



They may not be household names the world over like their Greek counterparts, but Montenegro's islands also offer sandy shorelines, as well as spectacular nature, myth and history. And all with a fraction of the crowds and at a fraction of the cost.

the alternative to the Greek Islands, Greece

MONTENEGRO'S ISLANDS

Montenegro

Not got the time for an epic Greek odyssey? Try Montenegro's dozen or so islands instead, which are mercifully close together and no less breathtaking. Most lie in the warm embrace of the compact Bay of Kotor, while others line the edge of the Adriatic, just a short boat ride (or even walk) from the shore. From lushly forested islets fringed by gorgeous sweeps of sand to a human-made stack of rock topped with a 17th-century church, each Montenegrin island offers something different.

At the southern tip of Dalmatia, a little southeast of Dubrovnik in Croatia, the Bay of Kotor is one of Montenegro's biggest draws. And it's little wonder. Made up of inlets linked by narrow passages, the bay is fringed by quaint villages, overlooked by the gloriously green Dinaric Alps. Out in the bay itself lie some of the country's most beautiful islands. While most of these are natural, the title of most iconic

goes to an artificial island, the Gospa od Škrpjela (Our Lady of the Rocks). Legend has it that a group of seamen found an icon of the Madonna and Child on a rock in the sea in 1452, so set about creating an island on which they could build a church to house it. They added new rocks to the pile every day, along with the odd scuttled ship, and after (give or take) 180 years, they had a fully formed, church-ready island.

Fast forward around 400 years, and the Church of Our Lady of the Rocks is one of Montenegro's best-known attractions. Small boats ferry passengers from Perast on the mainland to the island harbour in five to ten minutes, from where it's just a few steps to the pretty stone church. Inside, see stunning, 17th-century Baroque paintings and a gorgeous tapestry embroidered with a mix of golden and silver fibres – as well as, so they say, strands of the artist's hair.



The beautiful Bay of Kotor, surrounded by forested mountains and the medieval town of Kotor



Left The human-made islet of Our Lady of the Rocks with its old church Above The entrance to the small church of Our Lady of the Rocks



Above Kitesurfing in the waters off Ada Bojana *Right* The public beach on Sveti Stefan, perfect for swimming

Our Lady of the Rocks is far from the only church-on-an-island here. You can also explore Sveti Đorđe (Saint George), a natural island home to a picture-perfect 12th-century monastery and a graveyard. There's also Ostrvo Cvijeća (Island of Flowers), connected to the mainland by a narrow strip of land, and featuring a 13th-century abbey. And let's not forget the tiny Gospa od Milosti (Our Lady of Grace), home to a spectacular 15th-century Franciscan monastery.

But it's not all about houses of God. Sveti Marko, the biggest island, doesn't have any churches – or, in fact, anything human-made. This is an island entirely covered in greenery, rimmed by beautiful beaches. It's off most tourist radars, but boat owners in Tivat may be persuaded to ferry you there for a small fee.

As well as the Bay of Kotor, Montenegro has a host of islands dotted along its Adriatic coast. Two are so close to the mainland that you don't even need to charter a boat. Sveti Stefan, a

postcard-worthy islet, is connected to the mainland by a narrow tombolo. While most of the island is occupied by a resort, the beach on the left side is free and open to the public, its turquoise waters perfect for swimming and snorkelling. Ada Bojana is situated in the far south of the country. Created by a river delta of the Bojana River, this island is connected to the mainland by road bridge. With its long stretch of idyllic beach and subtropical climate, it's a great place for swimmers, windsurfers and kitesurfers.

Looking to venture further out to sea? Head for Sveti Nikola Island, Montenegro's largest island in the Adriatic, which lies a couple of kilometres (a mile) out from the mainland town of Budva. Breaching the surface of the sea like a shark's fin, the



island has soaring rocky cliffs – but only on one side. At the northern tip of the lopsided isle is a sandy beach, while its densely forested interior is roamed by fallow deer. Hire a kayak to explore the coves, including a secluded beach at the southern end.

With a mere 88 km (55 miles) between Our Lady of the Rocks in the west and Ada Bojana in the east, you can see all of Montenegro's islands in a long, leisurely weekend. How's that for time-poor island-hoppers?

Still hopping around the Greek Islands?

Instead of Crete, Corfu and Rhodes, opt for lesser-visited but just as lovely islands like foodie haven Sifnos, proudly traditional Tinos and away-from-it-all Amorgos.

Getting There Fly into Podgorica in Montenegro or Croatia's Dubrovnik and catch a bus to Budva, a good base for visiting islands in all directions.
www.visit-montenegro.com

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