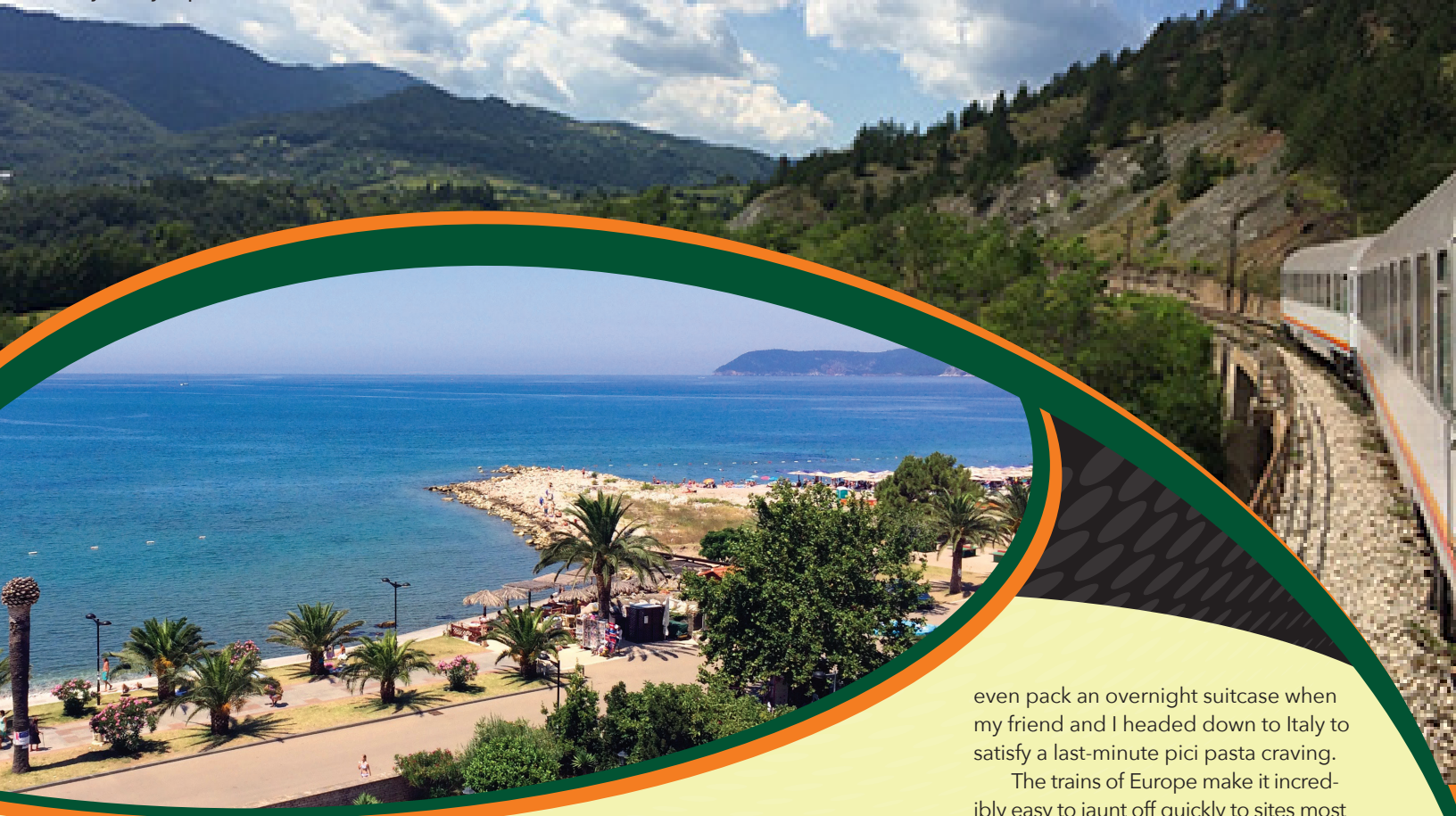


Riding the Rails

A scenic journey through former Yugoslavia

By Kristy Alpert



I glanced once more over my shoulder as I sat in the empty dining car, the sound of rattling china adding a welcomed beat to the rhythmic hum of the train as it rolled through tunnels and over rickety wooden bridges. I was finally alone, the other passengers having abandoned cups of Turkish coffee grounds and half-eaten sandwiches to rejoin their friends and families back in their cabins.

I was traveling by myself, my Eurail pass my only companion. As the last passenger shut the door behind her, I allowed myself the freedom to do what I'd been wanting to do since I'd first sat down next to that open window above my table.

With not so much as a hesitation, I climbed up on my seat and perched myself on my tiptoes before tilting my head out the window to let the cool wind whip my hair in tangled directions across my face. The air came in sweet bursts as

we passed by sapphire mountain lakes surrounded by towering evergreens, and then changed to breezy waves scented with stony, wet earth while we crept through dark tunnels.

I was on the train traveling from Belgrade to Bar, and I closed my eyes to soak in the magical nostalgia of traveling slowly through the heart of the former Yugoslavia by train.

Slowing Down

Living in Europe, it's easy to take for granted how convenient it is to get from one place to another. If I have no daytime plans, I could just hop on an ICE train to be in Paris for an afternoon picnic beneath the Eiffel Tower. If I missed a band coming through Frankfurt, I could always head off on a train to Amsterdam to see the show at the Amsterdam ArenA. In fact, I didn't

even pack an overnight suitcase when my friend and I headed down to Italy to satisfy a last-minute picci pasta craving.

The trains of Europe make it incredibly easy to jaunt off quickly to sites most people wait their entire lives to see, but, as I learned in that dining car that sunny afternoon, there doesn't always need to be a destination to make the journey worthwhile.

Starting in Serbia

The route from Belgrade to Bar has been rated among the most beautiful train rides in Europe, and is known to railroad fanatics as the last historic railway of its kind, with more than 435 bridges and 254 tunnels stretching 296 miles from the Serbian capital to the Adriatic. The rails of Europe are dominated by high-speed modern trains, but this line has remained virtually untouched since the times when these countries made up what was known as Yugoslavia, and continues to offer a chance to experience the slow romance of old-school train travel and

continued on page 20

continued from page 18

Soviet-era engineering ingenuity. The cars are still sectioned off into rooms for six, and each room is decadently clad with Gothic-style red velvet seats and thick embroidered curtains.

To start the journey, it's best to hop a short flight from Frankfurt to Belgrade, Serbia, and spend the first day and night exploring this historic town. Some of the best local accommodations can be found through [Homestay.com](#), a website that offers an amazing bespoke experience through local hosts who rent out rooms in their homes for affordable prices. Each host will have a ton of local recommendations for where to eat and play in the city, but make sure to check out Knez Mihailova Street (a quaint pedestrian shopping street) and Kosančićev Venac Street in Old Belgrade (the main street that was struck by German bombs back in 1941) before heading out to the Kalemegdan Fortress for sunset. Eager photographers line the walls each night in an attempt to capture the crimson colors reflecting off the scenery below this hilltop fortress, but the best (and most unobstructed) view is from the patio at the Kalemegdanska Terasa restaurant. The restaurant serves upscale regional specialties paired with quality Serbian wines. Diners can enjoy fresh-caught river fish while looking out over the point where the Sava and Danube rivers come together.

For a more modern take on Balkan food, check out Ambar Restaurant on the banks of the Sava River. The restaurant occupies one of the stalls in Beton Hala, alongside a series of other restaurants serving the trendy crowd that comes out each night to dine in this renovated stor-

age facility. Ambar's cuisine is authentically Balkan with a contemporary twist, and the small plates served tapas-style make it easy to get a taste of all the different flavors of the region (don't miss out on the *suve sljive* appetizer of bacon-wrapped prunes filled with local goat cheese).

On the Train

The entire route can be completed in a single day, but to really experience the spirit of the journey, it's best to break it up into a few days. Starting in Belgrade, the train rolls out toward Valjevo and arrives in the tiny town of Užice, where a few petite hotels and [Booking.com](#) rentals are available for overnight stays. The main attraction is a hydroelectric dam, but hikers use the city as a home base for taking to the mountainous trails surrounding it.

Although there isn't much going on in town, Užice offers a great place to break up the trip between Belgrade and the next biggest city, Podgorica. From Užice, the trip to Podgorica is roughly six hours, but it's one of the most gorgeous stretches of the entire route. It's



here that the train tunnels through the countryside of Serbia and Montenegro, through lush mountains and manicured lakes and rivers. The dining car offers the best chances to catch the mountain breeze (open windows to take photos!) while sipping on a strong cup of Turkish coffee or some local beer.

Podgorica is the capital and largest city in Montenegro. Although it has great nightlife, brand-name hotels (the Ramada Podgorica is within walking distance from the train station), and exciting offerings like many other mid-sized European cities, a few local gems help maintain the signature small-town feel. At little wine bar called Vinoteka Fufluns, the owner and his wife pour glasses of Italian and Montenegrin wine all night long for a group of regulars. It's not uncommon for the owner (Igor) to join his tables for a wine tasting and offer up hearty slices of his delicious house-cured fish.

The final leg of the route lasts only an hour and stretches along the coastline of Montenegro until the train pulls into the station at Bar. Bar was once a very important port city, and the remnants of its maritime history are seen everywhere in town. The Hotel Princess Bar is by far the best hotel in town, with a private pool and beach, boutique spa with special Montenegrin treatments and massages, and easy access to the bustling esplanade. At night, the esplanade lights up with street vendors, live music, and outdoor seating at the restaurants that fill the pedestrian zone, most notably Restoran Knjazeva Basta. The restaurant is known for its fantastic wine list, and the menu features a range of contemporary Montenegrin dishes and fresh-caught seafood.

Although there's always the option to train all the way back to Serbia for another flight out, Podgorica Airport is only an hour train ride from Bar, which makes it easy to maximize time spent luxuriating by the Mediterranean Sea. ■

