The Western Balkans
Land of Discovery

46 Outstanding Ways to Experience Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia

National Park Wonders * The Sporting Life * Food Lover’s Guide
Sacred Places * Café Society * Party On! * Plus More
The Western Balkans

PHOTO CREDIT TK

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A pale stone bridge spans a narrow gorge. A snow-capped peak glows in the morning light. Bells ring from within a medieval monastery, and a muezzin’s call echoes from an ancient mosque. You’re in the Balkans. A decade after the end of wars in the region, the doors have opened again on one of the most magical places in the world. Whether hiking western Albania’s wild mountains or wandering the colorful Sarajevo bazaars in Bosnia and Herzegovina; breathing the Ottoman atmosphere of Prizren, Kosovo, or exploring the mystical shores of Macedonia’s Lake Ohrid; dining on grilled squid at a seaside café in Montenegro or sampling the nightlife in the Serbian capital of Belgrade—visitors can’t help but marvel at the richness of culture and the vibrant weave of people, history, and nature in this crossroads of Europe. —The Editors

Montenegro’s Kotor Bay remains a major Balkans draw. Top: A girl wears traditional garb for an August celebration in Serbia. Left: In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Mostar’s narrow streets beckon. Cover: Lake Ohrid, Macedonia.
SUMMER DAYS: BEACH AND BEYOND

Budva, Montenegro’s trendiest summer spot, has long had it all. With its marble-paved streets, Venetian walls, and elegant medieval architecture, the Old City is often mentioned in the same breath as Dubrovnik. Budva’s main streets are sprinkled with outdoor cafés and bars—ideal for the see-and-be-seen crowd, dependably tanned (Budva has 17 beaches) and dressed in the latest. To shop in Budva is to go from gucci to stores selling locally made rugs—a fine metaphor for the blend of then and now.

A detailed exploration of the city—one of the oldest on the Adriatic coast—should include a look at the winged lion above the main gate and time at the Citadel, with its impressive library of ancient tomes within and, outside, striking views of the sea. The Greek and Roman necropolises—discovered in the mid-20th century—date to the first century b.c. Come nighttime, sit back, relax, dine, and enjoy some music or theater.

—Kristina Stefanova

MACEDONIA

INTERIOR DESIGN

Location, location, location. Occupying prime turf in the fertile Central Vardar Valley, the prosperous second-century b.c. Roman settlement of Stobi saw lots of traffic. It was a major trading center on one of the main routes between the Danube River and Aegean Sea. Residents lived in opulent style—thanks, in part, to nearby sources of gold and, especially, marble.

Homes were decorated with ornate mosaic scenes of domestic life, animals, and geometric designs. Some of the most impressive mosaics are sheltered in Stobi’s basilica—an easy day trip from the capital city of Skopje.

—Kristina Stefanova

Villagers handpick some of the tastiest raspberries on Earth.

At the Stobi site, a mosaic floor surrounds the baptistry.

SERBIA

RASPBERRIES: BEARING FRUIT

Serbia supplies a third of the world’s raspberries for export, cultivating them the old-fashioned way: on the sun-drenched slopes of the central and western parts of the country, in the prime time of June and July. The result is a berry that is rich, red, flavorful, and sweet. The growing epicenter is the town of Arilje, on the pristine Rzava River, where the aroma of berries perfumes the air at harvest time and a raspberry statue stands in the middle of town. Brankovina holds a raspberry festival in June. Apart from their superlative flavor, raspberries possess antioxidant qualities and are used in massage treatments in the Serbian village of Borac.

—Laurie Werner

Villagers handpick some of the tastiest raspberries on Earth.
The Western Balkans

PRAYERS AND BLESSINGS

At night, seen from a distance, the dome of Sveti Sava Cathedral shines like a fragment of the moon, and it’s tempting to believe that the place of worship has been there forever. In fact, the church—named for the founder of the Serbian Orthodox Church—is the product of centuries of struggle to establish a national identity in the Balkans. As legend has it, when the Ottoman Turks burned the body of Saint Sava in Belgrade in an attempt to suppress Serbian resistance to their rule, “the people made an oath,” says Belgrade native Milan Prosen. “They swore to build a church so large that it would cover all the ground consecrated by the ashes of Saint Sava.”

Construction began in 1936 but stopped when the Germans invaded in 1941 and didn’t resume until after the fall of Communism. In 1989, the 3.6 million kilo/4,000-ton dome was finally put in place. The result is a stupendous work of religious architecture and an acoustic wonder. When you go to Saint Sava, be sure to stay for the music. Liturgical chant rises to the great central dome, a metaphor for the heavenly spheres, and showers back down in an echo of time-honored Eastern Orthodox tradition. You can feel the sound in your bones. —John Marks

Sveti Sava, known for brilliant acoustics, can hold some 10,000 people. Candles (above) lend a silent, timeless mood of reverence.

MACEDONIA

SPIRITUALLY SERENE, LAKESIDE

The monastery of Sveti Naum sits on the southeastern shore of Lake Ohrid, not far from the Albanian border. Established in 905 by Saint Naum of Ohrid, the medieval scholar who founded monasticism in the Balkans, the first monastery was superseded in the 16th century by a structure that has stood its ground ever since. With peaceful views over the lake and peacocks strutting around, the monastery feels like a magical parallel universe—and all the more so after the ticket seller hands over a fiery shot of the monastery’s homemade rakija (see page 27) with your ticket. Sveti Naum carefully safeguards its peace and quiet (fruit brandy notwithstanding). You can purchase trinkets outside of the monastery, but the monastery itself, funded in part by a hotel and restaurant on the grounds, is kept otherwise free of commercial incursions. —John Marks

Spend the night: Sveti Naum Monastery on Lake Ohrid has a hotel on the grounds.

HELLO, OLD MAN

In a nice example of upcycling, the Museum of the City of Skopje is housed in the city’s former railway station—a handsome piece of modernism. The clock over the main entrance is frozen at the precise moment in 1963 when a severe earthquake hit, destroying much of the city in its wake.

The museum’s permanent exhibition reflects Skopje from prehistoric times through the contemporary era. But nothing within these walls is a match for Adam of Macedonia, the country’s oldest artifact ever excavated. The small sculpture of Adam—seated, with a detailed spine, ribs, and navel—goes back some 6,000 years. —Alex Roberston Textor

Adam of Macedonia.
W
inemaking in the Balkans is an ancient tradition that is just beginning to re-emerge after years of political upheaval. Today, each of the Balkan countries makes wine, but regional, economic, and cultural differences account for variations in quality, which can range from rustic to ultrasophisticated.

While some wineries are not set up to receive visitors, others are eager to show off their wines and Balkan hospitality. International grape varieties are found everywhere, but each region also boasts wine made from unique indigenous grapes. Margaret Rand, award-winning co-author of the book *Grapes & Wines*, puts it this way: “It’s the indigenous grapes that will be most interesting in the future; the world already has plenty of Chardonnay. A nice glass of Blatina, anyone?”

- **Albania** has vineyards along the Vjosa River in the Permet district and around picturesque wine towns such as Berat and Gjirokastra. Boukas is a winery known for its Cabernet-Merlot blends and native Shesh. Some production at family-run Cobo takes place in traditional *kallas* (stone houses).

- **Bosnia and Herzegovina**’s wine country is centered in its southwest, where the climate is often compared to California’s. Obiteljiski Podrum Brkic is one of the principal estates along the wine route. Seek out Zilavka and Blatina grape varieties.

- **Kosovo** has a wealth of grape varieties, including the widely grown Prokupac, followed by Gamay and Smederevka. Wineries to check out include Muja, Old Cellar, and StoneCastle.

- **Macedonia** has 38 wineries. Tikves is the largest winery in the Balkans, producing 24 types of wine that range from bone dry to marvelously sweet. Vranec, the most important Macedonian grape, yields dark red, fruity table wines with full body and complex aromas. Worthy Macedonian estates include Bovin, Popov, Popova Kula, Skovin, Grkow, Tristo, Pivka, and Chateau Kamnik.

- **Montenegro** is a tiny country producing a handful of fine wines, mostly in the southern and coastal regions. Chardonnay and Cabernet can be exceptional, and high-quality dry white wines are being made from Vranac grapes. Plantaze, Alexandrovic, and Kovacevic are among the region’s most impressive wineries.

- **Serbia** has a grape-growing history that dates to Roman times. One of the country’s oldest and most famous vineyard regions is Zupa, 129 kilometers/80 miles south of Belgrade. Prokupac is Serbia’s chief red grape; Tamjanika (a Muscat variety), a popular white. —Marguerite Thomas

**Balkans Roundup**

**VINES, GRAPES, AND WINES**

In Albania’s Vjosa Valley, white wine grapes cross the Vjosa River with some old-fashioned help. Right: A retired electrician, Mehmeti Eqerem (top) is a highly respected wine-barrel maker; grapes (bottom) thrive near Skopje.

**FAST FACT**

It’s an exciting time for Balkan wine. Vineyards are being replanted, wineries are undergoing much-needed modernization, and large state-owned facilities are becoming privately owned, entrepreneurial wineries competing for gold medals.

**In Albania’s Vjosa Valley, white wine grapes cross the Vjosa River with some old-fashioned help. Right: A retired electrician, Mehmeti Eqerem (top) is a highly respected wine-barrel maker; grapes (bottom) thrive near Skopje.**

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ALBANIA

BIG, RARE BIRDS IN QUIET PLACES

The gray-white Dalmatian pelican, native to southeastern Europe, is the least common of the eight species of pelicans. What’s more, the region’s largest bird has a grand wingspan of 3 meters/10 feet and can weigh up to 15 kilograms/33 pounds. They tend to settle in isolated islets rich with fish. But with the decrease in wetland areas due to hunting, farming, industrialization, and pollution has come a decrease in the Dalmatian pelican population. The species is now endangered. The bird still breeds, though, in the Karavasta Lagoon in Divjake National Park, on the central Adriatic coast—the largest wetland area in Albania and an important site for wintering waterbirds. The lagoon plays host to a wide range of wildlife, including 228 bird species, 25 mammal species, and 29 amphibian species. Because of Karavasta Lagoon’s rich natural diversity, international organizations have stepped in to help protect the ecosystem, resulting in a reverse in the trend of faunal decline, pelicans included. —Laurie Werner

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

IN THE OTTOMAN STYLE

No visit to Sarajevo is complete without some time spent at the Gazi Husrev Beg mosque, one of the best examples of 16th-century Ottoman architecture in the region. The complex once sprawled over a city block and included a mosque, school, soup kitchen, hospice, library, inn, public baths, and tombs—notably Gazi Husrev Beg’s final resting place.

Beg (1480-1541), the first Ottoman governor of Bosnian descent (his father was Bosnian; his mother a Turkish princess), had a keen interest in urban development. His architectural patronage left Sarajevo a richer spot.

With fires, conflict, and changing times, some of the original structures are closed, but the well-preserved mosque (with its handsome dome, minaret, and clock tower) remains open to visitors. It is constructed of stone, but the interior feels warm as worshippers and visitors walk over the thick carpets and gaze at the intricate walls. Equally peaceful are the grounds, with baths, tombs, and a fountain covered by a carved wooden canopy. Upon entering, note the sign: no cycling, smoking, guns, talking on mobile phones. Within the mosque, shoes are removed, and women must cover their heads. —Kristina Stefanova
Belgrade's cobblestone Skadarska Street is where the spirit of the old city lives. At the turn of the last century, this bohemian quarter was home to many of Serbia's writers, musicians, and artists. Creative types still gather here. The well-preserved main thoroughfare is dotted with some of Belgrade's oldest restaurants and bars, where the pace is set by live music and poetry. This is a good part of town for tasting kacamak (a polenta dish). The area's vibrancy is expressed at the galleries, open-air market, and on street corners, where musicians croon 19th-century ballads. Says one local, “You should only give money to them if they make you cry.”

Hip today, gone tomorrow? Not in Belgrade. In fact, broad, pedestrians-only Knez Mihailova Street has been the place to see and be seen since 1870. Belgrade’s most prominent families moved into the area, and in 1938 it became home to the city’s first skyscraper. Today, its wide array of brand-name shops and select boutiques attracts fashion-conscious locals and travelers who, after shopping, find relaxation at the street’s cafés. In summer, these places tend to sprawl onto the pavement, with tables covered by colorful umbrellas. On the menu: Serbian snacks, modern desserts, and seemingly endless coffee concoctions. —Kristina Stefanova

Nighttime!

Heading to Belgrade? Rest up before you show up. The Serbian capital is an energetic and wallet-friendly 24-hour metropolis. Start with cocktails at Pastis (Strahinjica Bana 52b), one of many Slavic-sleek cafés along hip Strahinjica Bana Street. Rustic 19th-century restaurants like Dva Jelena (Skadarska 32) grill up classic pleskavica (see page 27). Or go modern at Zaplet (Kajmakcalanska 2); Serbian artists help with decor; chefs with “unrelenting openness to anything new”—in the words of owner Vladimir Melentijevic—turn out such dishes as spicy pork belly with parsnip purée. Finally, digest by dancing at Black Panthers (Ada Ciganlija Island) or the funky brick-lined Plastic (Takovska 34). —Seth Sherwood
In Kosovo’s Sara Mountain National Park, the Brezovica ski resort hosts international championships as well as skiers keen to enjoy the excellent conditions.

For skiers, the Dinaric Alps—the long ridge of snowcapped mountains that runs down the eastern edge of the Balkan Peninsula—and, farther inland, the mountains of the Durmitor Range (Montenegro) and Kopaonik (Serbia) are gaining in popularity. Value-conscious winter-sports enthusiasts, including cross-country skiers and snowboarders, are flocking to the slopes.

In 1984, long before war broke out, athletes gathered from around the globe to compete in the XIV Winter Olympics in Sarajevo. Today, Mount Bjelasnica, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, is still a snow lover’s choice. Due to a happy climactic coincidence—the mountain sits between Mediterranean and Continental air systems—the slopes almost always have fresh powder between November and April.

Winter-sports enthusiasts have been coming to the Durmitor Range (in one of Montenegro’s five national parks) for at least a century, and the little town of Zabljak, Montenegro (population 4,500), is the gateway—a ski village filled with hotels, small restaurants (best to make a reservation), and rental places. Zabljak—literally the high point of the Balkans—is also known for the 18 glacial lakes that surround it (Black Lake is the largest of the bunch). Some years you can even hit the very highest slopes in summer.

Kopaonik may be the least well-known of the major Balkan ski destinations, which helps explain its status as least expensive. Located in the south of Serbia, the resort itself is a travel highlight, an Alpine village that, in part, resembles a medieval Serbian monastery. —John Marks

**FAST FACT**

People native to the rugged, forested Dinaric Alps are acknowledged to be the tallest in Europe. For adult males, the average height is 185.6 centimeters/6 feet, 1 inch; the average for adult females is 171 centimeters/5 feet, 7.3 inches.
Women as well as men take religious vows at Gracanica. Inside the monastery are frescoes that are stunning in their colorful simplicity.

Surrounded by fields of grazing sheep and rustling woods, the Gracanica monastery seems too sleepy to bear the weight of so much history, but enter the dark interior and you grasp instantly the epic nature of the place. Completed in 1321, just six decades before the battle of Kosovo Polje that led to Ottoman dominance, it has been repeatedly scorched by war. For a different feel, head west to Decani monastery, one of the largest medieval Orthodox places of worship in the region. About five kilometers/three miles from Pristina, Decani was built around the same time as Gracanica, by King Stefan Decanski, who is buried here. The high cathedral walls gleam with 14th-century frescoes—masterpieces of the late Byzantine style. If Gracanica broods with bloody memory, Decani makes the spirit soar. —John Marks

Women as well as men take religious vows at Gracanica. Inside the monastery are frescoes that are stunning in their colorful simplicity.
In the far western corner of Kosovo, beyond the town of Peja (or Pec, as it is known to Serbs), a narrow road enters one of the most spectacular areas in the Balkans. Welcome to the Rugova Gorge, where granite walls vault 609 meters/2,000 feet above the Drini River. The road takes startling hairpin turns and plunges into tunnels to reemerge beneath vistas of soaring peaks and alluring caves. Rock climbers will be thrilled at the challenge of these immense rock faces, but they should bring their own gear. The ropes left dangling down to the road aren’t to be trusted. For less technical adventures, continue up the road to the villages of Bogaj and Stankaj, the best launching points for hikes in these mountains.

—John Marks

In Rugova Gorge, a rugged place of soaring granite, tunnels are engineered for passage. In contrast to the stone are delicate wildflowers.

DINE ON TRADITION

From the moment you enter Tradita G&F, a rustic restaurant in the mountain town of Shkoder, you’re immersed in the culture and warmth of Albania. Gjon Dukgjaja, the jovial owner, greets everyone with a broad smile and then proudly shows off his museum-worthy collections of traditional costumes and artifacts. Musicians play, dancers (including some diners) perform the local steps. And at one end of the stone room, a fire roars, roasting the most succulent lamb you’ll ever taste.

Dinner is a feast of the vibrant flavors of the countryside, presented by formally dressed waiters (white shirts, dark pants, red cummerbunds), course after course. All ingredients are local; the dishes, seasonal. A salad of lettuce, cabbage, and tomato bursts with flavor. Roasted farmer’s cheese in bubbling olive oil arrives melting, ready to be scooped up and spread on crusty bread. Meats and potatoes follow. To finish it off: pastry with almonds and honey along with glasses of fruit brandy, rakija. Fortunately, the restaurant has a small hotel attached.

—Laurie Werner

Tradita’s authentic southeastern Albanian fare: white bean salad and ripe tomatoes with basil, for starters.
The spiritual realm has helped the people of the Balkans retain their traditions and identities as borders, place names, and governments have changed through the years.

In and around Sarajevo, locals tell the tale of the Goat Bridge, one of many that cross the Miljacka River. In one version of the story, an old shepherd was tending his goats when one started to eagerly dig at the ground. Indeed, the shepherd discovered that the animal had unearthed sacks of gold. Lots of them. The shepherd invested the bounty in the construction of a bridge, which served as the main crossing for travelers on their way to Istanbul. (In fact, the bridge was built by the Ottomans in the 16th century.)

Near the Macedonian village of Kratovo stand 120 stone pillars, referred to in local folklore as the kuklica, or “dolls.”

One story says the pillars are wedding guests cursed by a forsaken bride and turned into rock. Others claim they are frozen soldiers, caught crossing a clearing during winter. Locals believe a new doll appears every few years. (Science says the dolls are the result of erosion.)

A 1981 event put the small city of Medjugorje, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, on the map for Roman Catholics. Here, the story goes, six teenagers saw the Virgin Mary. A shrine was built to commemorate the sighting. Some 15 million people have visited the site since the first appearance of the Virgin. It is said that she still appears to some members of the original group, now grown up.

—Kristina Stefanova

Off the beaten track in eastern Serbia, Felix Romuliana is one of the best preserved Roman settlements on Earth. Built in the third century in honor of an emperor’s mother, the site’s palace included more than 36 towers that stood over 20 meters/65 feet high and a sophisticated bath complex that featured a precursor to the modern sauna. Impressive mosaics and sculptures creatively depicted significant mortals and immortals of the day.

Especially noteworthy here are the floor mosaics, mostly geometric in their patterns but with a central mosaic that creates an impression of a third dimension—a very rare design for the period.

Now a UNESCO World Heritage site, Felix Romuliana is still a big part of locals’ lives, especially masons who work to conserve and restore it.

“These ruins are the pride of the local population. Folks love to bring their guests here to show them their cultural heritage,” says archaeologist Bora Dimitrijevic. And the hot springs once enjoyed by Roman emperors are now open to the public.

—Kristina Stefanova

Impressive Felix Romuliana has seen more than 17 centuries of clouds, sun, wind, and rain.

Clockwise from top left: Sarajevo’s Goat Bridge was built in the 1500s. Pilgrims make their way up Apparition Hill, near Medjugorje. The “stone dolls” stand in rural Macedonia.
**Macedonia**

**Golden Passage: Burial Rituals B.C.**

Unearthed eight years ago at the oldest burial site at the Tsar Samuil fortress, a golden mask is shedding light on how ancient princelings buried their warriors. According to experts, the fifth century B.C. mask (estimated worth, 18 million euros), would have been placed on the face of a dead warrior as a way to communicate with him in the afterlife. The mask is the fifth of its kind found in the Ohrid area. “It is thrilling to know that the golden mask myth is an absolute scientific fact,” says Pasko Kuzman, the archaeologist who discovered the fifth mask. It was found with a golden glove, ring, and funeral items. Two golden masks are on display at Belgrade’s National Museum; two others can be seen at the archaeological museum in Sofia, Bulgaria. —Kristina Stefanova

**Kosovo**

**Power Lunch**

Pishat (Rr. Qamil Hoxha I) sits like a half-secret on a side street off pedestrians-only Nene Tereza Boulevard. Inside, local officials, aid workers, and businesspeople hatch deals over tables crowded with clay pots filled with tuve elbasani (yogurt, eggs, meat) and, left, savory flija (pastry). Pishatt is Pristina’s tastiest spot for local drama. —Alex Robertson Textor

**Albania**

**Where Civilizations Left Their Marks**

The Roman poet Virgil wrote of ancient Buthrotum [Butrint], “I saw before me Troy in miniature,” and his words conjure the sense of concentrated majesty in one of the most remarkable, complex archaeological sites in the world. Amid the ruins of Butrint, at the head of the Straits of Corfu, remain compelling whispers of civilizations that rose and fell over a span of some 2,500 years. “Butrint is almost a gateway to the beyond,” says Oliver Gilkes, an archaeologist who has worked on the site. Butrint began as an Epirot city. Later, as was the case with numerous settlements, it was Hellenized. Farther on, Byzantine Christians created one of the most elaborate baptistries of the ancient world. On the floor of the baptistery unfolds a tale of salvation, with mosaic animals. Here, the faith of a lost world truly comes alive. —John Marks

**Bosnia and Herzegovina**

**Peace and Harmony**

Strolling among artfully crafted, centuries-old headstones—stecci—can be a wistful experience. The graveyard of Radimija brings together peoples of various beliefs and social classes—for eternity. It’s a peaceful place, nice for wandering and pondering the charmingly decorated 15th- and 16th-century stones and the lives of the people who lived so long ago. —John Marks
Flanked by green mountains, the Danube River hits a scenic crescendo at Iron Gate gorge.

The Danube in Austria may be better known, but for those who’ve traveled every mile of the river, nothing compares to the Iron Gate, the 83-mile stretch between Romania and Serbia. “It’s practically untouched,” says Nancy Paredes, a cruise director for Avalon Waterways. Travelers don’t see signs of tourism anywhere—just narrow gorges and tall mountains, along with the remains of castles and Roman bridges. Plus you go through two locks, the only double lock on the Danube. To get the full effect of the waterway’s spectacle, sail upstream, entering the water at Lock 2, then work your way through the Lower Kazan and Great Kazan gorges. Miles later you reach a scenic highpoint, with Trojan’s Tablet carved into the rock face and Golubac Castle, a well-preserved 14th-century fortress atop the Iron Gate gorge. —Laurie Werner
The Western Balkans

TASTES OF THE NATIONS

Balkans Roundup

FRUIT BRANDY: SIP, DON’T GULP

For those not familiar with moonshine, fire water, or grappa, a sniff of rakija—the region’s fruit brandy—might well bring to mind rubbing alcohol. Get over it. When in the Balkans, sip as the locals do: before dinner, over salads and mezes, or whenever. “You feel a sense of closeness when you drink rakija with friends,” says Emil Rashkov, a soccer coach living in Skopje, Macedonia. Some types of rakija are kept in oak or mulberry barrels for extra aroma and color. A special variety, served at weddings and outdoor winter festivals, is greena or toplarakija, heated and sweetened with honey, sugar, and spices—like mulled wine.

—Kristina Stefanova

LAMB? GREAT CHOICE

A down-home eat fest is in store a few miles from the Greek border at Restaurant Javor, on the outskirts of the city of Gevgelija, Macedonia. You’ll enter a smoke-filled (courtesy of grilling meat, not burning tobacco) dining lodge packed with locals of all ages.

A salad course materializes in stages: plates of lettuce and cabbage, a bowl of stewed peppers, and a glass of green onions—along with bread that’s been toasted on the grill. Next, the waiter will tick off a choice of grilled meats, one by one.

Try the incredibly tender lamb, carved nimbly at the table. When it arrives, there will be silence. One taste and you will understand the reverence.

—Alex Robertson Textor

FAST FACT

Usually baked though sometimes fried, burek is a phyllo pastry beloved in this part of the world. Enjoyed at breakfast or as a snack, its fillings reflect location. Most popular is a feta-type cheese; other possibilities include cheese and spinach, meat, apple, sour cherries, mushrooms, and “pizza,” the most modern choice. The small restaurants that make and serve this centuries-old fast food are called buregdzinica. Get close to one and the aroma will draw you right in.

THE BALKAN BURGER

In the former Yugoslavia, whatever the cultural differences, a love of grilled meat unites the peoples of the region. Folks there are serious about barbecue, and we’re not just talking kebabs. An important hallmark of the cuisine is pljeskavica, a patty usually made with ground lamb, veal, beef, and, except in Muslim areas, pork. Served with or without bread, it can be stuffed with kajmak cheese or topped with ajvar (see opposite page).

The Serbian city of Leskovac claims to be the spiritual homeland of that oversize patty, and every summer it celebrates the carnivorous heritage with a Grill Specialties Festival. Hundreds of thousands of people attend, eating an estimated 36,287 kilograms/40 tons of meat. A typical star attraction? A 46-kilogram/105-pound pljeskavica. The Big Mac made it to Serbia in the 1990s, but it’s never upstaged the Balkan burger. —John Marks

AJVAR: RELISH THIS!

Just when the red peppers are at their sweetest, family members from near and far gather to make ajvar. Peppers, eggplants, chilies, and garlic are harvested, washed, roasted, peeled, pureed with olive oil, and then left to slow cook for several hours. “It’s a lot of work, very slow, with many breaks and a good amount of time spent sitting around a table, mostly drinking,” says Zoe Konovalov, who recently made his very first batch with a local family.

“It’s also a sensually rich experience—the warm colors of the ripe vegetables, peeling them carefully, smelling the ajvar as it cooks—and of course, tasting the end product,” says Konovalov.

No time? No stove? Ajvar—eaten on its own, used as a condiment, spread on bread—is a staple of Balkan cuisine. You can find it in food shops and restaurants all over. —Kristina Stefanova

Red peppers—the main ingredient in ajvar (below)—delight a child at the market in Ohrid, Macedonia.

Supersize, the Balkans way.
KOSOVO

CAPITAL GOOD TIMES

S
ome chalk it up to the renowned Kosovar spirit of hospitality, but it may just be that Pristina, unlike so many cities in the rest of Europe, seems to have a young-crowd vitality. One way or another, the bars and nightclubs in Kosovo’s capital have a reputation for staying open—and lively—until dawn.

Early in the evening, you might want to drop into the friendly, popular Strip Depot (Rr. Rexhep Luci 6/1) for a drink. More cocktail lounge than club, it’s not what it sounds like. You’re apt to see intellectuals having a heated discussion here rather than anything resembling a seductive pole dance. Whether for jazz lovers or club dancers, Pristina is becoming one of the continent’s hot spots. —Kristina Stefanova

TROUT ON THE FARM

G
one are the days when Tito’s photo hung on a drab restaurant wall at the Trofta Fish Farm in Istog. These days, international flags fly over several acres of one of the most successful businesses in the Balkans. The star attraction is the trout. Launched in 1977 as an example of a workers’ paradise, the fish farm and motel/restaurant became a destination for a generation of Yugoslavs. Now visitors from around the world are treated to exquisite indoor and outdoor dining. Tables sit on bridges, overlooking streams where the “catch of the day” glistens in the current. Order it fried with chips, sautéed in butter, or grilled with olive oil and you will understand why the trout at Istog transcends politics. —John Marks

MONTENEGRO

SPIRITUALITY SET IN STONE

T
he holiest shrine in Montenegro, Ostrog Monastery was carved into a sheer mountain cliff in the 17th century. It sits at the end of a narrow, twisty road and reveals itself slowly to visitors. Come in the morning or late afternoon, when the light is best. Start with the Lower Monastery (with single-sex dorm rooms for overnight guests). Then head to the Holy Trinity Church, with its vivid frescoes. Deeper in is the main shrine, which pilgrims approach in bare feet. The humble Church of St. Stanko the Martyr is next. Finally, the Upper Monastery sits nestled in two large caves. Ostrog overlooks the Zeta Valley, home to some of the most skilled artists in the 12th to 15th centuries. The legacy of their craft traditions are reflected in Ostrog. —Kristina Stefanova
Kotor’s Old Town is a diminutive, cobbled confection brimming with right-now energy. It’s anchored by Sveti Tryphon Cathedral, a 12th-century haunt whose reliquary contains the remains of its patron saint. Kotor rocks with song and dance on summer evenings, not unlike Dubrovnik but looser and more dynamic. Recognizing its tourism potential, the Montenegrin government has poured money into infrastructure improvements since the country’s independence in 2006. Still, it’s the mountains above that give this place (often referred to as Europe’s southernmost fjord) its credentials as a stunner. So what if the bay is not a fjord but rather a ria (drowned river valley)? Kotor’s backdrop is majestic and rivals Norway’s most dramatic fjords. Hardy hikers will have one goal: to ascend to the bay’s famous fortification system, which is about a three-mile hike—spread out over 1,500 steps—from town. The walk features great intermediate vistas. Except for summer, there will be few fellow hikers sharing the path. Watch out, however, for the grazing goats. —Alex Robertson Textor

Accounting in part for Kotor’s magnetic charm (top): No vehicular traffic is allowed in the city’s medieval center.
In a relatively dry landscape, about halfway between the Adriatic Sea and the city of Sarajevo, Mostar feels like an oasis. Cradled by high limestone banks, the Neretva River flows in sparkling turquoise and sapphire, and on a hot summer day, there’s nothing like a swim in those cool waters, followed by a walk on the eastern bank through the remnant of an ancient Ottoman town, where a cluster of old mosques looms over narrow streets and bright cafés compete for customers. This part of town was almost destroyed by war, and it’s a singular pleasure to watch it come back to life. Wide boulevards run between rows of plane trees, and a necklace of tempting open-air eateries runs down the long slopes leading to the river. Don’t miss the squid risotto, a testament to the proximity of the Adriatic. Holding your glass of local red or white, listening to the rush of the river, you can catch a glimpse of the city’s famous bridge and be forgiven for thinking that Mostar, tucked away in its valley, is a Balkan Shangri-La.

Bridges matter in the Balkans, and none more than the 427-year-old Ottoman bridge over the Neretva River. It is known to locals as the Stari, short for Stari Most, “the old bridge.” For centuries, the people of Mostar gathered on the 24-meter/78-foot arch to have a smoke and a chat. Inspired to literal flights of fancy, the young men held diving competitions, plunging into the waters below. Then, in the 1990s, war broke out among the peoples of Mostar, and the bridge became a target, surviving countless assaults until it was destroyed in 1993 by artillery and heavy shelling. After hostilities ceased, the international community rebuilt the Stari, bringing in artisans and engineers from Turkey and even using rock from the original quarry. The new version can never replace the old, but at night the copy makes for a haunting sense of continuity. For a glimpse of another span, check out the Kriva Cuprija—the little crooked bridge, built around the same time as the 16th-century Stari (and also rebuilt), just a few hundred feet up the western bank, spanning Rabobolja Creek. —John Marks
**MUSICAL NOTES**

**TRUMPET FESTIVAL: MORE THAN JUST HORNS**

Serbia’s biggest annual party, the Guca Trumpet Festival routinely draws revelers by the tens of thousands—even hundreds of thousands, according to some estimates—for days of rollicking music from veteran brass ensembles, military bands, wedding entertainers, and virtuoso solo trumpeters who dream of becoming the next Miles Davis. (The famous jazz master, who once attended the trumpet festival, is reported to have remarked during a concert, “I didn’t know you could play a trumpet like that.”)

But equal to the horn-blowing competitions is simply the effusive all-day, all-night carnival atmosphere, which is fueled by mounds of grilled Serbian meats, cases of strong Serbian rakija (fruit brandy; see page 27), and gallons of Serbian pivo (beer). It all takes place in the western Dragacevo region. Bring a tent to camp out. —Seth Sherwood

**SOULFUL SOUNDS**

The Balkans music known as sevdalinka is one of the saddest and most stirring in the world. Its name comes from the word sevdah, which can refer to a lover’s caress. “Sevdah started as wartime songs sung by boys on the frontlines about girls, and by girls waiting at home,” says Emir Gacanovic, manager of the Sevdah Art House in Sarajevo.

The passionate tales of yearning and desire—and the music itself—combine ancient strains of Turkish love songs, Gypsy strings and rhythm, a hint of Italian crooning, and a touch of exuberant Serbian horn.

The best place to hear sevdalinka is Sarajevo, a city known for its eclecticism, but every year the Bosnian city of Tuzla holds a festival devoted to the hauntingly memorable music. Acts from around the region play on a series of stages, while panels of musicologists and sociologists discuss the finer points of the tradition.

Note: Tuzla is known for its hip-hop music, too, so don’t be surprised if a sevdalinka player suddenly breaks into a rhythmic rap number. —John Marks

**FOLK CAPITAL IN THE SPOTLIGHT**

Novelist Ismail Kadare wrote of his childhood in Gjirokastra, “Everything was...old and made of stone,” covered with “gray slates like gigantic scales.” The image evokes a living creature, and it fits. Gjirokastra, named a World Heritage site in 2005 for its perfectly preserved Ottoman urban center, bustles with culturally vibrant energy.

One recent visitor was delighted to hear Balkan a capella in the streets. “People were practicing polyphonic [contrapuntal] singing,” says Gwen Al Sawi, “and the following evening there was folk dancing.” Gjirokastra is arguably the folk culture capital of the Balkans. Every five years, the city hosts a National Folk Festival with hundreds of performers from around the region, though you can be treated to great music and dance any weekend. After the show, head for the restaurant on the ramparts of the Kalaja fortress for a great view, a drink, and a bite to eat. —John Marks
Montenegro

Seafood: From Water to Plate

I
taly, just across the Adriatic from Montenegro, exerts a delightfully major influence on the cuisine, especially the seafood. Typical are prstaci, mollusks cooked in a broth of garlic, white wine, and parsley; squid sautéed with butter and garlic; and the local tuna, mussels, and prawns also simply prepared.

Inland, carp from Lake Skadar is smoked and used in a dish with the unfortunate name krap. The lake fish bleak is also smoked—and dried—for the dish ukljeva.

Back at the water’s edge, scattered along the coastline are postcard-worthy villages with seafood restaurants. Among the most beautiful: Herceg Novi, Kotor, and Perast, a UNESCO World Heritage site on the Bay of Kotor (see page 30). At the southern tip of the country, the town of Ulcinj and Ada Bojana (an island in the Bojana River) are particularly known for their seafood restaurants. From some of these spots, diners can watch their dinner being caught in a calimera, an arc-shaped contraption with a net that skims the water’s surface.

—Laurie Werner

Sea pleasures, clockwise from top left: Squid grilled with parsley and lemon, a mix of fresh fish and shellfish, the pretty fishing center of Kotor Bay, and catch of the day.

Albania

Stones of the Distant Past

A
bout 8 kilometers/5 miles from the southwestern town of Fier, a center of Albania’s oil and chemical industries, are the vestiges of the grand city of Apollonia. Founded, according to ancient writers, by Greeks from Corinth and Corfu in 588 B.C., it later became a Roman city, siding with Julius Caesar in the civil war with Pompey. It flourished until the third century A.D., when an earthquake changed the path of the Vjosa River. The harbor dried up and the city declined.

By the 13th century, after the city’s swampland had expanded, resulting in outbreaks of malaria, the city’s residents had moved elsewhere. Over time, movements in the earth buried the city. Austrian archaeologists began to excavate during World War I, a process that continues today; it is believed that most of the city is still deep below Apollonia’s hills.

Among the most striking remains are the six columns and facade of the Monument of Agonothetes (once part of the city’s administrative center), from the second century A.D., and the Odeon, a 300-seat theater where the Roman Emperor Augustus studied in his younger days (today, it is occasionally the setting for concerts). The 13th-century Monastery of St. Mary keeps the past protected, housing statues and other artifacts discovered in the process of excavation.

Excavations at the site of Apollonia (top) began in the early 20th century; much still remains buried.

—Kristina Stefanova

Excavations at the site of Apollonia (top) began in the early 20th century; much still remains buried.
Talk about an embarrassment of riches. There are 32 national parks in the six countries featured here, so whether you’re looking for a pocket of some of the continent’s last primeval forest, mountain-biking trails through limestone karst, or a hike in a countryside paradise still teeming with wildlife, you won’t be disappointed. Albania offers perhaps the largest stretch of pristine national parkland for hikers. Lots of it is quite wild. Feeling adventurous? Hire a guide and head to **Llogara Pass**, which has overnight accommodations. In Bosnia and Herzegovina’s **Sutjeska National Park**, ancient stands of black pine and beech tower high above unspoiled rivers in one of the continent’s last ancient forests. **Sara Mountain National Park** in Kosovo is remote—one of the only places in Europe where wildlife lovers might actually see a bear or a wolf. **Biogradska Gora National Park** in Montenegro is a magnet for mountaineers eager to test their skills on the sheer rock faces of Mount Bjelasica. At **Mavrovo National Park** in Macedonia, mountain bikers can take a challenging 34-kilometer/21-mile spin around Mavrovo Lake or a ride up into the dairy-farm-dotted hills. **Fruska Gora National Park** in Serbia beckons visitors to its Orthodox monasteries. Wander the hills, and you’ll think you’re in a century long, long gone.

—John Marks
Look for the heart of modern Serbian history, and you’ll find Black George Petrovic—Karadjordje to Serbs—who staged a rebellion against the Ottoman Turks in 1804 and launched his people on the road to nationhood. Two hundred years later, a Karadjordje, Crown Prince Alexander, still sits at the head of the Serbian royal family. His forebears lie in state 80 kilometers/50 miles south of Belgrade in the Royal Mausoleum of the Saint George Church in Oplenac. In the midst of pine trees and gardens, five generations rest in a white marble church that is more national shrine than place of worship, though the two are often one and the same in Serbia. Two of the family, Black George himself and King Peter I, lie in tombs in the church proper. The remaining 19 can be found in the mausoleum below. The 1,497-kilo/3,300-pound chandelier hanging from the central dome commemorates the battle at the Field of Blackbirds in 1389, the beginning of Ottoman rule. A series of brilliantly colored mosaics depicts Bible scenes copied from medieval Serbian monasteries. —John Marks

The mausoleum at Oplenac (top) is venerated throughout Serbia for its historic importance and rich mosaics.

**ROYALTY, IN THE END**

Drinking coffee is as much art as pastime here. Just ask the locals. Its preparation, as they will earnestly tell you, requires just the right touch of grace and skill. Of course, it’s important to get the name right. Serbs and Montenegrins call the beverage kafit. Croats prefer kava, and Bosnians go with the long drawl of kahva. Next, you need the right implement. That’s the dzezva, a metal pot with a long, thin handle on one end, a spout on the other. The grounds go in the pot, boiling water is poured over them, and then both are boiled. Once the grounds are skimmed off the top, the coffee is ready to be served, a strong, thick brew in a small cup, neither as light as espresso nor as muddy as Turkish. Bosnians don’t generally put sugar in the cup. They either dunk a sugar cube and eat it or put the cube between their teeth and drink the coffee through it. A piece of Turkish delight and lots of conversation typically accompany the hot brew. For an authentic experience, go to the markets of Bascarsija in Sarajevo, where locals take pride in their café-hopping abilities. But whatever you do, don’t sip and run. —John Marks

A crossroads between east and west, Sarajevo (top) boasts a sophisticated coffee tradition. In the old Turkish quarter: a coffee vessel (left) and folks relaxing over coffee (right).

It takes one look to understand why Macedonians refer to the city of Ohrid as the jewel in their crown. Add in the lake of the same name and you have a surf-and-turf World Heritage site. Inhabited since Neolithic times, this area has more than 200 churches, holy sites, and museums.

Another draw? The local fare, including “by far the best fish soup I ever tasted,” says Skopje native Martin Nikolovski, who was in a rowboat on Ohrid when he proposed to his girlfriend.

Summer festivals attract performers from all over the world. Year-round, senses are engaged in varied ways: Stroll a 2,000-year-old Greek amphitheater, imagine life during the Middle Ages as you walk the grounds of the Tsar Samuil fortress, marvel at the craftsmanship at the Icon gallery of Ohrid. And, by all means, sift through antiques, rugs, wood carvings, Lake Ohrid “pearls” (made from fish scales), and paintings at the bazaar.

Wind up your visit at St. Sofia, one of Macedonia’s most important monuments; through its storied history it has served as mosque, warehouse, and cathedral. The impressively restored interior features frescoes from the 11th, 12th, and 13th centuries—some of the most significant achievements in Byzantine painting. —Kristina Stefanova

**OTTOMAN LEGACIES**

Off the beaten path, Prizren’s lush greenery, burbling river, and old stone mosque conjure up the Ottoman past like no other city on the Balkan peninsula. The Turks left this region about a century ago, but on the streets along the Lumbardh River, their culture lives on. Start with the Sinan Pasha Mosque, looming over a 15th-century stone bridge. Richly painted inside, the Sinan Pasha has been restored to some of its former glory. Stop for coffee, drinks, or a bite at a Shadervan Square café.

Walk into the Serbian neighborhood behind the Sinan Pasha, further still into the past. The ruins of the 14th-century St. Saviour Church and the medieval/Ottoman Kalaja Fortress are atmospheric reminders of centuries gone by. Finally, don’t miss the Orthodox Cathedral Church of the Holy Virgin of Leviska, on the other side of the river. A World Heritage site built in the 12th to 14th centuries, it brims with fresco masterpieces. Their survival over time is reason enough to make the trip to Prizren. —Kristina Stefanova

**SWEET DREAMS**

This corner of Kosovo boasts a rich and ancient heritage, but how to preserve and protect it when there’s little money and even less experience in the realm of sustainability? One answer lies in the village of Dranoc, where a fledgling bed-and-breakfast business functions as the first line of defense for the kulla, a series of centuries-old stone buildings. Kulla literally means tower, and these places were actually fortified dwellings, with windows high up for surveying the terrain. Some 80 percent were destroyed in the Kosovo War, but those in Dranoc have survived and are thriving (in a gentle turn of history) as places for visitors to find peace and quiet. —John Marks
SERBIA

CITY LIGHTS: SMALL, CULTURED, SOPHISTICATED

Most of Serbia looks east to Russia or south to Turkey for its cultural influences, but go to Novi Sad and you breathe the air of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, emphasis on Hungarian. The compact city sits on the banks of the Danube as the river winds its way south from Budapest to Belgrade.

Arrive by water. The city gets your attention as the fortress of Petrovaradin looms into view. Eighty-eight years in the making, the fortress fended off Turkish onslaughts for centuries, but don’t let this famous sight mislead you about the spirit of the place. Novi Sad is one of the most comfortable and easygoing cities on the Balkan peninsula.

Stroll the Beogradski Kej along the Danube, stopping for hot chocolate or a piece of sour cherry pie—a local favorite—and you’ll get the idea. In summer, head to a beach along the river or lose yourself in the art nouveau streets of the town center.

The Novi Sad Synagogue, in particular, is a masterpiece of Austro-Hungarian times. “It shows the power and prestige of the Jews when they were a major force in this very sophisticated Central European city,” says Edward Serotta, a photographer, filmmaker, and historian who has traveled the region extensively. —John Marks

With fun, cozy cafés such as Alla Lanterna, pedestrians-only shop-and-stroll zones in the Old Town, and Danube River location, Novi Sad rewards a visit. It’s Serbia’s second largest city (after Belgrade).

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

GRACE AND CHARM

British writer Rebecca West once called Jajce a town of “extravagant beauty,” and it’s easy to see why. It climbs to a great gray fortress overlooking ribbons of waterfalls that drop almost 21 meters/68 feet into pools below. Today, Jajce lives off the chemical manufacturing industry; in the early 15th century, though, the fortress was the heart of the medieval Bosnian kingdom. Little remains inside the battlements, but don’t miss a walk on the walls. Soak in the views and you’ll see why the place has been inhabited since—at least—the dawn of recorded history. It’s gorgeous and defensible. A must-see Mithraic temple testifies to the antiquity of the place. Millennia later, Marshal Tito founded the Yugoslav state here, and you can visit the catacombs where he hid from the invading Nazis. —John Marks
This corner of the world rewards the traveler in many ways. From treasures of the past to fine food and wine, pleasures await in six countries whose total size is less than half that of Spain. Herewith, some details and sources so you can find out more.

**ALBANIA**

**COUNTRY STATS**
- Capital: Tirana
- Population: 3,639,453
- Area: 28,748 square kilometers/11,100 square miles
- Highest point: Mount Korabit, 2,764 meters/9,068 feet
- Currency: the lek

**ONLINE RESOURCES**
- National Tourist Organization of Albania: www.albanianatourism.com
- Outdoor Albania: www.outdooralbania.com
- Albania Holidays: www.albania-holidays.com

**DID YOU KNOW?**
- In Albania, nodding the head up and down is a way to communicate “no.” Shaking the head from left to right signals “yes.”
- Mother Teresa is Albania’s most famous person. She was baptized in Skopje in 1910, when Albania was part of the Ottoman Empire.

**BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA**

**COUNTRY STATS**
- Capital: Sarajevo
- Population: 4,613,414
- Area: 51,197 square kilometers/19,767 square miles
- Highest point: Magic Mountain, 2,386 meters/7,828 feet
- Currency: the convertible marka

**ONLINE RESOURCES**
- Tourism Association of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina: www.bhtourism.ba/eng
- Exploring Bosnia and Herzegovina: www.exploringbosnia.com
- Green Visions: www.greenvisions.ba/治安

**DID YOU KNOW?**
- The city of Tuzla gets its name from “tuz,” Turkish for “salt.” Tuzla’s salt comes from saltwater springs.
- Residents of the village of Lukomir, high in the mountains, maintain one of Europe’s oldest lifestyles, wearing traditional clothing and opting to live without running water and electricity.

**MONTENEGRO**

**COUNTRY STATS**
- Capital: Podgorica
- Population: 672,180
- Area: 13,812 square kilometers/5,333 square miles
- Highest point: Babotov Kuk, 2,522 meters/8,274 feet
- Currency: the dinar

**ONLINE RESOURCES**
- National Tourism Organization of Montenegro: www.montenegro-travel-guide.info
- Montenegro Adventures: www.montenegro-adventures.com

**DID YOU KNOW?**
- Half the population of Montenegro is under 35 years old.
- Montenegro’s Tara River Canyon is Europe’s longest and deepest.

**SERBIA**

**COUNTRY STATS**
- Capital: Belgrade
- Population: 7,379,339
- Area: 77,474 square kilometers/29,913 square miles
- Highest point: Midzor, 2,169 meters/7,116 feet
- Currency: the dinar

**ONLINE RESOURCES**
- National Tourism Organization of Serbia: www.serbia.travel
- Serbia Travel Guide: www.serbia-travel-guide.info

**DID YOU KNOW?**
- Belgrade is one of the oldest cities in Europe, first settled in the third century B.C. by the Celts.
- The Roman emperor Constantine the Great was born in Nis, Serbia, sometime after A.D. 280.

**KOSOVO**

**COUNTRY STATS**
- Capital: Pristina
- Population: 1,804,838
- Area: 10,887 square kilometers/4,203 square miles
- Highest point: Mount Gjeravica/Deravica, 2,764 meters/9,068 feet
- Currency: the euro

**ONLINE RESOURCES**
- Visit Kosovo: http://visitkosova.org/page=2,4
- Experience Kosovo Blog: http://experiencekosovo.wordpress.com

**DID YOU KNOW?**
- Kosovo, entirely surrounded by mountains, is about one-fourth the size of Switzerland.
- Loosely translated, the name Kosovë means “field of blackbirds.”

**Macedonia**

**COUNTRY STATS**
- Capital: Skopje
- Population: 2,066,718
- Area: 25,713 square kilometers/9,928 square miles
- Highest point: Golem Karab (Maja e Korabit), 2,386 meters/7,828 feet
- Currency: the denar

**ONLINE RESOURCES**
- Exploring Macedonia: www.exploringmacedonia.com
- Macedonia Timeless: www.macedonia-timeless.com

**DID YOU KNOW?**
- Half the population of Macedonia is under 35 years old.
- What’s all the buzz about? There are more than 80,000 beehives in Macedonia.

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Clockwise from left: In Montenegro, “A raft trip down the Tara River is a dreamlike spree,” says Richard Bangs, co-founder of Mountain Travel Sobek. In Tirana, Albania’s Skanderbeg Square is the place to be on a sunny day. Skopje, Macedonia’s National Art Gallery was originally Turkish baths. Opposite: Marshal Tito in Cyrillic on a Macedonian street sign.