

Blue Dot Travel





THE BALKANS

MACEDONIA, ALBANIA, MONTENEGRO, SLOVENIA, SERBIA, 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 seven of them – Macedonia, Albania, Montenegro, 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 mediaeval 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?



10th September (date to be confirmed)

DEPARTURE

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



Day 1, 11th September BELGRADE, SERBIA

Welcome to Serbia's capital city. We will be transferred to our hotel on arrival to check in and freshen up. Then, we'll enjoy a Belgrade

city orientation tour. Belgrade fascinates with its history - its seven centuries have been so eventful that it's difficult to single out the most important episodes. We'll stop briefly by Parliament and the Royal Palace, then visit St. Mark's Church, the Temple of St. Sava - one of the most significant religious edifices in Europe, the St. Michael Cathedral and Nikola Tesla Museum. The panoramic tour includes the Serbian National Library, the National Theatre and the Republic Square. Enjoy an official welcome dinner. We'll stay at the Amsterdam Hotel (or similar) for two nights. **D**



Day 2, 12th September BELGRADE

After breakfast, we will continue our tour of Belgrade, including the key highlights, such as the Belgrade

Kalemegdan Fortress. This landmark, literally enthroned upon the city, 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. In the afternoon, the group will drive to Sumadija region and Topola and enjoy a wine tasting at Aleksandrovic Winery. **B/D**



Day 3, 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 the amazing mountain views, river streams, old-fashioned wooden houses, and great hospitality. The route is from the base of Tara Mountain to a village called Šargan. Take a ride 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 gorgeous oasis just beside Mokra Gora, observe the authentic log cabins and enjoy traditional Serbian cuisine with a view from the hilltop 'Mečavnik'. Take a deep breath while visiting Zlatibor Mountain. Overnight in Zlatibor, at the Iris Hotel (or similar). **B/D**



Day 4, 14th September SARAJEVO AND MOSTAR

Breakfast at the hotel before we depart for Sarajevo - a vibrant city in the heart of Bosnia and Herzegovina, known for its rich history, stunning architecture, and captivating 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' in the house where the entrance to the tunnel is hidden. Among other things, the museum houses a collection of weapons used during the siege. Learn about the tragic recent Bosnian history. 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. This underground tunnel saved the citizens from starvation and provided the chance to escape from the deadly fire of war. In the afternoon, we'll stroll the old town, allowing us feel the different cultures shaping today's city. The Venetians, Byzantines, Ottomans, and Austrians all had a hand in creating the present image of Sarajevo. Stroll the Bascarsija district, where the famous bazaar is located. Visit the place of the fatal assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, as well as the town hall and exterior of the "House of Defiance". Sarajevo has a deep spiritual ambience, so we visit worship houses of various religions: the oldest preserved mosque in the country - Gazi Hysrev-Beg Mosque, 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, 15th September SARAJEVO - MOSTAR - SARAJEVO

After breakfast, we will drive to the oriental-inspired city of Mostar. The entire city centre of Mostar is UNESCO World Heritage-listed. Cobblestoned streets and splendid nature all around will captivate you. 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 by the Bosnian War and rebuilt within ten years. Since then, the bridge has symbolised 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, go shopping or enjoy a traditional Bosnian coffee. Drive back to Sarajevo (total driving distance 260km - 5hrs). **B/D**



Day 6, 16th September SARAJEVO - TRAVNIK - JAJCE - BIHAC

Depart from Sarajevo early in the morning for Travnik, approximately 90 kilometres northwest of Sarajevo. Enjoy the scenic drive through the Bosnian countryside before arriving in Travnik, a charming town with a rich history. Visit the historic 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 stunning waterfall and

medieval watermills. Visit the Pliva Waterfall, where the Pliva River plunges into the Vrbas River, creating a breathtaking natural spectacle. We'll continue the final 150 km drive to Bihac, for dinner and overnight stay at the Emporium Hotel (or similar). **B/D**



Day 7, 17th September BIHAC - PLITVICE LAKES - ZAGREB

After breakfast, we'll head to the main natural wonder of Croatia - Plitvice Lakes. Please note the border procedures. Travellers are required to keep their passports handy. It has exceptional natural beauty and is Croatia's oldest and largest national park. In 1979, Plitvice Lakes 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

Welcome to Zagreb - a charming city with an Austro-Hungarian past that is felt everywhere - from architecture to cuisine. After breakfast, the group will explore Zagreb by foot. We'll get to know 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, 19th September ZAGREB - LJUBLJANA, SLOVENIA

Surrounded by the hills and ice-capped Alps, Ljubljana is one of the few European capitals where peace prevails over a hectic pace. The drive is 150km (2.5hrs). After we check into the hotel, we'll stroll the narrow streets of Old City and the medieval Ljubljana Castle on the hill. The main decoration of the town square is the Baroque fountain of the three rivers of Carniola. We also walk through central Preseren Square, where the image of the square is reflected in the baroque Franciscan church. Near it, admire the landmark of the city, the quirky Tromos-tovje, and three pedestrian bridges over Ljubljana. We cannot miss visiting the Ljubljana Castle. The impregnable fortress towers high above the city. Overnight in Ljubljana at The City Hotel (or similar) for two nights. **B/D**



Day 10, Saturday 20th September LJUBLJANA - BLED - BOHINJ - LJUBLJANA

Today is wholly dedicated to the natural wonders of Slovenia. Our first destination is the town of Bled. The city is a popular Slovenian resort located on the picturesque Lake Bled with crystal clear water. We admire the blue pearl



of Slovenia from the board of a traditional wooden boat called Pletna. We take a trip to the picturesque island in the middle of the lake and visit the imposing St. Mary's church, whose bell is said to grant wishes. 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 picturesque mountain valley attracts alpinists, fishermen, and rafters. Drive back to Ljubljana for dinner. **B/D**



Day 11, 21st September
LJUBLJANA – RIJEKA – ZADAR

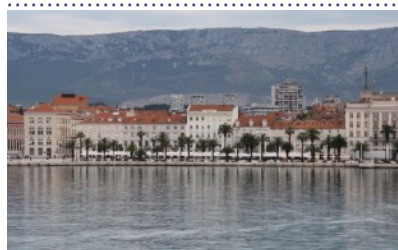
On our way to Zadar (410km – 6hrs), we'll visit Rijeka – a vibrant port city on Croatia's Adriatic coast. It is known for its rich history, diverse culture, and beautiful coastal setting. While strolling around Rijeka, you explore its historic streets, admire the panoramic views, and savour the local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



Day 12, 22nd September
ZADAR – TROGIR – SPLIT

Zadar is an intriguing city home to a historic old town of Roman ruins, defensive walls,

medieval churches, cosmopolitan cafes, and quality museums on a small peninsula. Here, we also see one of the most recognisable churches in Croatia – St. Donat's church of the 9th century. Another famous landmark is the ancient ruins of the Roman Forum. We will also witness a sea organ where waves create their own melody. Departure to Trogir. Upon arrival, enjoy lunch at a local restaurant by the water. In the afternoon, we'll visit Trogir, which dates back to the Greek period. The Baroque style exquisitely complemented its architecture. We may indulge in the Mediterranean milieu, watching the mighty fortress Kamerlengo and St. Laurentius Cathedral. Proceed driving to Split (Zadar to Split is 160km – 2.5 hours) for dinner and overnight at the Art Hotel (or similar) for three nights. **B/D**



Day 13, 23rd September
SPLIT

Sitting on the Dalmatian coast, the oldest part of the city is located on the premises of a Roman

Palace built in the early 4th century by the emperor Diocletian. These are among the most enigmatic Roman ruins in the world. The Diocletian Palace and the imposing St. Domnius Cathedral of the 8th century rises nearby, regarded as the oldest Catholic cathedral in the world, functioning in its original structure. After the architectural combo in the old town, we will have free time to explore the city on your own. You can stroll along Riva – a seafront promenade with bustling cafes, pride of all people from Split, or to taste fresh mouth-watering dishes in cozy restaurants. **B/D**



Day 14, 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. No wonder it is named 'San Tropez of Croatia' as the wealthy and famous adore spending leisure here. 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, trekking to the fortress. Shop the cobblestoned streets and have lunch by the sea. Return to our hotel by ferry later in the afternoon. **B/D**



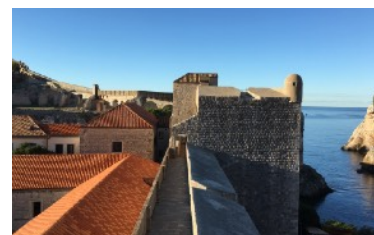
Day 15, 25th September
SPLIT – MALI STON – DUBROVNIK

Today we have a free morning in Split to shop or walk the streets 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 Komodore Hotel. Dinner is at your leisure tonight. **B/L**



Day 16, 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, 27th September
DUBROVNIK, KOTOR AND THE BUDVA RIVIERA, MONTENEGRO

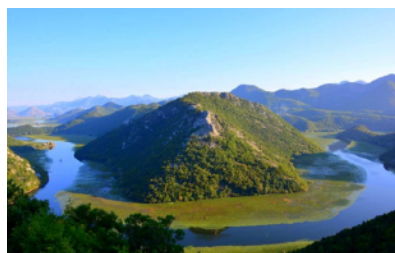
Today, the world-famous Bay of Kotor awaits us (120km – 3hrs). This unique fjord is hemmed in by cliffs, rippling gulfs, and sparkling straits so that we will fall in love with this gorgeous place. Kotor's impregnable 'Great Wall of Europe'

encloses the old town and the mountain towering above. After visiting the core sights and taking a lunch break, we head towards the most famous destination in Montenegro - Budva Riviera. Its history spans around 2500 years, so we may discern Roman ruins in the centre of Budva. But the town reached its height during the rule of the Venetians, who built defensive walls encircling the old town. Discover the three shrines representing various historical epochs and religions on the square of churches. Overnight in Budva at the Bracera Hotel (or similar) for one night. *B/D*



Day 18, 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 called the gates to Skadar Lake



National Park. It is a small fishing village with a small fortress and breathtaking views. We'll take a boat tour through the wetlands to admire its beauty. After a lunch stop (at your 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. The fewer expectations you have when you come here, the more pleasant surprises await you- like rich cultural heritage and exceptionally hospitable people. 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) for two nights. *B/*



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

Today, we'll drive to Durres, not only the largest port but also one of the oldest settlements in the country. This is where the path called Via Egnatia (from Rome to Greece) began and lay through the flourishing country of Illyria on



the territory of today's Albania. We can see the rich past of Durres as once a strategic point in various places: remains of a Byzantine wall, a Venetian Tower, ancient Baths of Trajan and the largest Roman Amphitheatre in the Balkans - all these and

some more were accidentally found only 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 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, which is reflected in the rather oriental-looking appearance of this old town. We'll walk the old Turkish bazaar – one of Albania's largest folk art markets. You can buy handicrafts and see artisans working, including rugmakers and weavers. Head back to Tirana. *B/D*



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

After breakfast, a walking tour of Tirana, looking behind the scenes of a city that



hides many treasures. Though oversized buildings predominate 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 was tired of the grey dreariness of the city and painted the buildings in bright colours. We'll visit the capital's most important buildings, such as the town hall and the national theatre, and walk through the government district. Drive to Ohrid, with stop en route to 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 Sky Corner (or similar) for two nights. *B/D*



Day 21, 1st October
OHRID

Nestled on the shores of Lake Ohrid, this UNESCO World Heritage Site is a treasure trove of cultural and natural



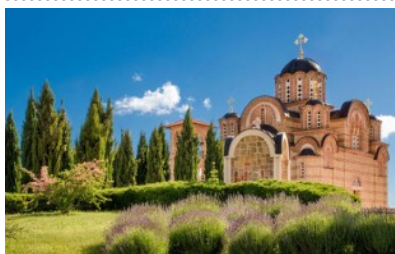
wonders. Fabulous landscapes, crystal clear water and an incredible abundance of fish make it a paradise for relaxation and fishing. The reason for this is the uniqueness of the lake, especially its fauna. Along with Baikal and Tanganyika, it is one of the oldest lakes in the world (around 5 million years old). To say even more, Ohrid town is the best preserved and most complete ensemble of ancient urban architecture in this part of Europe. When in Ohrid town, we delve into its historical grandeur. Visit St. Perivlepta Church. We also cannot miss the newly reconstructed Samuil fortress. Wonderful views of the citadel walls and winding streets descending to the old town will leave pleasant impressions. The remains of an ancient Amphitheatre emphasise the historical significance of the town. Our next must-visit destination is St. Sofia Church, a remarkable architectural gem with a rich history. This Byzantine-style church dates back to the 11th century and is one of the region's most significant religious and cultural landmarks. Overnight in Ohrid. *B/D*



Day 22, 2nd October
OHRID – SKOPJE AND SURROUNDS

Today we can get acquainted with the picturesque gorge of Matka (195km – 4hrs). The area where a blue ribbon of the

Treska River meanders along the mighty cliffs is a popular resort. Not only is it a heaven for tourists and hikers, but also a revered pilgrimage destination. Then we arrive in Skopje - a city of great cultural heritage, which skillfully assembles buildings from different eras. Every step proves that it is a city of contrasts – between the ancient and the modern, and between Christianity and Islam. We begin our acquaintance with the heart of the city, the square of Macedonia, designed in the 20th century and abounding with pompous monuments of proud riders, mighty rulers on thrones and the heart-warming fountain 'Mother of Macedonia'. Bustling with cafes, the square is a popular meeting place. We visit the house of Mother Theresa. Built on the place of her baptistery, it houses the memorabilia that belonged to this woman, a Nobel Prize laureate who devoted her life to fighting poverty. 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 City Park Hotel (or similar) for two nights. **B/D**



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

Today is a long but rewarding (driving

200km – 4hrs). Depart from Skopje to UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Gračanica Monastery. Admire its beautiful frescoes and stunning architecture, which reflect the rich history of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Learn about its significance and the local legends surrounding this sacred site. 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—time for lunch. 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 vibrant 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, 4th October
SKOPJE – NIS – BELGRADE, SERBIA

After breakfast, we depart for Serbia, and we'll visit one of the oldest cities in the Balkans, Niš (450km – 6hrs), 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. Beautiful architectural buildings get lost among random grey ones.

We will stroll through King Milan Square, located right next to the river, with the Monument to the Liberators of Niš right in the middle. Furthermore, to fully enjoy and soak the atmosphere of Niš, we will visit the so-called Tinker's Alley (Kopitareva Street) – the urban quarter from the early 18th century that once was 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, Niš 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 to discover. 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, 5th October
BELGRADE – NOVI SAD – BELGRADE

About an hour's drive from Belgrade, Novi Sad is called by some - 'Serbian Athens'. We'll admire 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 points to minutes and the large one - to hours. It was made up for sailors to see the time from afar. We'll head back to Belgrade for our farewell dinner! **B/D**

Day 26, 6th October
DEPARTURE

After breakfast, we'll transfer to the airport for the flight from Belgrade home 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.