

hidden europe

the magazine exploring Europe's special spaces



including

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Montenegro mountains

Pennine portrait

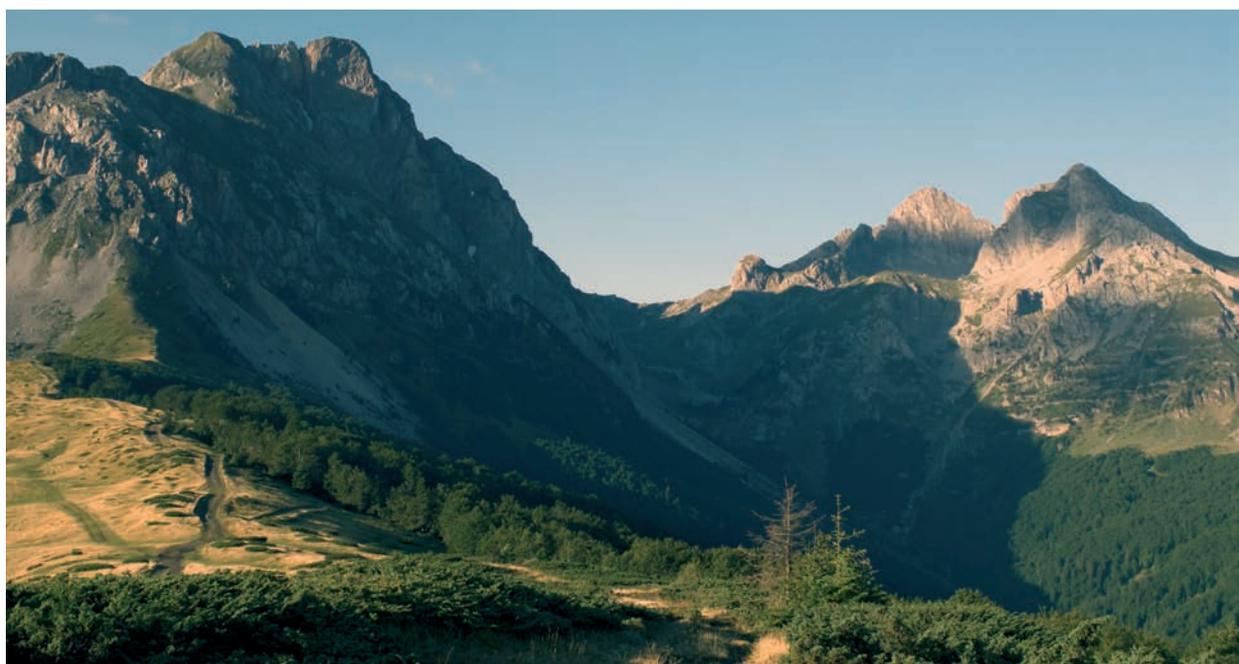
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accursed mountains, enchanted mountains



by Rudolf Abraham

Montenegro's status as Europe's newest country has been challenged by neighbouring Kosovo. That does nothing to diminish Montenegro's appeal. It is a country that boasts a wonderful coastline, some superb townships, the most engaging of which is Kotor with its lovely fjord, and an endless variety of mountain landscapes. To Tennyson, the Montenegrins were a race of mighty mountaineers, and anyone encountering the crowds of Montenegrins who cluster on the top of Mount Lovćen on sunny summer days will see first-hand the affection of Montenegrins for their mountains. There may be something of the Montenegrin soul bound up in Mount Lovćen, but the country has mountains that are wilder and more beautiful. Guest author RUDOLF ABRAHAM, a first-time contributor to HIDDEN EUROPE, takes us to Prokletije, a superbly rugged region where Montenegro borders onto Albania.

My soul hankered ever after Gusinje. Gusinje, said everyone, was impossible... No-one would take the risk of piloting me... The natives would admit no stranger. In former days a consul or two had visited it with an escort. Lately it had become the Lhasa of Europe, closed to all; though several had tried.

from Edith Durham's 'High Albania' (1909)

Few are the visitors who probe Montenegro's mountainous border with northern Albania. It is a fascinating and remote area, a spectacular landscape of isolated valleys and fang-like peaks, with a long and compelling history. Lying at the headwaters of the River Tara and the River Lim, and marching with the narrow finger of territory which forms the northern tip of Albania, this area constitutes one of the wildest remaining corners of Europe.

The best-known area of these mountains is Prokletije (Bjeshkët e Nemuna in Albanian). Meaning 'the accursed mountains', Prokletije was, according to local folklore, created by the

devil himself, unleashed from hell for a single day of mischief. Scoured by glaciers during the last ice age, the landscape shows all the hallmarks of a region shaped by ice: glaciated cirques and broad, U-shaped valleys. Glaciation in the Prokletije region actually occurred at a much lower altitude than elsewhere in the Balkans, or even in the Alps. Experts say that a glacier in the Plav-Gusinje area, the largest in the region, was about thirty-five kilometres long and some two hundred metres thick. Above the ice-worn valleys the skyline bristles with jagged limestone crags, the northern slopes of which carry snow well into the summer. The physical

OPPOSITE: Komovi's peaks stand sentinel close to Montenegro's border with Albania;
BELOW: on the road to Komovi (both photos by Rudolf Abraham)



character of the terrain is reflected in such exotically named peaks as Očnjak ('fang') and Karanfili ('carnations').

Sitting at the edge of these mountains is the small town of Gusinje. In some ways Gusinje appears to have the conservative, rather remote feel of a village far removed from western Europe. Yet at promenade time during the late afternoon and early evening, its streets are awash with miniskirts and designer jeans. Gusinje boasts a stone-walled mosque with the distinctive wooden minaret so characteristic of the area. There is a similar, slightly smaller mosque in the village of Vusanje, a little further up the valley.

But not all is quaint and beautiful. Gusinje has its share of concrete utilitarian housing offset by many new and remarkably large mansions, owned by Albanian expats and returning émigrés. For over forty years there has been a steady stream of ethnic Albanians moving from this region of Montenegro to the United States. Now some are coming back.

It all makes for a rather odd mixture. While sitting outside the Šar café in Gusinje (which serves some of the best *burek* I have ever tasted), after a walk to the head of the Ropojana valley, I was told the story of the arrival of a new Ferrari

in Gusinje. The roads were too rough for it to be driven, so it had to be brought to its owner's house on a truck, where it remains confined to the garage.

Stretching roughly southwest from Gusinje, the Grbaja valley runs past scattered houses to a series of open meadows, enclosed by a

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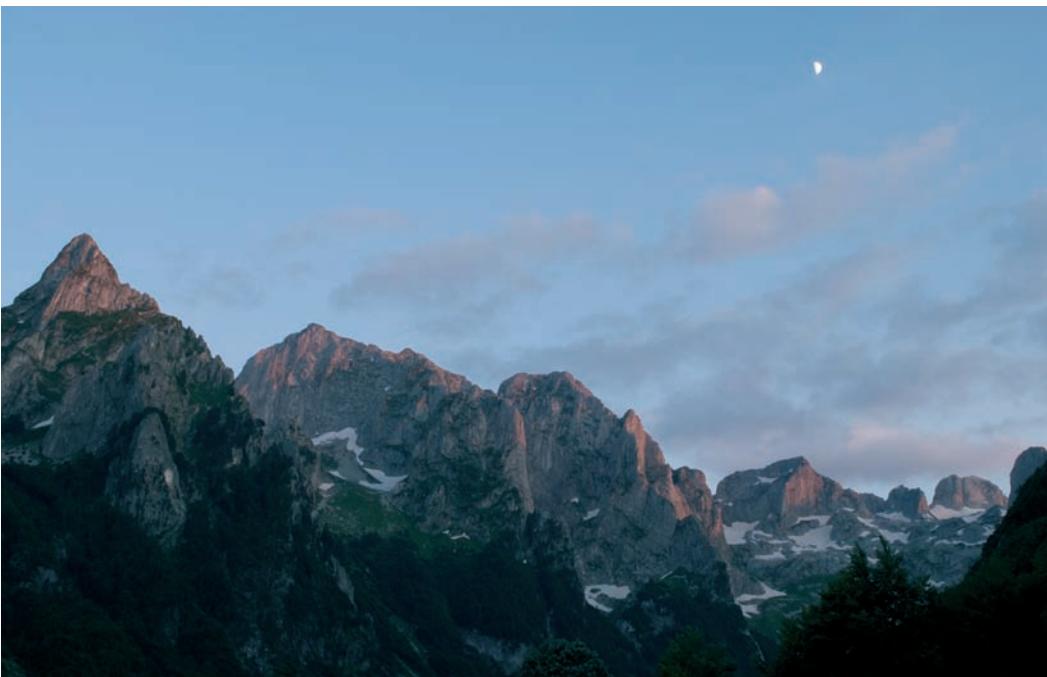
wall of limestone peaks. There is a small mountain hut near the head of the valley, called dom Radnički, run by a climbing club in Belgrade. The shadows of Montenegro's only recently severed ties with Serbia are everywhere. While I was staying at dom Radnički, the leader of an experienced group of

climbers from Belgrade fell during the steep descent from Karanfili's Sjeverni vrh (North Peak), which rises near the head of the Grbaja valley. His team mates had been filming him at the time of the accident, and later that evening, sit-

ting in the mountain hut and fortified with liberal quantities of homemade *rakija* (that quintessential local spirit) and Nikšičko Pivo (Montenegro's favourite beer), the old veteran — who had miraculously survived the incident with no more than a few cuts and bruises — relived his fall a dozen times on the monitor of a small camera, while his friends gathered round him and slapped him amiably on the back.

To the southeast of the Grbaja valley is the Ropojana valley, which stretches into the wilds beyond Vusanje up to a lonely and quite magically beautiful lake, full in

the view from the mountain hut in the Grbaja valley (dom Radnički): Očnjak (left) and Karanfili (centre) (photo by Rudolf Abraham)





Krošnja, a high, glaciated cirque above the Grbaja valley, in the Prokletije mountains (photo by Rudolf Abraham)

some years, the water vanishing in others like a mirage. A stream, nicely called the Skakavica, which means grasshopper, dances down the valley before disappearing into the rock in a roaring vortex of a cascade. Above the Ropojana valley is Maja Kolata, at 2528m the highest peak in Montenegro. Ignore the guidebooks, which wrongly award this accolade to Bobotov kuk (2523m) in the Durmitor region. Walking through the Ropojana valley in 2006 the only human souls we encountered were Albanian children gathering wild strawberries. Perhaps it was these same children who left a small pile of stones on the bonnet of our car, with its Podgorica number plates, which was parked at the end of the asphalt road — as if just to let us know that this valley was *their* territory.

Rough mountain passes link both valleys with Albania, but permission from the local police is required for foreigners to cross them. Registration with the local police in Gusinje is in any case mandatory for foreign visitors — Prokletije remains, officially at least, a sensitive border area. So long as you are only visiting the Grbaja and Ropojana valleys, this is in most cases purely a formality, and only requires showing a passport and stating where you intend to stay. Saying that you plan to follow an unmarked trail over a mountain pass into Albania will of course generate rather more paperwork!

The heady beauty of the landscape is matched in equal measure by its human interest. Indeed, as is often the case, the physical character of the landscape has in many ways shaped the lives of its inhabitants and the course of their history. Illyrian tribes in the area, for example, were among the last to surrender to the Romans, one veteran of the Roman campaigns in

the mountainous Montenegro-Albania border region is circled (map © Collins Bartholomew Ltd; scale 1:2m)



heading for the hills

There are three direct buses daily from Podgorica to Gusinje. Otherwise, the best jumping-off point for visits to the Prokletije region of Montenegro is the town of Bijelo Polje, well placed on the main Belgrade to Podgorica rail route. From Bijelo Polje there are good bus connections south to Gusinje, often requiring a change of bus at Berane. The Komovi and Kučka krajina mountain areas are best accessed from Kolašin, which is served by regular buses from Podgorica.

the area describing these wayward Illyrians as almost unconquerable, so protected were they in their mountain strongholds.

A trade route once ran through the Ropojana valley, linking it, and the village of Gusinje, with the Valbona and Shala valleys in northern Albania. Its position on this trade route, at the confluence of both the Grbaja and Ropojana valleys gave Gusinje considerable regional importance. From Gusinje, traders could head down-valley towards the Adriatic or cross the Čakor pass over to Peć in Kosovo. However, with the shifting of political borders during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the resulting decrease in trade, Gusinje's importance waned, and the town of Plav, set further back from the ramparts of the mountains, developed into the more important regional centre.

Following her energetic part in the anti-Ottoman wars of 1876–1878, Montenegro was awarded the districts of Gusinje and Plav, along with other Albanian areas, at the Congress of Berlin (1878). This settlement led to massive armed resistance on the part of many Albanians, and ongoing territorial disputes with local Albanian tribes, especially around Gusinje, prompting the English traveller Edith Durham to describe the largely porous Montenegrin-Albanian border as “floating in blood”. Unable to maintain its hold on Plav and Gusinje, Montenegro was forced to accept instead the port of Ulcinj as a compromise; and it was only some years later, following the First Balkan War (1913), that Gusinje and Plav became part of Montenegro. It should therefore come as little surprise that there is still a large Albanian population in Prokletije.

Slightly to the west of Prokletije, across the other side of that northern tip of Albania that juts into Montenegro, lie two further mountain areas of interest: Komovi and Kučka krajina (also sometimes called Žijevo). The latter is if anything even less known than Prokletije, despite its comparative proximity to the Montenegrin capital, Podgorica. The sudden view of the Kučka krajina peaks on reaching a pass, some seven kilometres up an unsealed road from Veruša, across the intervening lake and cottages of Bukumirsko jezero, is lovely indeed.

The legacy of Montenegro's tribal and clan-based history survives in the names of the main peaks of Komovi (Komovi simply being the plural of the noun *kom*): Kom Vasojevički, Kom Kučki and Kom Ljevoriječki, each summit named after a tribe of that name. The pastures below these same peaks were divided between these tribes in the nineteenth century. Legend tells that the tribes piled stones on the summits of their namesakes, each vying to claim as its own the highest of the three peaks.

Like elsewhere in the mountains of Montenegro, the landscape is dotted with *katun* — small cottages which locals move up to during the summer months, driving their sheep and cattle with them. As the last of the winter snow melts away, the animals graze on lush pastures

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while the seasonal migrants from the valleys grow vegetables and make cheese. At Bukumirsko jezero, a scattered settlement on the edge of the wonderfully jumbled mass of rocky peaks and dells which is the Kučka krajina region, many of the locals come up from Bioče, a small town

just north of Podgorica. One particularly hospitable family called us over to their house as we were returning from a long day's walk, to ply us with cheese, *kiselo mljeko* (a refreshing, slightly sour milk drink) and deliciously crusty homemade bread, as we sat in the shade of a

tree in their garden. Typically built of either wood or stone, some *katun* are long abandoned, and their ruined shells punctuate the landscape of any walk through the Montenegrin highlands.

The area is also home to numerous species of plants and animals, many of them peculiar to this part of Montenegro, in some cases even to a particular lake or tarn — such as an endemic species of alpine newt, which is to be found swimming lazily among long, waving water weed, in a shallow pond beneath the rugged summits of Štitan and Pasjak in Kučka krajina.

It seems remarkable, then, that this uniquely beautiful region of Montenegro has not yet been designated a national park. This is to be explained perhaps by the marginal location of Prokletije and adjacent ranges, and the proximity of the frontier with Albania. These border mountains are not so inscribed on the national psyche as Lovćen and Durmitor, both of which are national parks. Prokletije missed out on designated park status when Montenegro was linked with Serbia. Now, in newly-independent Montenegro, it is back on the agenda.

There is an international effort to promote and protect this region under the auspices of the Balkans Peace Park Project, which last autumn was runner-up in a competition to identify the best new ecologically sensitive tourism development in the world — nominated, appropriately enough, by Nicky Gardner of *hidden europe*. The proposed area of the Balkans Peace Park covers a huge tract of territory, spanning the borders of Montenegro, Albania and Kosovo, and including, on the Montenegrin side of the border, Prokletije, Komovi and Kučka krajina. Cross border treks, organised with the blessing of the local authorities, have traversed the mountains, linking valleys long divided by international frontiers. Find out more about this initiative at www.balkanspeacepark.org.



a *katun* (summer cottage) on Bjelasica north of Komovi (photo by Rudolf Abraham)

Awarding Prokletije and adjacent areas national park status would not only help ensure that they are protected and preserved, but also generate valuable revenue for local inhabitants as small scale tourism develops in the region. And we must hope that, as this remote and outstandingly beautiful area of Europe slowly opens up, it will be developed in an understated and sympathetic manner — one that respects the region's rich combination of natural beauty and cultural heritage. ■

Rudolf Abraham is the author of *THE MOUNTAINS OF MONTENEGRO* (2007) and *WALKING IN CROATIA* (2004), both published by Cicerone Press. He lives in London and is currently working on a guidebook to the mountains of eastern Turkey. Apart from travel writing and photography, Rudolf also writes on Islamic art and architecture. Find out more about him on www.rudolfabraham.co.uk.

If you found this article of interest, you may like to know that we have featured this part of Europe in earlier issues of the magazine. In January 2008, we published a wonderful account, written by Anjeza Cikopano and Antonia Young, of village life in the Albanian valleys on the south side of the Prokletije mountains. And in January 2006 we looked at Čakor Pass, which heads east from the Lim valley to Kosovo. A remarkable tale of a road that has all but disappeared!