominate your dream 24-hour itinerary around your country?’

‘Hmm... Fly to Tivat in the evening,’ said the Minister, misting over. ‘As you come in to land, you can see Kotor Bay. Fascinating! I would visit Old Kotor, a perfectly intact fortified medieval Venetian town. Take a coffee in the piazza – not alone but with locals, which isn’t difficult because wherever you sit the locals will talk to you and probably pay, too. Stay in a hotel in the Old Town and visit a nightclub. If you wake up early, go to Cetinje, the historic capital, which gives an impression of old Montenegro. Then proceed to Kolašin ski resort where the Bianca Resort has a very good wellness centre. Now, you face a dilemma: north or south? I would recommend going south to Sveti Stefan, passing Lake Skadar, the

largest bird reservation in Europe, larger even than the Danube delta. After 24 hours, you will want to stay for one week.’

Montenegro is a very big country concentrated into a much smaller one. Despite its modest size – 13,812sq km, roughly equal to Northern Ireland – it crams in a disproportionate number of geographical prodigies: the oldest pine forests in Europe; the largest lake in the Balkans (Skadar, bordering Albania); the second deepest river canyon in the world (Tara canyon, 1.3km); one of the longest beaches in the Mediterranean (Velika Plaža); and one of the most beautiful views I have ever seen in Europe, that of the Crnojević River.

The biggest attraction, however, is the Boka Kotorska, or Bay of Kotor, Montenegro’s national icon. Described by Byron as ‘The most beautiful contact between earth and sea’, this butterfly-shaped flooded river canyon (often referred to as a fjord) reaches 17km inland, surrounded by mountains, the tallest of which, Lovćen (1,744



metres), is where Petar II Petrović-Njegoš (1813–51), the great Montenegrin hero, poet and leader, is buried. To sit alfresco at Conte Nautilus restaurant in Perast, one of the oldest towns on the Boka, eating catch-of-the-day before the stillness of great mountains, is one of the most delightful ways of spending an afternoon in Montenegro.

With so much geography squeezed into so few hectares, Montenegro is that rare thing: a country that lives up to its strapline: 'Wild Beauty'. The rugged, mountainous interior is dominated by great knuckles of inhospitable rock with occasional stone hamlets that, from a distance, look more like extrusions than buildings. The 294km coastline presents the classic Mediterranean horizon of plunging, pine-scented peaks; but – unusually for the Med – Montenegro has beaches galore. The sea is clean and swimmable and, with 215 days of sunshine a year, you won't complain about the weather.

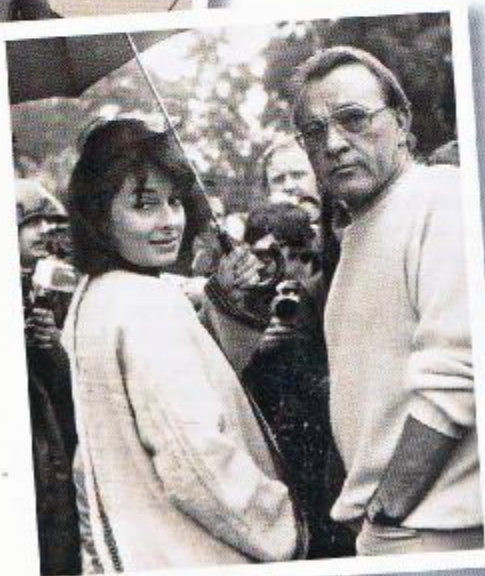
In 2006, Montenegro split from Serbia and became an independent nation state. Wasting no time to

beat a path to the door of the European Union, it adopted the euro and is now dashing towards EU compliance. To underline its commitment to tourism, the government has embarked on a massive upgrade of its infrastructure, roads, water, power, electricity and telecoms. You have never seen so many excavators digging up the roads. For tourists this is both good news and bad news. Good news because it will make Montenegro investable, accessible, liveable and safe. Bad news because, unless it treads very careful, Montenegro risks trashing itself. Adriatic connoisseurs would argue that the place has already been ruined by eyesore property development. Fingers point to the huge influx of Russian roubles. Montenegro shares a deeply held common culture with Russia ('The last Czar had 20 Montenegrin bodyguards,' one Montenegrin told me. 'I'm sure they died heroically'), and it would be easy to think it shares a common economy, too, judging by the amount of funny, silly, hot and cool Russian money going into

Above, from far left: shopping in the medieval town of Kotor; a waterside church; summertime dining; the clock tower in Kotor's old town



From above: Tito with Sophia Loren in 1969; welcoming Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton to Sveti Stefan in 1971; Burton with Princess Elizabeth of Yugoslavia in 1974. Opposite, the town of Kotor, beneath the slopes of Mount Lovćen

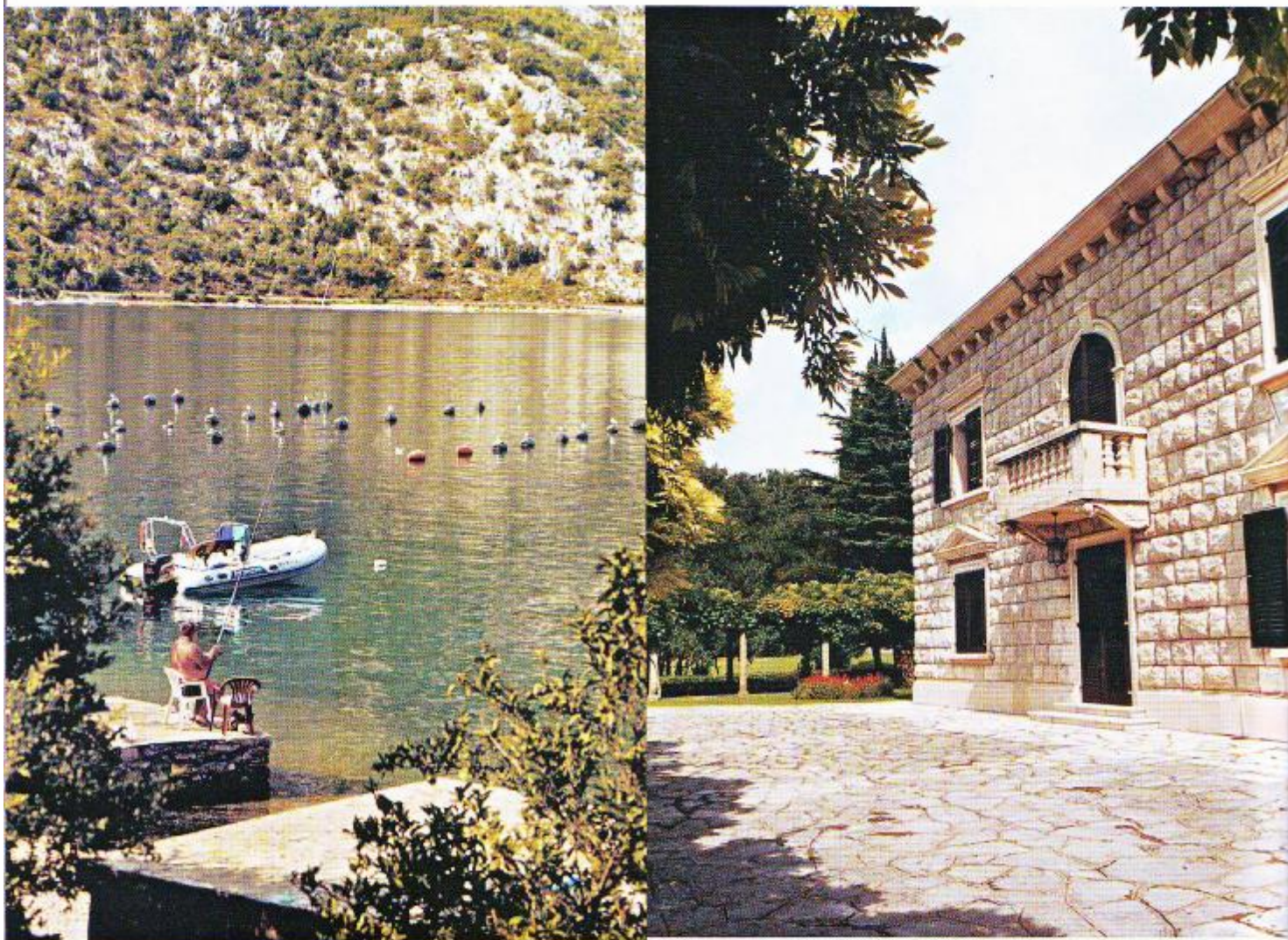


In the 1960s, Tito turned Sveti Stefan into a hotel with a casino and invited the stars. It became 'the' Mediterranean resort

the country. Whether this is entirely healthy remains to be seen. The coves and inlets of the coastline echo to the tormented howl of drills and the shriek of saws as another new Russian apartment block goes up. The silent question being asked by people is: will Montenegro be a tourist success story or will it dazzle briefly before becoming engulfed in a million tonnes of concrete?

Montenegro is located to the south of the tapering extremity of Croatia on the western coast of the Balkan peninsula. This is where the Balkan jigsaw gets complicated. Given its size, Montenegro has a surprising number of neighbours, five at the last count: Croatia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo (all of old Yugoslavia's greatest hits) and Albania. Throughout the existence of federal Yugoslavia (1918-1991/92), each component state contributed in its own way. Montenegro was everyone's favourite backyard as well as land-locked Serbia's pre-eminent beach opportunity. Montenegro's relationship with Serbia is complex and contradictory. A legacy of Montenegro's union with Serbia is a blurring of the distinction between 'Montenegrin' and 'Serbian'. Some Montenegrins I met seem to believe that Serbia is Montenegro by other means, and that Montenegrins are in fact Serbs with a sense of humour, and that Serbs are really Montenegrins by birth. 'There is not a single Serb who doesn't have Montenegrin roots,' insisted one friend. 'Slobodan Milošević was born here. Boris Tadić, the Serbian President, has Montenegrin ancestors. Montenegro is the centre of the universe.' If this sounds complicated, that's because it is, as are most aspects of Balkan international politics. One wonders how Tito managed to control Yugoslavia. 'Maybe it is our submission complex,' said my friend. 'Balkan people can be feeble-minded. We're 24 million Forrest Gumps.'

Finding itself on the borders of so many competing multinational empires over the course of successive centuries (Roman, Venetian, Ottoman, Hapsburg, Russian), this maritime region has always been a pawn in other people's games of chess. Somehow, it managed to stay true to itself, and, miraculously, it avoided being drawn into the Balkan conflict during the 1990s. 'We had no problems,' said Jovan Stanković, a lawyer at a British-owned property company. 'No fighting, no bombing. We are a multi-ethnic diaspora of Serbs, Montenegrins, Albanians, Croats and Bosnians; but our cultural and religious harmony was



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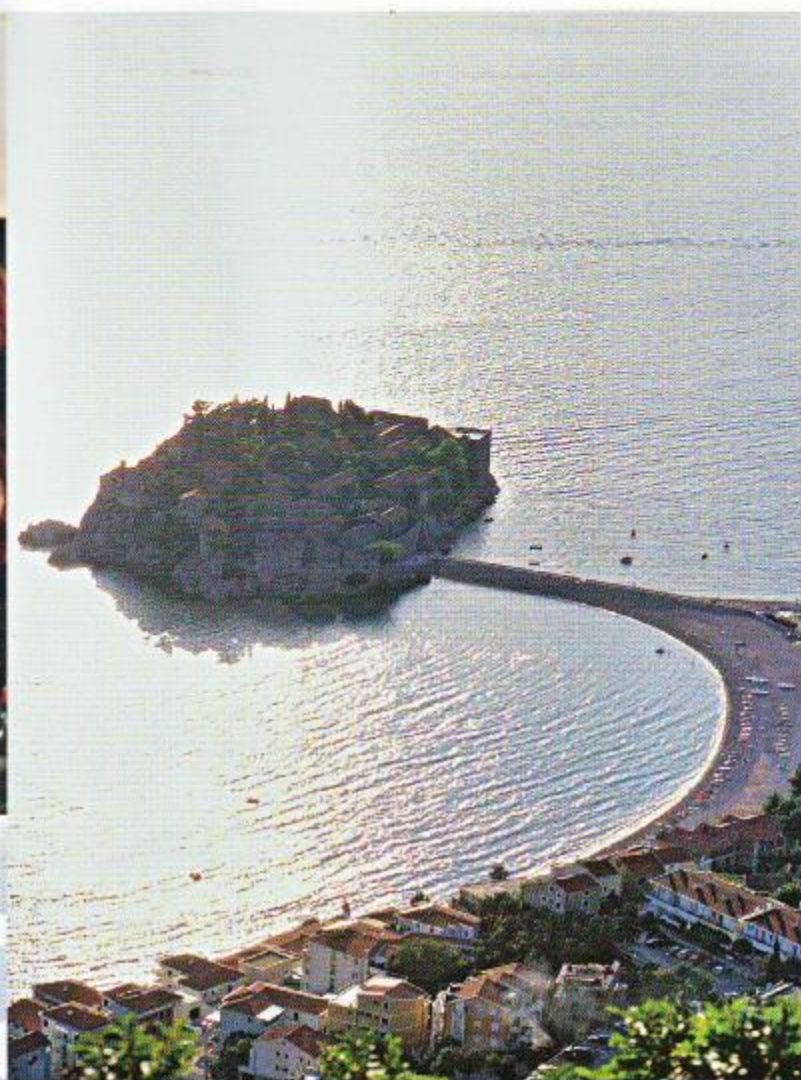
undisturbed.' Credit is due to Prime Minister Milo Djukanović, 47, who since 1991 has held power either as prime minister or president. Although mentored by Slobodan Milošević, he quietly opposed the Serbian leader during the Balkan conflict, sparing his country all but a few isolated bombardments (90 Montenegrins died during the war, fewer than die each year on the roads). Since then, Djukanović has peacefully wrested Montenegro from Serbia and turned instead to the EU.

Another obvious source of stability is the size of Montenegro's population. There are only two degrees of separation between any two Montenegrins, so everyone knows of everyone else. To mingle with them and be confronted by the sameness of dark brooding eyes, broad faces and tall athletic physiques, is like being part of a family reunion. 'From your surname, everyone knows who you are, your family, your village, and how many Turks your ancestors killed,' said Stanković. 'Everyone is continually going to weddings and funerals. They

say a Montenegrin is happy twice in his life: at his wedding and at his wife's funeral.'

If you drive along the precipitous Montenegrin coast, it is easy to see the new Montenegro taking shape. If booming (in every sense) property development is one sign of Montenegro's self-confidence, cars are another. I have never seen so many new cars on the roads, and so many perfectly decent secondhand ones for sale on the verges. Montenegro is literally on the move, or would be were it not for endless traffic jams due to roadworks. Cars are the new status symbols. 'The VW Golf Mark II is the mythical car,' says Stanković, throwing his VW Golf into gear. 'You can use it for all purposes, plough with it, keep livestock in it... The bigger your VW is, the more accepted you are.'

Montenegro's premier coastal resort is Budva. Once an ox market dating from the 3rd century, today it is a maze of 18th-century stone streets and buildings, rebuilt after an earthquake in 1979. As



games of chess, but somehow it managed to stay true to itself

everywhere in Montenegro, the choice of hotels is limited. All the usual suspects are rumoured to be looking to invest – Kempinski, Hilton, Four Seasons – but until they do, the majority of hotels here are Communist-era monoliths. There is, however, Hotel Splendid in nearby Bečići. Should you ever get the spooky feeling that everything in Montenegro is being manipulated to a grand – probably Russian – plan, the Splendid will do little to allay your fears. A Russian-owned, five-star, kitsch monstrosity, it resembles a beached cruise liner half-sunk in sand with the 'biggest spa on the Adriatic'. The Splendid's early reputation was far from splendid. Three bombs exploded on-site during construction, and the police officer investigating the blasts was killed. When it opened in September 2006, guests were bussed in while being watched by armed guards. Thankfully, matters have improved, and the place is now perfectly safe to stay in, as Mick Jagger and Madonna can vouch. The Bond film *Casino*

Royale was a welcome boost. Bond and Vesper stay at 'Hotel Splendide' in 'Montenegro' (the Montenegrin scenes were actually shot in the Czech Republic). 'Many guests ask for the casino, which we don't have, and for James Bond's room,' says Larisa Jovanović, the Splendid's spokeswoman.

The Montenegrin way of life highlights many of the foreign influences to which this country has been subjected over the past thousand years, influences which have been filtered through the Montenegrin genius for the finer things of life. Take food and drink. One legacy of the Venetian Republic's grip on coastal Montenegro (1420 to 1797) is that the food is recognisably Venetian: the classic Montenegrin meal consists of a combination of prosciutto (slightly saltier than in Italy), octopus salad, fish and squid-ink risotto. Squid-ink risotto is the Montenegrin classic, as ubiquitous as the hamburger is in the USA.

Before and after each meal, *rakja* is the traditional tippic. This Montenegrin grappa is

From far left: fishing on the Bay of Kotor; Villa Miločer, once a royal residence, now part of the new Amanresort; the bar at Hotel Splendid in Bečići; Sveti Stefan

The Bay of Kotor is Montenegro's national icon, described by Byron as 'the most beautiful contact between earth and sea'

variously distilled from pears, grapes, plums and – during World War II – floorboards. *Rakja* is an important lubricant of social and business life. 'I regularly meet the mayor of Tivat,' said one English businessman based here, 'and I have yet to do so without getting stuck into a bottle of *rakja*. However tough the negotiation, once the *rakja* and cigarettes come out, lunch can last three hours, no matter who you are with.'

Coffee-drinking is another cherished Montenegrin ritual, derived from both Venetian and Ottoman eras. If Italians salute the day with an espresso knocked back in one go, Turks linger over theirs, while smoking. Montenegrins combine both approaches: they take their coffee seated, often with a succession of mechanically consumed cigarettes and shots of *rakja*. Every pavement in Montenegro is a free-form, alfresco coffee lounge with tables and padded armchairs intended to prolong and thoroughly indulge the coffee-drinking habit.

Coffee is the cue for '*polako*', a Montenegrin expression meaning, 'Time to take it easy', which itself is an excuse to carry on The Great Montenegrin Conversation conducted with the universal props of cigarettes and alcohol. It begins with cars, women and sport and, if the *rakja* comes out, turns unwisely to politics. 'We Balkans have inside us a monster, a volatile cocktail of Mediterranean and Slav,' said Stanković, leaning forward. 'We are driven by emotions. Balkan peoples are incapable of keeping things bottled up. That applies to emotions as well as drink. "Denial" is a river in Africa.'

While the cafés of Budva teem with coffee drinkers, half a mile away, one of the biggest investments in Montenegro's bright new touristic future is under way. The Amanresorts group has acquired 32 acres occupying two kilometres of coastline. Among 'dozens' of European projects that Amanresorts is considering, this is the largest and most advanced. It is located on a delightful coastal strip of bays, rocky promontories and terraced olive groves interspersed with formal gardens. The scents of pine and rosemary drug the air.

When completed, the Aman property will comprise three hotels, two villas, spa, restaurants, shops, sports facilities, nightclubs and so on. The six-bedroom Villa Miločer is already open and the two Queen Marija Suites, in a separate villa, are set to follow this month. An unremarkable two-storey stone rectangle, Villa Miločer was the



MONTENEGRO: THE LOWDOWN

GETTING THERE

Montenegro Airlines (020 7864 4032; www.montenegroairlines.com) flies from Gatwick to Tivat.
JAT Airways (020 7629 2007; www.jatloncon.com) flies from Heathrow to Tivat via Belgrade. See www.visit-montenegro.com for general information.

WHERE TO STAY

Villa Miločer opened in December 2008 near Budva under the management of Amanresorts; the **Queen Marija Suites** open this month. **Sveti Stefan** is being restored and will open as Aman Sveti Stefan at a date yet to be confirmed. 00 382 33 420000; www.amanresorts.com. Suites from €606.50
Hotel Splendid in Bečići has 341 rooms and suites. 00 382 33 773777; www.montenegrostars.com. Doubles from €107
Hotel Vardar is a smart, 23-room hotel in Kotor's Old Town, with a pavement terrace café. 00 382 32 325084; www.hotelvardar.com. Doubles from €125
Bianca Resort & Spa, in Kolašin, is a striking, modern take on a hunting lodge. 00 382 20 863000; www.biancaresort.com. Doubles from €150

WHERE TO EAT

BUDVA
Konoba Stari Grad A small Italian-style trattoria with great seafood and pasta, plus meat-based favourites. Eat on the terrace, overlooking the city walls and the beach. Njegoseva 24; 00 382 33 454443
Knez Konoba Fantastic risottos – squid ink, seafood, etc – are elegantly presented in this old-town konoba (trattoria). Mišev Ljubise
Tri Ribara Just outside Budva, in Rafailovići, and right on the beach: you can dip your toes in the water and eat fresh seafood here. Bečići beach; 00 382 33 471050
MB Ice Club On the main square of the old town, this is popular for its morning coffee and, later in the day, cocktails. Njegoseva 44; 00 382 33 452562
● Outside Budva, past Sveti Stefan, is the seaside settlement of **Przno**, where waterfront restaurants have fantastic fish and seafood. The three recommended konobas are **Konoba More**, **Kod Zaga** and **Langust**.

KOTOR

Galion Right on the marina, this is where you'll find the best fresh fish in town,

grilled and sprinkled with local olive oil. Susani; 00 382 32 325054
Stari Grad On the 'Milky Square' with a vine-covered terrace out front. Stari Grad is great for fresh fish and traditional Balkan (ie meaty) dishes. Trg od Mlijeka; 00 382 32 322025
Vino Santo Outside Kotor, but worth the trip to see the lovely Luštica Peninsula. Famed chef Dragan Perčić gives seafood dishes a French spin. Obala Durasovića; 00 382 32 67 381117
Ristorante Tramontana Also just outside town, with gorgeous views from the rooftop terrace. Excellent pasta and seafood. Prčanj; 00 382 32 301700

PERAST

Conte Nautilus Perast's most atmospheric place to eat, with water-side tables. Great for long, relaxed dinners. Hotel Conte; 00 382 32 373687
Restoran Stari Milini Montenegro's best-known restaurant for romantic dinners, set in an old mill on the edge of a small bay. Order the fantastic brodet (Dalmatian fish stew). Jadranski put, Ljuta; 00 382 32 333555 **VESNA MARIC**