

Backpacking the Balkans

Croatia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Montenegro and Albania are home to some of the last pristine rivers and primeval landscapes in Europe, and a cycling, swimming and wild camping journey is the perfect way to explore, says **Sarah Stirling**





Clockwise from top left: exploring the limestone streets of busy Dubrovnik; landmine warnings are everywhere just across the border in Bosnia & Herzegovina; lots of border crossings; wild camping in the trusty Terra Nova Voyager; on the summit of Maglic, Bosnia's highest peak; cycling through tunnels above the Piva canyon in Montenegro; route planning; Bosnia & Herzegovina's wild landscape includes some of Europe's last primeval forests

A light swept across the tent, causing Rob to leap out into the field in his pants, brandishing a knife he had apparently put under his pillow 'just in case'. "Mind the land-mines!" I called. "And look out for wolves and bears!" We resettled, then the light shone on us again. Miles from any road, and unable to find the cause, we slept fitfully.

It had all been so easy back in Croatia, I remembered, lying awake. Irritated by the heat and homogenous tourism of Dubrovnik, we'd sweated anti-consumerism onto a 'left luggage' shelf there. Four pairs of pants? We'd get by on two. Warm hats? Ha! Our canvas panniers felt lovely and slim, after that.

Cycling uphill towards the Bosnian border, though, I'd pondered that there's a simple cycle touring equation: you always use less than half of whatever you pack, and you always forget something that later proves crucial. It had been eerily quiet. Clouds purpling over the white mountains on the horizon had given a sense of something impending. Something that might require a warm hat, or change of pants, perhaps.

The border crossing - essentially a white portacabin - had been sinister, with gun-swinging guards eyeing us daringly. Unperturbed - he quite enjoys being daring - Rob had made a request.

I'd winced as the guard's eyes flickered, considering. Then he'd raised his hand and punched down hard. We were hoping to cross lots of borders, and had decided to collect passport stamps. That was the first one in.

It was there, in a part of rural Bosnia & Herzegovina that had largely been abandoned during the Yugoslav Wars, that I realised we'd forgotten both local currency and stove fuel.

Mine country

"All we need," Rob had enthused, "is someone willing to give us Marks in return for Euros, and a short piece of hose so we can steal a little fuel from a car."

"Yes, and then we'll find some treasure at the end of a rainbow," I'd laughed.

Then we'd spotted some treasure of sorts: a sign for the Ciro Cycle Trail. It looked hopefully jaunty and touristy. I'd underlined five things on our Balkans map - places or routes I wanted to explore, if serendipity took us past them - and this trail was one of them.

This new cycle path follows the route of an old narrow gauge railway, which once ran north from here, towards Sarajevo. It has been way-marked and marketed, thanks to an injection of EU cash. We had been promised an 'open air museum'. Photos on the website had shown children gaily cycling along.

What we actually got was landmine warning signs attached to trees every few metres. 'MINE' was also spray-painted on some derelict houses in red. Others were marked, rather noncommittally, 'OK'. Hundreds of thousands of unexploded mines remain in the wild Bosnian countryside. We didn't see any gay children. The only person we saw was a sun-wrinkled man in a shirt and cap, poking a herd of cows past us with a pointy stick. We'd loved it, all of it.

In places the track had been levelled by raising it from

the surrounding valley, which gave huge views over the surrounding dense bush, fields and mountains. When the sun set, we'd wheeled off the track, cautious as stalking cats, walking only where we could see animals had grazed and survived.

It had been late. In a sudden hunger panic, we'd thrown most of our fresh food into our mouths, leaving us with mostly dried pasta, coffee and remorse until we found fuel or currency. Then, soon after we'd zipped up the tent, the spooky light had shone on us.

I finally slept. In the morning, Rob found a small piece of hose at the end of the field. Was it a sign? And if so, was it a welcome or a dare?

Health and safety gone crazy

"Maybe they aren't going to take the bridge down after all," I said. "No-one else seems worried." When we'd first arrived at Kravica, dirty and sweaty, I'd wondered if it was a mirage. Waterfalls gushed down huge cliffs, splattered into spray amidst greenery, and tinkled into natural pools banked by sand. This Bosnian beauty spot was the second thing I'd underlined on our map.

After swimming like gluttons, we'd joined a few other travellers, camping on the bank. One of them had told us the bridge leading to the falls would be removed the next morning. He'd also been happy to swap some Marks for Euros. I'd eaten my words, along with some fish from a little riverside cafe. We'd slept, risen early, crossed the bridge and waited to see what happened.

Finally, a boat full of men with mallets rowed up. "Surely they'll say something to the campers?" I said, as planks began flying off. We watched as a traveller plucked his tent off the ground, and made a run for it.

Gradually, other campers began spotting what was happening. It became a slightly dangerous long jump competition, with each person having to leap a larger gap than the one before. The workers cheered loudly each time someone made it, and so did we. Two day's cycle from the touristy coast, we felt a world away.

Sipping my coffee, I reflected that the Balkans is home to the last pristine rivers in Europe. Sadly 2,798 dams have been proposed in the region - threatening almost every one of them.

Hydro-schemes, touted as a green energy source, can actually hugely endanger ecosystems and result in concrete poured over beauty spots. There are lower impact energies out there. Plus, the amount of proposed dams is ridiculous. Plenty of Balkan locals are protesting and the campaign is gaining momentum.

I didn't know it then, but we were to swim in plenty of Balkan rivers on our trip. Wild rivers with huge gravel banks, spectacular waterfalls, deep canyons, and crystal clear streams full of fish.

In which we become robbers

Rob was actually doing it. Under the cover of dusk, he was furtively tiptoeing up to a car outside a house with his piece of hose. I backed away, pretending he was nothing to do with me, and looked around.

The countryside had begun to neaten up and bustle with quiet industry as we'd cycled north. People generally ignored us. Tourism wasn't a thing here. Houses, rough-and-ready in breeze blocks, were beautified by vegetables and flowers twining over arches, which shaded paths to front doors.

Haystacks - proper haystacks - had handmade pitchforks stuck in them. Wood was chopped and stacked. Small herds of sheep, goats and cows were carefully followed as they grazed verges.

As we'd neared Sarajevo, everything to the east had become densely forested. I could see a few houses gathered at the feet of mountains, around blue lakes, along rivers. Bosnia is home to some of the last primeval

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forests in Europe. Bears and wolves definitely roam in there, and maybe an endangered Balkan lynx or two. We were looking forward to exploring.

Rob emerged from behind the vehicle, shaking his head. Like most cars we'd seen in Bosnia, it was a practical ancient yellow Fiat. They have, it transpired, lockable petrol caps. Thwarted, he refused to throw the hose away. It would come in useful, he was sure of it...

The heart of everything

Following a road artery into Sarajevo – the third place I'd underlined on our map – we found the heart of Bosnia. Smart cars, make-up and modern coffee shops were thinly veneered over bullet-holed buildings and fractured lives. A local told us that everyone still talks about the siege, which happened in the 90s.

During the Yugoslav Wars, while landmines were planted in the countryside, an army of Bosnian Serbs took to the hills surrounding the capital, and liberally shot at people. Essentially, as Yugoslavia dissolved into independent countries, it highlighted racial differences. These guys wanted a Serbian republic.

Ratko Mladić, the top Bosnian Serb military officer at that time, dubbed the 'Butcher of Bosnia', was finally captured last November after 16 years on the run and sentenced to life in prison for war crimes.

An art gallery film revealed all. Kids running across streets, dodging sniper bullets. The city looked apocalyptic. "So many people die here", a lady with a defiant air told the video camera, "That we have a black humour about it." The siege lasted four years.

Meanwhile, life elsewhere in the world continued as normal. Perhaps that's why the city – and country – seemed to have a friendly but insular air.

We got a taste of the city in siege conditions (sort of) when the threatening storm finally arrived. As huge raindrops bounced in all directions, everyone in the street ducked and blindly ran for cover.

After treating ourselves to a night indoors (I also treated myself to a warm hat and some spare pants, inconsequentially), we showed our map to the hotel receptionist. A small lane had caught our eye. It wound from Sarajevo to Montenegro through the Sprska Republic – the part of Bosnia & Herzegovina that was designated an autonomous Serbian region after the war. "What's this road like?" we asked.

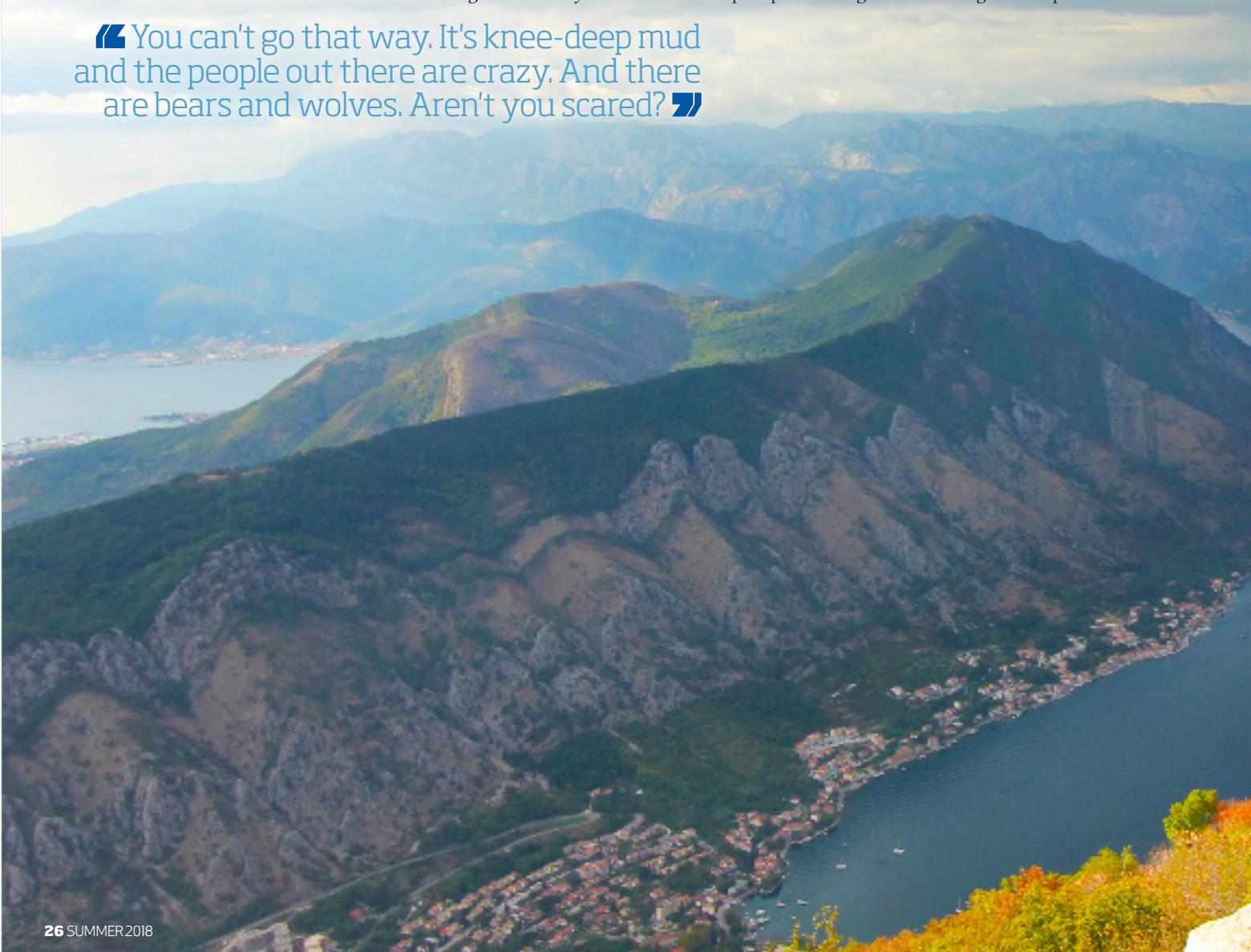
Knee-deep mud

"Oh!" she said. "You can't go that way. I've never even been on that road. But I've been told it's knee-deep in mud that way. And the people are all crazy out there. It's not like here. There's nothing there. And there are wolves and bears. Aren't you scared?"

The road sounded wonderful. We anticipated knee-deep mud round each bend. All we kept finding, though, was glorious countryside and people poking animals along verges with sticks, minding their own business. As we cycled, I contemplated the psychology of conflict and that cultural construct – race. The divisive 'us' and 'them' idea, and what it can lead to.

Then, while I wasn't concentrating, we met the precipice of a huge wooden bridge and I squealed to a

“ You can't go that way. It's knee-deep mud and the people out there are crazy. And there are bears and wolves. Aren't you scared? ”



stop. It had broken in the middle, as if a heavy load had been too much for it, and crashed into the river below. “Oh well,” I said, dejectedly. “I guess we had better turn around.”

Then Rob noticed that someone had nailed small pieces of wood onto the collapsed bridge, to create footholds. After carefully pushing and pulling our bikes down and up the vertiginous slopes, two dirty, sweaty people whooped triumphantly and cycled to the Montenegrin border. If everyone was crazy in the Sprksa Republic, we probably fitted right in.

Gorging and ice cream

Coffee shops and ice creams were aplenty on the other side. The roads were well-kept. We bought fuel and found cash points. Tourist signs pointed out everything. Montenegro had been one of the earliest Balkan countries to cosy up to the West, and it showed.

We were cycling along the fourth thing I'd underlined on our map – the incredibly beautiful Piva canyon. The water, sparkling turquoise, had carved a deep cleft in limestone. High above it, the road alternately carved around mountainsides, tunnelled through them, and teetered along bridges between them.

Then we spotted the mountain. Maglic. The final thing I'd underlined on our map. Straddling the border, it has twin summits, one in each country, and rises from that primeval forest I mentioned. The Bosnian summit is the country's highest peak. It looked magnificent.

We set off uphill, stashing our bikes in the

woods, both hoping and not hoping to see any evidence of bears or wolves. The landscape was vast and wild. The peak was 2,386 metres tall, but goodness knows how wide. Hours later, we peered over a col at the heart-shaped lake. The mountain was like an enigmatic world of its own. The stars were out. It was time to camp.

The next morning we woke early to find the sun rising, too, in pale blue and pink pastels. On and on wound the final ridge, teasing us with false summits, until a final scramble gained us the top and a view, seemingly over everywhere we'd been, and everywhere we were going.

Big black Mercs and swagger

The man in the tiny hut marking the Albanian border had a neat moustache. He spent a long time carefully copying our names and passport numbers onto a paper form in neat writing. Suspicious brown eyes looked up.

“Biçikletë?” he asked. We nodded. He rose and looked out of the window at our bicycles, then slowly wrote “Biçikletë” in the appropriate box. When the stamp was neatly aligned with the edge of the page, he hesitated, then pressed firmly. We all admired the result.

Just beyond the Albanian border, the tarmac ran out to gravel. We carefully crossed a haphazard bridge with planks missing.

Beyond it, a clear pool had sunk itself into a limestone bowl. We washed our cares away and continued through

Below: Montenegrin fjords





the green river valley, gazing at a horse we could hear clopping down a lane, at haystacks in fields, and at the mountains rising beyond. We'd have to cross them, somehow.

The few cars we saw weren't practical yellow Fiats as in Bosnia, or generic Western cars as in Montenegro. In Albania, one of the EU's poorest countries, nearly every car we saw was a huge, old, posturing black Merc.

A young girl tore out of a house, yelling, and sprinted towards us. We waited for her to cross the river. Finally her feet flapped along the road in flip flops. She stopped and panted - "Camping?" Her neighbour, a young boy, joined us. "Coffee, my house?" he offered. She elbowed him and smiled sweetly up at us.

Then the boy noticed our bikes. "Pfft, pfft?" he asked, motioning excitedly with his hands. He and the girl tore away, returning with an old bike. When we fixed its tyre, they whooped with delight. It was fun to meet some locals, we thought. And then we met the bad guy.

I am a very bad mad

In a cafe, a man dressed in leather with slick black hair and stubble called, "I used to live in London. Join me for a drink?" He had a confident charm, like he could tell a good story, so we settled around a plastic table.

"So you lived in England?" Rob asked. "Where?"

"Yes, I came over on boat," the man said. "In truck. A lawyer helped me get fake passport and I went to America."

"And you lived there for a few years?" asked Rob.

"I was in prison there ten years!" the man said, grinning hugely.

"For... being an illegal immigrant?" asked Rob.

"No," he snorted. "I am very bad man. When you tell your friends who you had drink with, they will not believe you." He glanced at his friend. "Google me."

"Well, I think we'd better be going," I ventured.

"I think you have another drink with me out of respect," said the man, lightly. "Perhaps I will manipulate you and steal your bikes."

"No, we're going to head off," said Rob. Walking as slowly as we could to our bikes, we cycled rapidly down the valley. Spotting a long, rickety foot-bridge spanning deep, blue water, we wheeled across and set up camp on the far bank, tucked under a tree, then dived in, to calm and cool ourselves. We were nervous and excited. Everything felt unregulated and lawless. Rob did not even suggest trying his hose trick here.

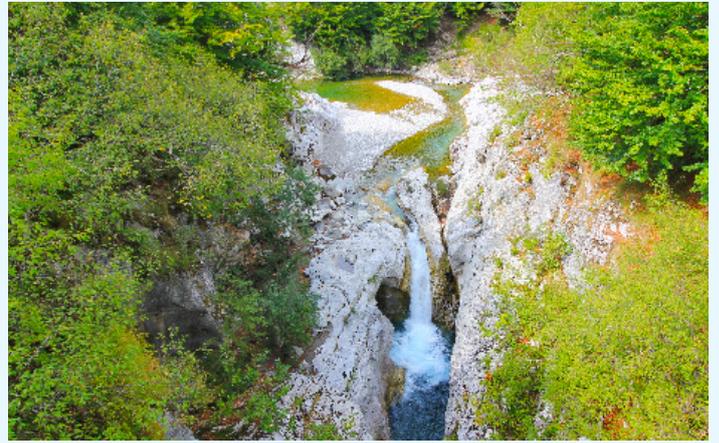
Sea dreams

The next morning the road we were following led us zig-zagging up to a high mountain col, then we whizzed down the other side to Albanian civilisation.

Speeding through a town, I enjoyed the sights. Two young boys were driving a brakeless, mechanised contraption along the main road. "You like?" they postured, seeing our smiles, and vroomed the engine. We overtook a horse and cart next, then several old

Clockwise from top left: sleeping off a fish dinner by a river in a Montenegrin valley; cycling in Albania; offered a glass of honey wine at a mountain col; the broken bridge in the Sprska Republic

“I am a very bad man. When you tell your friends who you have coffee with, they will not believe you”



Would you drive across it? Just across the border into Albania, the main road became gravel, punctuated by broken bridges. The waterfalls and rivers were a wild-camper's dream for swimming in. Below: on a bridge in Mostar, en-route to Sarajevo. How beautiful are these rivers?

men wobbling along in shirts and trousers. The young men we saw, in contrast, smelled strongly of aftershave, and swaggered in skinny jeans and T-shirts with carefully coiffed hair.

At the border, our passports were stamped in Albania, then thrown into Montenegro, which was in the next room. "Perhaps it'll be nice to see the sea," said Rob. "After all the wild camping. Maybe we should finish the trip with restaurants, relaxing and beaches?"

On several nights recently, Rob had dropped off to sleep, then woken with a start: "I think I heard something!" "What, what?" I'd whimper, peering over the duvet. "Oh, actually," his voice would relax, "I think I dreamt it." Then he'd leave me with the imaginary wild animals and robbers, and slip away. Yes, perhaps it would be nice to see the coast again.

Montenegrin fjords

But we weren't quite ready. Up, up, up, we cycled, into the mountains above the Montenegrin coast. At a col, a friendly local offered us a glass of homemade honey

wine outside his ramshackle cabin, which was decorated with colourful flowers in pots. We sat and played with his menagerie of dogs and cats.

Down in the next valley, by a beautiful arched bridge that was reflected in the river, we found a small cafe built on stilts, decorated with painted fish. On the verandah we watched the owner cook our trout in a skillet, then we slept on the riverbank next to the cafe.

The next day we cycled up, up, up, again; treated to incredible views down over hills that curved around Montenegrin fjords. After whizzing down, and admiring the cute front doors of a fishing village there, it wasn't long before we were back in Croatia, and finally hit the beach.

After a swim, I laid my weary head down on my trek towel on the busy beach. I was actually drifting off to sleep. Rob wasn't going to wake me with imaginary robbers and wild animals. Heaven.

"Sarah," came a whisper. "Yes," I mumbled, eyes firmly closed. "I think you've got about five minutes," he said, "Before I'm really, really, really bored." oag

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