

ROADS LESS TRAVELED

BY JENNY SMITH // PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR AND PRIMOŽ BRIC



On our rest day in Dubrovnik, Croatia, part of our group opted to ride into Montenegro, which our guides were happy to accommodate. This village is typical of what you'll encounter riding in the region.

It's a place straight out of a fairytale: deep forests, bottomless lakes, rivers that pour out of gaping holes in the mountainside, waterfalls, crystal clear azure seas and a thousand islands dotting a coastline where Roman ruins, medieval city walls and arcane necropolises sit amongst modern buildings that bear the scars of war. This complex and misunderstood (by Americans, at least) part of the world is rich with history and natural beauty, and it's an underrated motorcycling destination—which is why I was so excited to experience it on Adriatic Moto Tours' Adriatic Riviera Tour. Slovenia-based Adriatic Moto Tours (AMT) specializes in introducing motorcyclists to the lesser-known destinations of Central and Eastern Europe, far from the typical crowds of tourists, and showing off the region's 2,000 years of culture and history. In their words, you will "Ride roads less travelled."



The group pauses for a photo on an overlook above Dubrovnik, on the Adriatic coast of Croatia. With six Canadians and two Ecuadorians, I was the lone American. Our guides, both Slovenians who spoke perfect English, gave us detailed history lessons at each stop.



EXPLORING SLOVENIA, BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA AND CROATIA WITH ADRIATIC MOTO TOURS



Left: AMT ensured we were well-fed; on the island of Hvar we enjoyed a dinner of fresh sea bass, prawns, octopus salad and *blitva* (a classic Croatian side dish of greens, potatoes, garlic and olive oil).



Top: The Old Bridge in Mostar, Bosnia, was destroyed by the Croats during the wars of the '90s, and rebuilt in 2004. Lower: The beautiful city of Dubrovnik is surrounded by massive walls built in the 12th-17th centuries. The walls are 1.2 miles long, and up to 20 feet thick and 82 feet high. A ticket to walk their entire length costs 120 Kuna (a little less than \$18).

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WAR AND PEACE

Most Americans are likely to associate the Balkans with war; all three countries we visited on this tour were once part of Yugoslavia, which

dissolved into what the locals here refer to as the Homeland War, the War of Serbian Aggression or, simply, the Stupid War, in the early 1990s. Many buildings, especially in Bosnia, still



We encountered some real horsepower on this road in Bosnia. Much of southern Bosnia and Herzegovina (the country's full name) is a mixture of low mountains and wide valleys dotted with the occasional village. Traffic was light and the roads were fast!

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bear scars from shelling, and some have never been repaired at all. Twenty years later the complexities live on—Croatian flags fly in Bosnia, Serbian Cyrillic writing adorns run-down army bases and the artillery used to attack the town of Dubrovnik sits in a museum on a mountaintop above the old walled city, within the pockmarked fortress from which it was fired.

Today, tourism across the region is growing rapidly, with visitors drawn to the natural beauty and cultural heritage sites. Our tour alone covered five UNESCO World Heritage Sites, as well as numerous local areas of interest. I'd never been on a guided tour before, so I had no expectations or preconceptions, but I knew I wanted local guides, who knew the language, roads and culture, to help me make the most of my visit.

A few weeks before my tour, AMT sent a package containing a map, hotel addresses where we would be staying and a tour book full of detailed information about each country, along with a full run-down of each day's ride, including restaurants, local history and sites

of interest. We would be visiting three countries: Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia. It also contained a list of tour participants; along with six Canadians (on four bikes) and two Ecuadorians, I would be the lone American.

This 7-day tour (nine, including travel days) begins and ends in Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia. After arriving at the hotel (AMT had arranged airport transportation), we all met for a pre-tour briefing and then were shuttled to AMT's office/warehouse to pick up our bikes. I had chosen a brand new 2017 Suzuki V-Strom 650, perfect for one-up touring and the narrow roads I anticipated. The entire fleet was new, and the other riders all opted for BMWs of various sizes: F 700 and R 1200 GS models for the single riders and R 1200 RT sport tourers for the couples. After a lovely dinner of local specialties (cured and grilled meats, cheeses, smoked trout and spinach-stuffed pork loin fried in slivered almonds) in the castle overlooking the city, it was off to bed to rest up for the first day of riding.



This *tekija* (Dervish monastery) was built in 1520 at the source of the river Buna. Here, cold, clear water pours from this opening at the base of a tall cliff. A few hundred yards downriver, visitors can sit by the rushing water and enjoy a Turkish coffee.

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ROADS LESS TRAVELED

Two guides—Boris and Primož—and a support van accompanied our seven-bike convoy. The level of organization was astounding; each morning, we would leave our luggage outside our hotel room doors and meet downstairs for the pre-ride briefing. While that was happening, Žiga, the van driver, would collect the luggage, load it into the van and head directly to our next hotel stop. When we arrived later that after-

noon, he was waiting outside to marshal us to our reserved parking area, hand us a glass of prosecco or grappa, and give us our room keys. Every last detail was attended to, leaving us free to enjoy ourselves and soak in the experience.

Breakfast every day was included, as well as most dinners (the only exception was on our rest day). Each evening, after we'd had a chance to shower and change, we would meet to go to dinner, usually via a short walk or a taxi ride.

Most of the inland roads meander rather than twist, making for a relaxing ride through forests, past lakes and rivers and over low mountain passes.





Relics of darker times: many buildings (such as this one in Mostar, Bosnia) still bear the scars of war, and derelict military bases stand guard over roads leading to the pristine blue waters of the Adriatic and the many quaint villages along the coast.

On the way, Boris would give us a detailed history lesson about the town or area we were in.

In Mostar, Bosnia, we walked from the eastern side of the river, traditionally known as the Turkish Muslim side, to the western “European” side, past an Orthodox church and a Muslim mosque, alongside shell-shocked derelict buildings, through the centuries-old bazaar, and across the stunning *Stari Most* (Old Bridge) high above the river Nerevta. The Old Bridge, considered one of the finest pieces of Balkan Islamic architecture and a UNESCO World Heritage Site, stood for 427 years before being destroyed by the Croats during the wars of the '90s. It was rebuilt in 2004, using the same materials and technology as the original.

While we, as motorcyclists, often consider the journey to be more important than the destination, this tour made me rethink that philosophy. Certainly, the roads were outstanding and the scenery was varied and breathtaking. Generally speaking, however, the people here didn't build roads for entertainment; they built them to get somewhere. The speed limits aren't high (generally 50 kph in towns and up to 90 kph on the motorways—that's 30 mph and 56 mph, respectively), and most roads meander rather than twist, with notable exceptions. My favorite riding days were on the island of Hvar, when I chased Primož on his R 1200 GS along a sinuous one-and-a-half-lane road for 50 kilometers through scrubby woods, lavender fields and vineyards, and the final day from Zadar, Croatia, back to Ljubljana, following curve after endless curve up the coast before turning inland and cresting the mountains into cool green forest and a lunch of venison goulash.

Then there was the day that we decided to make a detour to Medjugorje (pronounced “meh-dyoo-gor-yah”), which since 1981 has been a popular pilgrimage site for Catholics after six children claimed to have seen visions of the Virgin Mary. The two Ecuadorians in our group, both devout Catholics, were excited to discover how close they were to this important site. Not everyone was as excited, but Boris was open to an adventure, so we sent the two Canadian couples on their way to the hotel (navigating with their GPS units preloaded with the route map, which is included in every tour). The rest of us (Boris, Primož, the Ecuadorians, the two single Canadians and yours truly) set off for Medjugorje.

The road quickly devolved into a barely paved two-track goat trail, picking its way through small but steep hills, our shoulders brushing past scrubby trees and rock walls guarding tiny, freshly sown gardens. Wait—gardens? Who is trekking out here, and to grow what in the midst of all the rocks and shrubs? We edged past an occasional vehicle, so apparently the answer is *someone* and *something*.

After nearly an hour, stopping for directions and almost turning back, we found the main road and made it to Medjugorje with just enough time for a 20-minute visit. When we finally made our triumphant entrance into the hotel parking lot that evening, where Žiga waited with two bottles of local grappa, we felt like heroes. Roads less traveled, indeed.

It was the places those roads took us that were the star of this show, however. Like the medieval Stećak necropolis of Radimlja, a collection of 63 tombstones that are part of a

larger collection scattered across Bosnia and the neighboring borderlands of Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro. Roughly 60,000 have been identified, and collectively they are a UNESCO World Heritage Site. And the ancient salt fields of Ston in Croatia, where salt has been harvested from the sea since Roman times and a massive stone wall, known as the European Great Wall of China, was erected to protect it.

Or the breathtaking medieval city of Dubrovnik on the Croatian coast, where we spent our rest day. Originally settled by Greek refugees in the 7th century, Dubrovnik's history includes Romans, the Byzantine Empire, Venetians, Hungarians and Ottoman Turks. Its massive walls are rooted in rock that plunges into the sapphire blue Adriatic, and they have never been breached. The city even withstood a seven-month bombardment by Serbian and Montenegrin forces during the wars. Today, Dubrovnik is a popular tourist stop for cruise ships and was used as a filming location for the HBO series "Game of Thrones." Oh, and it's also a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Lastly, there is the fairytale land of Plitvice Lakes National Park, the largest national park in Croatia and one of the most beautiful places I've ever seen. Here, 16 azure, green, gray and deep blue lakes cascade down the mountains over natural mineral dams and numerous waterfalls. Wooden footbridges allow visitors to wander among and over the lakes and beneath the falls, which are—you guessed it—a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

For all of my expectations and imaginings of what the Balkans would be like, I was amazed by the region's natural beauty, culture, people and food. As the borderland between East and West, complexities have emerged and wrap around and through it like ivy, but it's flowering ivy, and if you give it half a chance it might surprise you. (3)

Adriatic Moto Tours is celebrating 13 years in business this year, and it specializes in tours throughout the Mediterranean, the Balkans and Central Europe, with a new destination this year: Thailand and Laos. Adriaticmototours.com



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