

HeartCycle Bicycle Touring Club
Balkan Quartet 2024
Albania, North Macedonia, Kosovo and Montenegro

- Dates:** May 17, 18-31, 2024
- Coordinator:** Lisa Evans
- Rating:** Intermediate/Advanced, 384 miles, 33,900 feet elevation
- Riders:** 20 (Includes Coordinator)
- Price:** \$2600 (double occupancy), deposit \$500 with registration, balance due February 17, 2024, +\$480 single supplement.
- Cancellation:** Fee \$100 prior to February 17, February 17 - March 16, loss of deposit, March 17 - May 17, loss of deposit and 50% of final payment, after May 17, no refund unless a replacement is secured from the waitlist. **Travel insurance is strongly recommended.**



OVERVIEW

The Balkan Peninsula for many is one of the last undiscovered corners of Europe. Cultural and natural variety abound here, forged over the centuries by numerous political changes and imperial influences from the Byzantine to the Ottoman. We'll visit the cities of Tirana, Skopje, Prishtina and Podgorica along with traditional towns, villages, UNESCO World Heritage Sites and places of untouched natural beauty. Each country offers a different culture, cuisine and tradition to discover, each growing as an independent nation in its own right and taking its place in the modern world. This is a rare chance to see the re-emergence of places kept off limits until relatively recently.

Ride through the mountains of 4 countries! Please note that while the distances aren't particularly long, averaging 36 miles per day, there are a number of days with 1000 ft. of elevation over just 10 miles.

INCLUDED:

- 13 nights of lodging.
- All meals (except lunch & dinner on the 2 rest days).
- 11 riding days
- Local guides, at least one who speaks fluent English, with a support vehicle for luggage and basic support.
- Hybrid bicycle (Giant Hybrid Roam with front suspension). E-bikes are available for an additional 370 euros. Panniers (to carry jackets, etc.)
- All museum and other entrance fees.
- Snacks on the road.
- Transportation at the end of the tour (5/31/24) back to the Tirana airport (about a 2.5-hour drive) or to the hotel in Tirana for those staying extra nights.
- Ride with GPS files. Group generally regroups several times during the day, so maps are not needed except occasionally.

NOT INCLUDED:

- Transportation from Tirana airport to our lodging at the start of the tour (5/17). Expect to pay around 20 Euros per taxi, which holds up to 3 people.
- E-bikes or Single Supplement (see above). Singles will need to double up on 3 nights.
- Four meals as outlined in the section above – expect to pay 10-25€ per meal, including tip.
- Drinks with meals and drinks at cafes during rest stops.
- Bike helmet, shoes, and gear (Bring your pedals & seat if you'd like.)
- Tips for our cycling tour guide and van driver/support person.

HOTELS AND MEALS

We will stay in 3-4 star hotels and very comfortable guesthouses/mountain huts. Singles have to pair up in 3 of the more remote locations. Meals are generally family style, with the guide ordering a variety of dishes to share. Balkan gastronomy is excellent, fresh, organic and delicious. Gluten-free and vegan friendly are often

available. Alcohol and soft drinks are extra (except where soft drinks are provided at sag stops). Happy hour is usually 5:00-5:30, and dinner at 6:30 -7:00 p.m.

WEATHER

We will ride through a variety of climates, including two countries influenced by the Mediterranean and two inland countries, covering a wide variety of elevations. In May you can expect lows about 50 and highs in the low- to mid-70s, with occasional rain.

TRAVEL LOGISTICS

Fly into and out of Tirana International Airport (Mother Teresa Airport - TIA), about 11 miles from Tirana city center. If you would like to arrive early or stay late, accommodations can be arranged through Cycle Albania.

ITINERARY

May 17 – Arrival and Orientation Meeting in Tirana

Rendezvous at the Sky 7 Hotel at 6:00pm to meet the rest of the group and your tour leader for the tour briefing, followed by a relaxing welcome dinner.

Note: If you would like to arrive early and have a tour of Tirana, the capital of Albania, be ready to go by 2pm at the hotel. The tour includes a visit to the nuclear bunker of Enver Hoxha, the fruit and vegetable market and the national museum of history next to the newly built city center of Tirana. Lively, colorful Tirana is the beating heart of Albania, where this tiny nation's hopes and dreams coalesce into a vibrant whirl of traffic, brash consumerism and unfettered fun.



May 18 – Tirana to Ohrid. 35 miles, 1985 ft vertical

We start with a two-hour transfer to the northern side of Lake Ohrid. After we fit bikes and install seats/pedals, we'll ride along the scenic shore of Lake Ohrid toward Pogradec. Lake Ohrid is one of the oldest lakes in the world, which came into



existence as a result of tectonic shifts. With its unique flora and fauna, the lake is one of the largest biological reserves in Europe with 212 known endemic species. After lunch we cross over into North Macedonia and visit the monastery of St Naum before arriving in Ohrid. The town of Ohrid has an atmospheric old quarter cascading down a graceful hill, crammed full of beautiful churches and topped by the bones of a medieval castle. Its cobbled streets are flanked by traditional restaurants and lakeside cafes.

May 19 – Ohrid to Debar. 42 miles, 2293 ft vertical

Today we cycle along the Black Drin Valley following the only way out for the river from Lake Ohrid down the gorge past several dams and lakes to Debar. We cross the city of Debar past the main road of Via Egnatia. At one time the city included a number of existing provinces, and resulted in great economic importance for the western side of the Balkan Peninsula. Throughout the city, there were long columns of caravans in different directions, to Albania and the major cities of North Macedonia. Debar has several thermal water springs with temperatures reaching 48°C.

May 20 - Debar-Mavrovo. 30 miles, 3600 ft vertical

Today's ride is just glorious. The gorges, pine forests, karst fields and waterfalls of Mavrovo National Park offer a breath of fresh, rarefied air. Beautiful vistas abound, and the park is home to North Macedonia's and Albania's highest peak, Mt Korab (2764m) which hosts the international border.

May 21 - Mavrovo-Prizren. 50 miles, 5095 ft vertical

After an early breakfast we travel for 90 minutes by bus to the border with Kosovo. From there, we'll cycle up and down the wild Sharr Mountains, one of the most picturesque parts of Kosovo and for years a popular skiing destination in the former Yugoslavia. Undulating roads through moorland mountains offer fabulous views, all the way down to picturesque Prizren.



Prizren, with its charming mosque- and church-filled old town, shines with an

enthusiasm that's infectious. It's Kosovo's second city and most obvious tourist town and is well worth our afternoon lingering exploration. Prizren is a UNESCO city and is also known for Dokufest, a documentary film festival held each August that attracts documentary makers and fans from all over the world.

May 22 - Prizren-Pejë.

We take a break from cycling and continue by bus to Peja, Kosovo's third-largest city and one flanked by sites sacred to Orthodox Serbians and with a Turkish-style bazaar at its heart. We'll visit two UNESCO sites just before lunch and continue up the spectacular nearby Rugova Valley and surrounding mountains for a relaxing afternoon.



Peja Patriarchy, a UNESCO World Heritage site, is a complex of churches located in the suburbs of Pejë at the entrance of Rugova Gorge. This complex dates from the 13th century and from its inception, was a gathering place for theologians, writers and artists alike—a place where artistic heritage was greatly stressed and, today, remains a core monument to Kosovo's cultural heritage.

May 23 - Pejë-Berane. 32 miles, 2495 ft vertical

After breakfast we make our way down the Rugova National Park toward the remote border with Montenegro. This mountain border was only opened recently for tourism purposes and makes a great addition to the development of hiking and cycling for the region, which previously saw little to no tourism at all. A beautiful climb through an ancient forest is followed by an even more spectacular descent with views of the Plava valley, dotted with karst lakes.

May 24 - Berane-Kolasin. 38 miles, 3770 ft vertical

We leave Berane via a narrow, winding road that ascends steadily through the Komovi Mountains to reach the Trešnjevik Pass (5134 ft.) and a welcome cafe for refreshments. From the pass, the narrow road descends into the valley of the Tara River before crossing the Drcka River and joining a wider, more modern road that runs alongside the Tara River into the town of Kolašin, situated beneath the Bjelasica and Sinjajevina mountains.

May 25 - Kolasin-Zabljak. 46 miles, 5672 ft vertical

We leave Kolašin by cycling alongside the Tara River, Montenegro's second longest at 91 miles. The river valley begins to narrow as we enter the lower reaches of the Tara River Canyon. At 48 miles long, this is the longest river canyon in Europe. We have lunch overlooking the Tara Bridge which stretches across the canyon 540 ft above the river. The next 6 miles is uphill



as we leave the Tara River and enter Durmitor National Park, before reaching the remote collection of A-frame ski chalets offering open views of the surrounding mountains. Once in Žabljak, you'll be free to explore this amazing winter ski resort or go for a short bike ride around the mystic waters of the Black Lake.

May 26 - Zabljak-Pluzine. 27 miles, 2480 ft vertical

Today's ride takes us through Durmitor National Park and begins with a dramatic and remote 5 mile ascent to Prevoj Sedlo Pass (6256 ft.) along the highest paved road in Montenegro. From the pass, the narrow road winds its way down through the mountains before a second ascent to the Prijespa Pass (6184 ft). Our descent continues through magnificent limestone scenery and alpine meadows. Leaving the national park, we descend through hairpin turns and rocky tunnels to the shore of Lake Plužine and the town of Plužine.

May 27 - Pluzine-Cetinje. 30 miles, 2972 ft vertical

From Pluzine we undulate along the main road above the Komamica River heading south toward the city of Niksic. We will have lunch here and transfer to the city of Cetinje.

May 28 - Cetinje-Kotor. 30 miles, 2909 ft vertical

Today is one of contrasts as we travel from the highlands down to the Adriatic Coast. We initially head west, gradually ascending to Lovcen National Park.

The road then passes through a dry, rocky landscape before reaching our lunch stop at a roadside restaurant in the town of Njegusi. The rest of the day is spent pretty much going downhill. This narrow road descends through a series of hairpin turns with dramatic views of the inlet of Boka Kotorska some 2100 ft below. After reaching Kotor we cycle alongside the shoreline of the Boka Kotorska, or 'The Bay of Kotor', to reach Dobrota on the outskirts of Kotor.

May 29 - Rest Day in Kotor



Free day to explore the medieval city of Kotor. Built in the 15th century, the city is still completely encircled by walls with three entrance gates to the west, north and south. The city is overlooked by Mt Lovćen and contains several squares, a cathedral, several churches and a patchwork of narrow streets. Other options include a boat trip or hiring a canoe on the Boka Kotorska. For

those who want to ride, we recommend a circuit of the Boka. It involves a 10-minute ferry ride to cross the sea inlet on the western side and offers magnificent views of Kotor and the various towns and villages along the shoreline with the surrounding high mountains as a backdrop.

May 30 - Kotor-Shkoder. 24 miles, 654 ft vertical

We board the transfer vehicle, which takes us from Kotor to the coastal town of Bar. Along the way, soak in the stunning views of the Bay of Kotor, with its majestic mountains and shimmering waters. Pedaling away from Bar, we start our thrilling journey towards Shkoder. The route takes us through scenic roads and charming countryside, offering panoramic vistas of the Adriatic Sea on one side and lush landscapes on the other. The final 15km within Albania is almost flat and after crossing the River Buna we enter the city of Shkodër, the largest city in Northern Albania.

May 31 - Departure

Farewell day. Depending on your flight, right after breakfast we will transfer for one and a half hours to Rinas airport in Tirana. A separate transfer will be offered to those staying another night in Tirana or continuing on other adventures. Book your flight for departure no earlier than 11:30 AM.

For more information contact:

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