

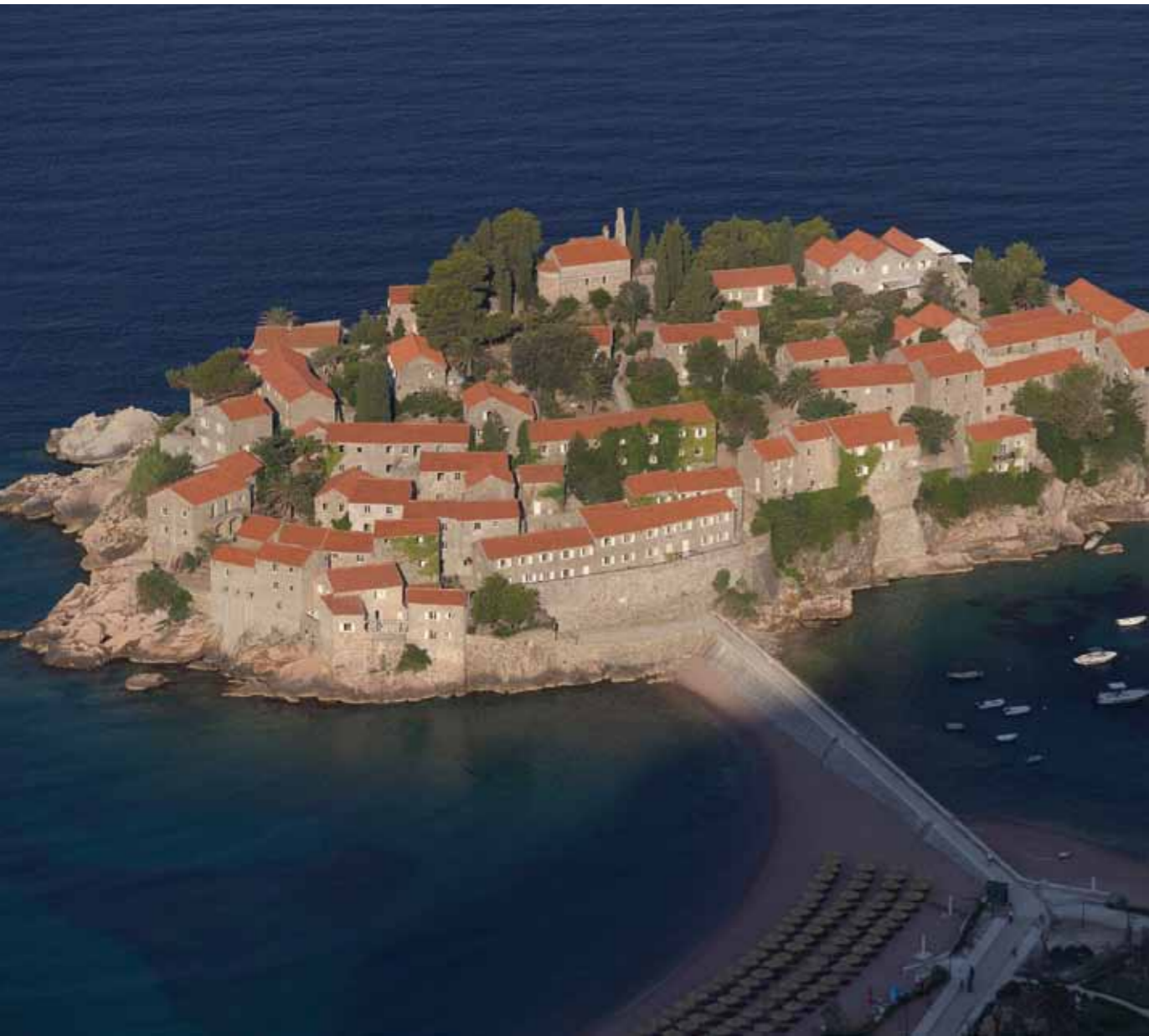


# JEWELS IN A TREASURE CHEST

Small but perfectly formed, Montenegro is a hidden gem on the Adriatic Coast

**Words:** Stephan Burianek

## Montenegro



Shortly after landing in Montenegro's capital, Podgorica, I quickly figure out how to interpret the country's official slogan, "Wild beauty". On the short journey to the coast, I pass a mountain landscape covered by a dense green carpet of bushes that is frequently penetrated by spectacular rock formations. Colourful wildflowers grow out of limestone chinks, hinting at the sensational honeys that must be produced in this small country on the Adriatic Sea.

My taxi driver apparently represents the 'wild' aspect of the country. In countless mountain curves, he accelerates his Mercedes and chooses a direct line, ignoring the probability of oncoming traffic. On roadside rocks I read the mobile phone numbers of private recovery services, but there's no

need for that; in a record-setting time of 39 minutes, we reach our destination — a jewel set on the spectacular coast.

In front of us is the picturesque island of Sveti Stefan (Saint Stephen), which is dotted with small stone houses, fragrant shrubs and several small churches. From the 15th century, its defensive walls protected a Montenegrin clan from the Turks, who attacked across the mountains. The tribe formed an alliance with the Republic of Venice and successfully repelled all attackers, until several years later when the entire region became part of the Soviet Union. The Yugoslav leader, Marshal Tito, resettled the remaining families from the island to the mainland before transforming the site into a luxury hotel. But for the last three years, this magical place has been run by Amanresorts.

### Lap of luxury

(clockwise from above) The island of Sveti Stefan; the Aman resort occupies the island's original buildings as well as Villa Milocer and the spa on the mainland

### Protected treasure

(previous page) The sublime Bay of Kotor and surrounding mountains



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Like other properties in the Aman portfolio, the privileged guests at Aman Sveti Stefan enter into Zen-inspired, uncluttered interiors that work beautifully with the original historic structures of the island. During a guided tour, which is offered to every guest upon arrival, I am immediately drawn into the resort's meditative atmosphere. I'm checked into a Deluxe Cottage with a Juliet balcony, from which I can immediately envisage myself enjoying the orange-infused mountain slopes at sunset.

This May, the resort opened a new spa centre, located on the mainland, on the most isolated of three gravel

**See, eat, unwind**  
*(clockwise from bottom left) Al fresco dining at Aman Sveti Stefan's Beach Café; charming towns and beautiful mountainscapes frame the Bay of Kotor; Aman Sveti Stefan's spa operates all year round*

beaches. On more than 2,000 square metres of dedicated space, guests can indulge in four couple's treatment rooms, three hydrotherapy areas (a sauna, hot showers and cold plunge pool), a beauty salon, a spacious gym and studios for yoga and pilates. I quickly find myself admiring the 24-metre indoor swimming pool, which is lined with loungers and partly surrounded by large glass windows, and linked to an eight-metre outdoor pool.

That's where I meet spa manager Melany Martinez Thomas. The Costa Rica native helped create the resort's spa concept, which takes a holistic approach combining Asian

### LUŠTICA BAY

Last year cranes and caterpillars started work on what will be the largest real estate project in the history of Montenegro. In addition to homes, hotels and a golf course, the marina will offer 176 berths for yachts up to 35 meters by 2017.

[www.lusticabay.com](http://www.lusticabay.com)

doctrines with the local, traditional pharmacology. "It's hard to believe, but in Montenegro alone there are about 670 medicinal herbs," she explains.



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The hotel, according to Thomas, buys most of the components of its in-house spa line from small producers that are often family businesses. “Our work is very goal-oriented here. The herbs and the treatments are individually tailored to the guests.”

The spa centre is open all year long, which is an ambitious feat in a country where tourism is highly dependent on the summer season from June to September — even the island of Sveti Stefan shuts down over winter. But there is potential for winter spa tourism, mainly from locations that have direct flight connections to Podgorica, like Austria and Switzerland. Intrepid winter guests

can stay in the eight-bedroom Villa Milocer, the former summer residence of a Serbian queen and later of Tito himself, and is now a part of the resort.

#### A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

Since the spin-off from the state union with Serbia in 2006, the Montenegrin government has been welcoming investors who are committed to sustainable tourism. And with good reason — the urban sprawl around Budva, a coastal town primarily popular among Russian tourists, was apparently enough warning of the consequences of rapid, unchecked development. As such, the still largely unspoiled areas in other parts of the

#### Just add water

(clockwise from top) Gleaming megayachts float on Porto Montenegro’s new marina; the new marina hosts lavish events and corporate launches; Lido Pool at Porto Montenegro

Montenegro are to be developed as gently as possible. But before green-lighting large-scale developments, the damage created by past projects needs to be addressed.

This was certainly the case in Porto Montenegro, which is located in the inimitable Bay of Kotor. While strolling through this brand-new marina district of the city of Tivat, I find hardly any evidence of the run-down shipyard that existed here just 10 years ago. The seabed below the waters of the bay was cleared of all sorts of debris before construction could begin on the new project — a task that took two long years to complete. The main investor, Peter Munk, a Canadian gold

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miner of Hungarian origin, recognised the potential of this former Austro-Hungarian naval base for oceangoing yachts. Today, their number is increasing steadily. This year alone, 19 new mega-yachts (with a length from 60 metres upwards) are being built worldwide, and Porto Montenegro is one of the few luxury ports in the Mediterranean large enough to accommodate them.

Even without a megayacht of my own, I still enjoy this exclusive, paparazzi-free zone. I soak up the atmosphere over a coffee in a French bakery and organic ice-cream on the harbour promenade, before browsing the window displays of independent mainstream luxury brands. The development is still only in the second of four stages of development, but the area already exudes a certain elegance. Apartment buildings are a maximum of four storeys high, and the terracotta façades of the buildings pay homage to the region's Venetian heritage.

On the promenade of the marina, a yellow building proudly stands out of the residential area. The new Regent Porto Montenegro, which opens this month, is expected to set new standards of luxury hospitality in the region. Each of the 51 guestrooms and 35 apartments has a private terrace, and beyond that guests will have a lot of other choices to unwind. The Library Bar offers a large number of champagnes by the glass, the spa manager comes from Bali, and the chef from Singapore. A secluded hotel beach is accessible via motorboat shuttle. Not surprisingly, the cosy interior design by Tino Zervudachi, who specialises in the creation of celebrity homes, reflects the yacht theme: fine wood is complemented by crème coloured tones and lively stripes of marina blue and white.

Anyone who stays in Porto Montenegro should rent a motorboat and explore the Bay of Kotor. If Sveti Stefan is a gem then the Bay of Kotor is a box of jewels. You will find islands with tiny old churches, Venetian coastal towns, breathtaking mountains and great local cuisine. It is no wonder that in such a unique environment, other luxury resorts are planned. In two years, Europe's first One&Only is scheduled to open in Herceg Novi. On the hitherto virgin Luštica Peninsula near Porto Montenegro, seven upscale hotels and a Gary Player-designed golf course will be built.



“If Sveti Stefan is a gem then the Bay of Kotor is a box full of jewels”

The highlands are still excluded from this remarkable wave of development, which could be seen as an asset, since its pristine landscape is perfectly suited for adrenaline tourism. On my visit I cross the largest canyon in Europe and hike through an alpine dreamscape in which bears are still said to live. I skip rafting and canyoning and spend the time eating superb hams and cheeses. And I was right about the local honey, which unfolds complex pleasures on the palate. The variety of this wonderful country is unbelievable. I think Montenegro is neither a gem nor a jewellery box, but a rich treasure chest. It only needs to be opened. ■

**Old and new**  
*(clockwise from bottom left)* Explore the waters around the Adriatic Coast on a chartered megayacht; the luxury residential apartments of Porto Montenegro; restaurants and cafés line the dockside promenade

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