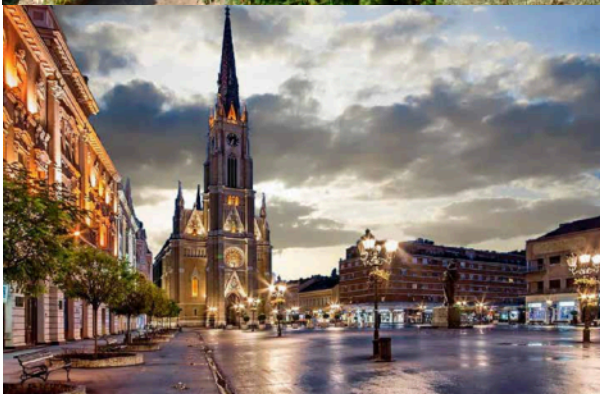


Blue Dot Travel





\$14,860 pp

Twin-share, excludes
international flights
Single supp \$1,800

THE BALKANS

MACEDONIA, ALBANIA, MONTENEGRO, SLOVENIA, SERBIA, KOSOVO, CROATIA, AND BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA

The Balkans is a sprawling peninsula which derives its name from the Turkish word meaning ‘a chain of wooded mountains’. Those mountains are the Balkans, a place where farming first reached Europe way back in the Neolithic era.

To the west is the Adriatic Sea, with the Mediterranean Sea to the south and the Black Sea to the east. It is perhaps easier to think of the Balkan States as “South-eastern Europe”. Wholly or partially on the peninsula, the region is made up of many fascinating countries. Our tour includes eight of them – Macedonia, Albania, Montenegro, Kosovo, Croatia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Slovenia and Serbia. Their polyglot nature has been forged in turn by the Greeks, Romans and Slavs, and even fell part of the Ottoman Empire in the 16th Century. A genuine cultural crossroads, the Balkan region was where Orthodoxy met Christianity, and Christianity met Islam.

While many of these names have been synonymous with political turmoil in modern history (Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in Sarajevo in 1914, sparking the First World War), the current reality is a collection of countries and cultures now relishing their own identities and enjoying a resurgence of interaction with the outside world. The region is rich in pre-history and history, with Neanderthal relics found in many areas, plus many towns still with dramatic medieval fortifications in place.

While typically characterised by peaceful mountainous terrain, many of these Balkan destinations feature pristine coastlines and seascapes, affording dazzling variety as you travel seamlessly from one country to another. Many of the places we visit are not yet popular with tourists, but this will change.

Are you ready for this journey of surprise and delight?



Wednesday 10th September DEPARTURE

Depart Australia for Belgrade—flights to be confirmed (most likely via Dubai).



Day 1, Thursday 11th September BELGRADE, SERBIA

Welcome to Serbia's capital city. We will be transferred to our hotel on arrival to check in. Belgrade has a fascinating

history - its seven centuries have been so eventful that it's difficult to single out the most important episodes. Enjoy an official welcome dinner. We stay at the Amsterdam Hotel (or similar) for two nights. **D**



Day 2, Friday 12th September BELGRADE

After breakfast, a city tour of Belgrade. Belgrade's landmark Kalemegdan Fortress, 50 metres high, shapes the skyline. It dates back to the 15th century. Today, it hosts many museums and sights. From the walls of the fortress opens a spectacular view of the confluence of the Sava and the Danube rivers. We'll stop by Parliament and the Royal Palace, St. Mark's Church, the Temple of St. Sava, the St. Michael Cathedral, Nikola

Tesla Museum, Serbian National Library, the National Theatre and the Republic Square. In the afternoon, the group will drive to Sumadija region and Topola and enjoy a wine tasting at Aleksandrovic Winery. **B/D**



Day 3, Saturday 13th September BELGRADE – MOKRA GORA – ZLATIBOR

Today, we'll head to Southern Serbia in Mokra Gora, situated on the northern slopes of the Zlatibor Mountains, home to the famous Sargan Eight Railway (295km – 4hrs). Enjoy views of the mountains, river streams, and old wooden houses. The route is from the base of Tara Mountain to a village called Šargan, riding on the "Čira", a one-of-a-kind tourist museum railway. Drvengrad is our next stop, where we'll see an enchanting ethno

village made by Emir Kusturica, a famous film director. In this oasis just beside Mokra Gora, observe the authentic log cabins and enjoy traditional Serbian cuisine with a view from the hilltop 'Mečavnik'. Overnight in Zlatibor, at the Iris Hotel (or similar) for 1 night. **B/D**





**Day 4, Sunday
14th
September
SARAJEVO**

Breakfast at the hotel before we depart for Sarajevo, a vibrant city in the heart of Bosnia and

Herzegovina, known for its rich history, architecture and culture. Please note the border procedures. Travellers are required to keep their passports handy. Upon arrival, we'll start with a visit to the 'Tunnel of Hope' to learn about the tragic recent Bosnian history. The museum houses a collection of weapons used during the siege. At the end of the 20th century, the country was engulfed in war, and its capital endured an exhausting 3-year siege. The city was cut off from the rest of Bosnia. To rescue the capital from this disaster, a tunnel was constructed to connect Sarajevo with the neighbourhoods controlled by Bosnia. In the afternoon, explore the old town, enjoying the mix of cultures that shape today's city. The Venetians, Byzantines, Ottomans, and Austrians all had a hand in creating the present image of Sarajevo. We'll stroll the Bascarsija district's famous bazaar and visit the place of the fatal assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, as well as the town hall and exterior of the "House of Defiance". We'll also visit Gazi Hysrev-Beg, the oldest preserved mosque in the country, the old Serbian Orthodox Church, the Synagogue, and the Catholic Cathedral. Check into the Colors Inn (or similar) for two nights, and prepare for dinner. **B/L/D**



**Day 5, Monday 15th
September
SARAJEVO – MOSTAR – SARAJEVO**

After breakfast, we will drive to the oriental-inspired city of Mostar. The city

centre is UNESCO World Heritage-listed. The landmark of the city is the famous Old Bridge over the Neretva. Its history dates back to the 16th century, but in 1993 it was destroyed during the Bosnian War. It was rebuilt, and the bridge now symbolises peaceful coexistence among different nations. Here, we'll also visit the old Turkish quarter of Kujundziluk, which has typical Turkish houses. Enjoy free time in the old bazaar, or stop for a traditional Bosnian coffee before we drive back to Sarajevo (total driving distance 260km –5hrs). **B/D**



**Day 6, Tuesday 16th
September
SARAJEVO – TRAVNIK – JAJCE – BIHAC**

Depart Sarajevo early in the morning for Travnik,

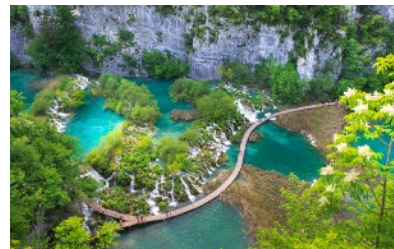
approximately 90 kilometres northwest of Sarajevo. After a scenic drive through the Bosnian countryside, we'll

arrive in Travnik, a charming town with a rich history. We'll visit the fortress of Travnik, dating back to the 15th century, which offers panoramic views of the town and the surrounding area. Continue our journey to Jajce, approximately 60 kilometres west. Arrive in Jajce, a picturesque town known for its waterfall and medieval watermills. At Pliva Waterfall, the Pliva River plunges into the Vrbas River, creating a natural spectacle. We'll continue the final 150 km drive to Bihac, for dinner. We stay one night at the Emporium Hotel (or similar). **B/D**



**Day 7, Wednesday
17th September
BIHAC – PLITVICE LAKES – ZAGREB**

After breakfast, we'll head to the natural wonder of Croatia – Plitvice Lakes. Please note the border

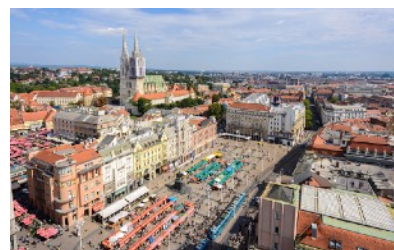


procedures. Travellers are required to keep their passports handy. Plitvice Lakes have exceptional natural beauty and are Croatia's oldest and largest national park. In 1979, Plitvice became a UNESCO World Heritage site. This is one of the most beautiful waterfalls in the world, with crystal cascades and waterfalls created by 16 different lakes. We will visit some popular routes to admire Mother Nature's finest work. Proceed to Zagreb in the evening and check into the Garden Hotel (or similar) for two nights. **B/D**



**Day 8, Thursday 18th
September
ZAGREB**

Zagreb is a charming city with an Austro-Hungarian past that is felt everywhere, from architecture to cuisine. After



breakfast, the group will explore Zagreb on foot. We'll explore the main sights of the Croatian capital: Upper Town, National Theatre, St. Mark's Church with its mosaic roof, perfectly preserved Stone Gates, and the Cathedral of the Assumption, towering into the sky. There will be some free time to stroll at leisure in the afternoon. **B/D**



**Day 9, Friday 19th September
ZAGREB – LJUBLJANA, SLOVENIA**

Surrounded by rolling hills and the ice-capped Alps, Ljubljana is a tranquil European capital. The drive is 150km (2.5hrs). After we check into the hotel, we'll stroll the narrow streets of Old City and medieval Ljubljana Castle on the hill. We'll explore the town square, which is home to the Baroque fountain of the three rivers of Carniola, Preseren Square, and the landmark Tromostovje (triple bridges). Overnight in Ljubljana at The City Hotel (or similar) for two nights. **B/D**

**Day 10, Saturday 20th September
LJUBLJANA – BLEĐ – BOHINJ – LJUBLJANA**

Today, we'll explore Slovenia's natural wonders. Our first destination is the town of Bled. The city is a popular

Slovenian resort located on a picturesque lake with crystal-clear waters. We'll board a traditional wooden boat called a Pletna and stop in at the pretty island in the middle of the lake where the imposing St. Mary's church stands. Our next destination is the Bohinj Valley in the heart of the Julian Alps. In winter, the snow-covered mountain slopes are a paradise for winter sports enthusiasts, and in summer, the mountain valley attracts alpinists, fishermen, and rafters. Drive back to Ljubljana for dinner. **B/D**

Day 11, Sunday 21st September LJUBLJANA – RIJEKA – ZADAR

On our way to Zadar (410km – 6hrs), we'll visit Rijeka - a vibrant port city on Croatia's Adriatic coast. It is known for its history, diverse culture, and lovely coastal setting. While strolling around Rijeka, you explore its historic streets, admire the panoramic views, and savour the local flavours. Overnight in Zadar at the A'mare Hotel (or similar) for one night. **B/D**



Day 12, Monday 22nd September ZADAR – TROGIR – SPLIT

Zadar is an intriguing city with historic Roman ruins, defensive walls,

medieval churches, cosmopolitan cafes, and quality museums, all located on a small peninsula. It is home to one of the most recognisable churches in Croatia - St. Donat's church of the 9th century. Along the foreshore, there is a sea organ where ocean waves create a unique melody. After exploring Zadar, we'll depart for Trogir, which dates back to the Greek period. We'll have lunch at Trogir, and see the fortress Kamerlengo and St. Laurentius Cathedral, with its Baroque style architecture. Proceed to Split (Zadar to Split is 160km – 2.5 hours) for dinner and overnight at the Art Hotel (or similar) for three nights. **B/L**



Day 13, Tuesday 23rd September SPLIT

Sitting on the Dalmatian coast, the port city of Split, Croatia's second largest, has striking

architecture, hidden courtyards and an elegant promenade that stretches along the harbour. The old city is located on the premises of a Roman Palace built in the early 4th century by the emperor Diocletian, and is one of the most enigmatic Roman ruins in the world. The Diocletian Palace and imposing St. Domnius Cathedral of the 8th century, regarded as the oldest Catholic cathedral in the world, are still functioning in their original structure. We'll explore the old city and stroll the Riva seafront promenade with its bustling markets and cafes.

B/D

Day 14, Wednesday 24th September SPLIT – HVAR – SPLIT (ferry boat)

Today we'll take the ferry and sail to one of the most beautiful islands of Croatia - Hvar. Besides its beaches and harbour, Hvar is also well known for its oldest European theatre, beautiful Renaissance squares and churches, Gothic buildings, wine and olive trees. Spend the day walking around the island, or take a light trek to the fortress. Shop the cobble-stoned streets and have lunch by the sea. Return to our hotel by ferry late in the afternoon. **B/D**



Day 15, Thursday 25th September SPLIT – MALI STON – DUBROVNIK

Today we have a free morning in Split to explore on your own. At around midday, the coach will depart for Mali Ston – about a two-hour drive south. Enjoy a (late-ish) delicious lunch at a local restaurant on the waterfront featuring fresh seafood and traditional Croatian dishes. Then, we'll explore Mali Ston's Old Town and walk around the old walls and over the peninsula to Ston. The bus will take you if you prefer not to walk. Late in the afternoon, we'll drive to Dubrovnik for a two-night stay at the City Hotel (or similar). Dinner is at your leisure tonight. **B/L**



Day 16, Friday 26th September DUBROVNIK

Today, we will explore one of Europe's great cities – Dubrovnik. One of the best ways to feel the soul of this city is to walk along its majestic defensive walls spanning almost 2 kilometres. The view over the old town and the glimmering Adriatic Sea is blissful from the top. We visit some of the forts and feel the atmosphere of those times, completed in the 13th century and have been preserved and rebuilt. The old city of Dubrovnik remains unchanged. Its medieval ramparts encircle the city, which can be entered through two main gates, crossing a stone bridge under the watchful gaze of the city's patron saint, Blaise or Vlaho. The main street of the old city is called Stradun or Placa and is the city's main artery, lined with graceful stone palazzos where people work and live. Heavily damaged during the 1991-92 Serbo-Montenegrin aggression, Dubrovnik is now completely restored. With the support of people worldwide, Dubrovnik has been reclaimed not just as a Croatian treasure but as one of the world's treasures, a fact officially recognised when the United Nations declared it a World Cultural Heritage Site. We'll visit the Franciscan Monastery with its 14th-century pharmacy and the Rector's Palace. You'll have some free time in the afternoon to explore - take the cable car or shop.

B/D





Day 17, Saturday 27th September
DUBROVNIK, KOTOR AND THE BUDVA RIVIERA, MONTENEGRO

Today, the world-famous Bay of Kotor awaits us (120km – 3hrs). Kotor's unique fjord is hemmed in by cliffs, with an impregnable 'Great Wall of Europe' towering mountain enclosing the old town. After visiting the core sights of Kotor and taking a lunch break, we head towards the most famous destination in Montenegro - Budva Riviera. Its history spans around 2500 years. The town reached its height during the rule of the Venetians, who built defensive walls encircling the old town. Three shrines representing various historical epochs and religions can be found in the square of churches. Overnight in Budva at the Bracera Hotel (or similar) for one night. *B/D*



Day 18, Sunday 28th September
BUDVA – VIRPAZAR – TIRANA, ALBANIA

We'll drive today towards Virpazar, Skadar Lake, neatly 'spilled' around the

mountains and shared by Montenegro and Albania (200km – 5hrs). It is the biggest lake of Southern Europe and one of the most pristine ecosystems in Europe. Virpazar is known as the gateway to Skadar Lake National Park. It is a small fishing village with a fortress and breathtaking views. We'll take a boat tour through the wetlands to admire its beauty. After a lunch stop (own expense), we will head towards Albania. Welcome to the land between the crescent and the cross! Albania was a no man's land for tourists only a few years ago.. Driving through Northern Albania, we'll stop in the oldest historical city, Shkodra. The massive ruins of Illyrian Rozafa Castle are perched on a hill above the Buna River. From there, we'll enjoy a perfect view of the confluence of the Drina and Buna and the nearby national park. Overnight in Tirana at the Hilton Garden Inn (or similar) where we stay for two nights *B/D*



Day 19, Monday 29th September
TIRANA – DURRES – KRUJA – TIRANA

Today, we'll drive to Durres port, one of the oldest settlements in the country, where the

Via Egnatia (from Rome to Greece) was built on the flourishing country of Illyria (today's Albania). Durres was once a strategic point, and we can see the remains of a Byzantine wall, a Venetian Tower, ancient Baths of Trajan, and the largest Roman Amphitheatre in the Balkans, which was found in the 1960s during construction works. Proceed to Kruja, located in the middle of an almost forgotten semi-desert mountainous area on a steep mountain slope, it forms a kind of oasis, which is unsurprising because the very name of the town, translated from the Albanian language, means

"source". Several times in history, the city was the last bastion in the battles against the Ottomans, and Kruja is associated with the name of a national hero of Albania - Prince Skanderbeg. After his death, Kruja fell under Ottoman rule for 400 years, and this is reflected in the oriental appearance of the old town. We'll walk the old Turkish bazaar – one of Albania's largest folk art markets and see artisans working, including rugmakers and weavers. Head back to Tirana for the overnight. *B/D*



Day 20, Tuesday 30th September
TIRANA – ELBASAN – OHRID, NORTH MACEDONIA

After breakfast, a walking tour of Tirana, with its many treasures. Though oversized buildings dominate in the capital of Albania, there is enough space for wide boulevards and spacious parks. The largest and most important square in Tirana is named after Prince Skanderbeg – a national hero – who stopped the Ottomans' forays into the Balkans in the 15th century. After the fall of Communism, the mayor painted the buildings in bright colours. Drive to Ohrid, with a stop en route at Elbasan. Our short sightseeing tour includes an overview of the 15th-century King Mosque. We reach the city of Ohrid in the evening. Overnight in Ohrid at the Unique Hotel and Spa (or similar) where we stay two nights. *B/D*



Day 21, Wednesday 1st October
OHRID

Nestled on the shores of Lake Ohrid, this UNESCO World Heritage Site is a treasure trove of cultural and natural wonders. Fabulous landscapes, crystal clear water and an incredible abundance of fish make it a paradise for relaxation and fishing. Along with Baikal and Tanganyika, it is one of the oldest lakes in the world (around 5 million years old). Visit St. Perivlepta Church and the newly reconstructed Samuil fortress. Wonderful views of the citadel walls and winding streets descending to the old town will leave an impression. Our next destination is St. Sofia Church, an architectural gem with a rich history. Overnight in Ohrid. *B/D*



Day 22, Thursday 2nd October
OHRID – SKOPJE AND SURROUNDS

Today we'll visit the picturesque gorge of Matka (195km – 4hrs). The Treska River meanders along the mighty cliffs and is a popular destination for locals. Then to Skopje - a city of contrasts between ancient and modern, with influences of both Christianity and Islam. The square of Macedonia is a popular meeting place designed in the 20th century and features the well-loved fountain, 'Mother of Macedonia'. We visit the museum of Mother Theresa, the Nobel Prize laureate who devoted

her life to fighting poverty. The memorial house consists of an amphitheatre in the basement, a museum on the first floor, and a chapel on the top floor. Then we cross the Vardar River over the Ottoman stone bridge to look into the deep past. The Old Bazaar, surrounded by mosques, caravansaries and hammams, appears timeless. We also visit the oldest church in Skopje - the church of the Holy Ascension. Nearby, we approach perhaps the main highlight of Skopje – the fortress of Kale. We visit this imposing citadel, remembering that the settlement around it dates back to pre-Christian times. Overnight in Skopje at the Gold Hotel (or similar) where we stay two nights. **B/D**



 **Day 23, Friday 3rd October**
SKOPJE – GRAČANICA – PRISHTINA – PRIZREN, KOSOVO – SKOPJE

Today is a long but rewarding drive (approx. 200km – 4hrs). Depart from Skopje for the UNESCO World Heritage Site, Gračanica Monastery. We'll get to see the monastery's frescoes and stunning architecture, which reflect the rich history of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Learn of the significance of the building and the local legends that have been passed on about the sacred site. We'll continue to Prishtina for a short stop in the capital city of Kosovo. Begin exploring the iconic Newborn Monument, a symbol of Kosovo's independence. Stroll through the city centre, visiting important landmarks such as Mother Teresa Square, the Kosovo National Library, and the Imperial Mosque. Then, head to Prizren, often considered the cultural capital of Kosovo, for a bite to eat (own cost). Explore the historic town of Prizren. Wander the cobbled streets lined with shops and cafes, and immerse yourself in the town's rich history and atmosphere. Enjoy some free time to explore Prizren at your own pace. You can shop for local handicrafts or enjoy a sweet treat from a local bakery. Back in Skopje in the evening for overnight. **B/D**

 **Day 24, Saturday 4th October**
SKOPJE – NIS – BELGRADE, SERBIA

After breakfast, we depart for Serbia to visit one of the oldest cities in the Balkans, Niš. The drive is 450 km (approx. 6hrs), Nis is the birthplace of the Roman emperor Constantine the Great. Over the centuries, Niš often played a significant role in the region's history. The centre of Niš is a bit chaotic. We will stroll through King Milan Square, located right next to the river, with the

Monument to the Liberators of Niš. To fully soak up the atmosphere of Niš, we will visit Tinker's Alley (Kopitareva Street) – the urban quarter from the early 18th century that was once the centre of tinkers and artisans but now is the main hotspot in the city for cafes, bars, and restaurants. Across the Nišava River from the central square, we will find Niš Fortress, which dates back to the early 18th century. Today, Nis fortress is one of the most popular recreational areas in the city, still full of historical remnants from the old times. There are well-preserved walls and gates, a Turkish steam bath, and ancient ruins. In the evening, the group will arrive in Belgrade, where we will stay at The Amsterdam Hotel (or similar) for our final two nights. **B/D**



 **Day 25, Sunday 5th October**
BELGRADE – NOVI SAD – BELGRADE

About an hour's drive from Belgrade, Novi Sad is called by some - 'Serbian Athens'. We'll see the imposing Roman Catholic Mary church and the extravagant town hall in the city's heart. A little bit further, the mighty fortress towers over the Danube. In the 17th century, Petrovaradin was the largest fortress in Europe. The fort is also famous for its tower with the upside-down clocks. Surprisingly, the short hand of the clock points to minutes and the large one to hours. It was made for sailors to see the time from afar. We'll head back to Belgrade for our farewell dinner. Overnight in Belgrade. **B/D**



Day 26, Monday 6th October
DEPARTURE

After breakfast, we'll transfer to the airport for the flight from Belgrade to Australia, arriving home the following day. All flights are to be advised. **B**



Icon indicates a day where there is **moderate physical exertion**. A basic level of fitness is required: eg. A trek over 'mostly flat' terrain or climbing several flights of steps without the support of handrails or elevators.



Icon indicates a day where there is a **particularly active section**. A good level of fitness is required: eg. A longer trek over non-groomed, uneven terrain, or ascending to reach a panorama. May also include exposure to higher altitude. **An alternate activity may be offered if you choose to sit out an active section.** Please call - we are happy to discuss each tour in more detail.