

Go Slow in Montenegro

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1 Fly Montenegro & transfer to Virpazar

Day 2/7 Excursions from Virpazar

Day 8 Depart Montenegro

Departs

April or May

Focus

A mix of birds and reptiles, plus other wildlife and landscapes

Grading

Day walks only. Grade A.

Dates and Prices

Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk (tour code MNE02)

Highlights

- Dalmatian Pelicans & Pygmy Cormorants on Lake Skadar
- Spring migrants including Bee-eater, Hoopoe, Yellow Wagtail & Woodchat Shrike
- Waders, such as Wood Sandpiper & Kentish Plover
- Stunning scenery
- Reptiles and amphibians possible
- Enjoy Montenegrin hospitality
- Wonderful rural location overlooking Lake Skadar



Images from top: Hermann's Tortoise, Rijeka Crnojeviča River and Villa Miela (courtesy of Villa Miela ©)



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Introduction

Montenegro is a fantastic little country, rich in history and with stunning scenery. From beaches, sand dunes and salt pans along its coast to the dramatic interior mountains there is a wide range of habitat for wildlife, providing vital stopover points for many migrating birds. Timed to coincide with the spring migration, this tour will focus primarily on birds, although there will also be plenty of amphibians, reptiles, plants and insects to be found.

Staying in the south of the country we will explore the area around the beautiful Lake Skadar, nestled between the mountains on the Montenegro/Albania border. Basing ourselves just outside the historic village of Virpazar with easy access to the



lake, we will be looking for waders, gulls and other waterbirds, including Whiskered Terns, Little Egrets, Squacco Herons and the rare Dalmatian Pelican. During our stay here we will also journey to the Adriatic coast as we search for Curlew Sandpiper, Black-necked Grebe, Cirl Bunting and Eurasian Hoopoe. We'll discover delightful villages, stunning landscapes and varied wildlife as we explore this less visited corner of Europe.

Itinerary

Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

Fly Montenegro, transfer to accommodation



Eurasian Scops Owl

We depart London on a morning flight to either Tivat or Podgorica in Montenegro and, on arrival, transfer to our accommodation near Virpazar, a sleepy town on the shore of Lake Skadar, where Scops Owls are often heard calling in the evenings. Our accommodation is located in the hills above the lake and this will be our base for the tour. Depending on the time, we may be able to make a short excursion from the accommodation this afternoon, getting our eyes and ears accustomed to the local wildlife. We'll formally begin the week with dinner on the terrace at the accommodation, keeping an eye out for the resident badger family while we enjoy a meal based on local produce.

Days 2 - 7

Excursions from Virpazar

This morning, we will start by following the southern shore of Lake Skadar in search of species such as Subalpine Warbler and Western Rock Nuthatch. Various orchid species grow along the roadside verges and at times we'll have stunning views out across Lake Skadar as the road winds its way along the hillside.

We then take to the water and enjoy a boat ride on Lake Skadar. The lake is one of Europe's largest freshwater bodies and home to some Dalmatian Pelicans. If we are fortunate, we will be able to find a number of these magnificent birds. At this time of year, many migrants are making their way north again for their breeding season and will stop off at the lake to rest or feed, while resident birds will be starting to mate or nest. Spring migration can turn up a number of surprises, so we may come across a few unexpected birds. Species that we are likely to encounter include Black-necked Grebe, Pygmy Cormorant, Squacco Heron, Little Egret, Whiskered Tern and Red-rumped Swallow. As we explore the lake, we are likely to observe some mating and territorial behaviour. (NB. We will be adhering to a code of conduct which states that a distance of at least 300m must be maintained from the pelicans, and boat engines shut off while watching them). The lake colour can change throughout the day depending on the angle of the sun and amount of cloud cover, while the vegetation on shore will be starting to display a variety of shades and hues as the leaves and flowers of different plant species begin to grow.



Dalmatian Pelican

We aim to picnic on one of the islands where the Orthodox Beška Monastery is located. In the past, pelicans have nested nearby, so we may be able to watch them at a nest site while still maintaining a sensible distance to avoid disturbing them. It may also be possible for us to visit the monastery and find out more about the history of the island.



Golden Oriole

In the afternoon, we'll return by boat to the shore, most likely journeying around the lake shore to disembark in Virpazar.

Another day we will set out on foot from Virpazar, along the banks of the Orahovstica River, looking out for orchids, reptiles and other wildlife. Riparian woodland grows along the banks, where we could find Greater or

Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, and Golden Oriole call from high in the tree tops. Orchid species may

include Green-winged (*Anacamptis morio*), Loose-flowered (*A. laxiflora*), Pyramidal (*A. pyramidalis*) and Monkey (*Orchis simia*), along with reptiles or amphibians such as European Tree Frog, European Glass Snake, Balkan Whip Snake, Nose-horned Viper and Dalmatian Wall Lizard. For the slightly more adventurous, there will be an opportunity to visit a nearby waterfall, before lunch at a local honey farm. Montenegro is thought to have the largest number of vascular plants per unit area of any European country, with both Mediterranean and Alpine species, including a number of country and Balkan endemic species. Pomegranate and Rosehip are particularly good for honey, but there are also a number of fragrant herbs such as thyme and rosemary.

In the afternoon, we take a gentle stroll through Dupilo village, set up in the hills to the north of the lake, finding out more about the local way of life. It's early in the season; however, on a warm day and in sunny spots, we could find butterflies flitting around the blossoms, which may include such species as Southern White Admiral, Swallowtail, Wall Brown, Spotted Fritillary and Southern Festoon.



Marsh Sandpiper

Another morning we will make our way south, away from the lake. As we drive, we will keep an eye out for hunting harriers, Corn Bunting and Yellow

Wagtail. Our destination is the Ulcinj salt pans which are situated on the Adriatic coast and consist of a series of shallow pans covering an area of around 15 km². The area is a disused salt excavation area and water levels can fluctuate throughout the year. The pans lie to the south of Ulcinj, a nice seaside town with an Albanian feel, and attract thousands of birds during the migration seasons, including Marsh Sandpiper, Stone Curlew, Wood Sandpiper, Curlew Sandpiper, Collared Pratincole, Calandra and Short-toed Larks. Greater Flamingoes are also a common sight here and can be found in large flocks.



Greater Flamingoes on the Ulcinj Salt pans

Lunch will be taken on the banks of the Bojana River, where there are some excellent fish restaurants. After this, we'll aim to have a short exploration of the island before we return to our accommodation in the hills.

Along the northern shore of Lake Skadar is the iconic viewpoint at Pavlova Strana, giving fantastic views of the horseshoe bend in the Rijeka Crnojevića River, as well as the peaked hills that surround

the lake. Following the stop here, we will follow the banks of the Rijeka Crnojeviča River in search of the varying wildlife found here. There will be two options for walks – one along by the village and a longer option to some hidden pools and a cave. The terrain here is steeper, so it is only suitable for more active walkers. We'll listen out for singing Nightingale and warblers, and Hawfinch can be seen throughout the year. The river is famous for fish and we could find Fire-bellied Toad in the damp areas.

After lunch in the village, we will journey by boat back to Virpazar, a trip of around an hour and a half, taking us past tall reedbed areas where Great Reed Warblers pour forth their incessant song. We'll also hear the croak of Marsh Frogs, and will likely spot herons and egrets hunting in the shallows. New growth from White Water Lilies and Water Chestnuts will be starting to cover the water's surface. As we approach Virpazar, a flurry of swallows and martins feed above the stream and around the bridge.



Virpazar & Lake Skadar

One day we will visit the Cijevna Canyon, a beautiful, natural canyon through the karst rock, where we will look for wagtail, finches, bee-eaters and nightingale. The canyon holds breeding territories of Egyptian Vulture, Short-toed Eagle and other raptors, so we could well see these soaring overhead. A rustle in the undergrowth could indicate the presence of a tortoise or perhaps a Common Wall or Sharp-snouted Rock Lizard. During the spring, the banks are festooned with flowers and plants, some rarer species, with 60 regional endemics and over 300 nectar-rich plants. The canyon has over 800 species that have been recorded, accounting for around a quarter of the country's flora, including a unique phytocoenosis - *Adiantum-Pinguiculetum hirtiflorae*, which is rare and has a very limited distribution. One of the dominant species of this plant community is the Hairy-flowered Butterwort (*Pinguicula hirtiflora*), a carnivorous plant and an emblem of the canyon area.

Lunch will be taken in a restaurant by a waterfall referred to as Montenegro's Niagara Falls. This is



Eurasian Hoopoe

located on the Cijevna River, which has a deep turquoise blue colour. In the afternoon, we'll explore Čemovsko Polje, an area on the outskirts of Podgorica favoured by local ornithologists due to the diversity of species found here, although it's not a particularly scenic place because it has a tendency to be used as a tipping site. The ugliness of the surroundings is more than made up for by the species that can be found in this steppe habitat. Calandra Lark, Tawny Pipit, Lapwing, Stone Curlew and Greater Short-toed Lark are known to breed here, while Red-footed Falcon are

seen as passage migrants. Corn Buntings call from the field margins and there could well be flocks of European Bee-eater migrating overhead, their distinct call carrying through the open space.

If there is time, we may visit a local winery. Thought to be the only vineyard producing Krstač wines, there are around 30 types of wine produced in this region.



On our final day we will visit the ruined citadel of Stari Bar. With parts of it dating back to the 11th century and before, this medieval city was once one of the most important settlements in Montenegro. In an area that has seen the Ottoman Empire come and go, as well as Hungarians and Venetians, it was claimed by Montenegro in the late 1800s after a siege. The city was abandoned in 1979 after an earthquake

destroyed the water supply. Today you can still see the foundations of the cathedral, Turkish baths, the clock tower and the aqueduct, among other buildings. We might well spot Blue Rock Thrush among the stonework. Overhead swallows and martins swoop after insects, and raptors use the thermals coming off the hillsides to gain height.

Day 8

Fly London

There will be time today for some final bird and wildlife watching around our accommodation before we make the journey back to Tivat or Podgorica for our flight back to London.

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Tour Grading

Grade A – walks will be day walks only and mostly on tracks or easy terrain. They will be taken at a slow pace, although a basic level of fitness is recommended to get the most out of the tour. Longer or more challenging walks will be optional.

Weather

Montenegro has a typically Mediterranean climate with hot, dry summers peppered by occasional thunderstorms. Winters are generally very mild along the coastline but can be extremely cold inland. Whilst April should be very pleasant along the coast with temperatures from the low 20s degrees C, it can be unpredictable



and you should be prepared for the occasional shower! A local cool wind called the 'Bura' can blow on occasion during the spring, and weather around the mountains is always fickle.

Focus

The primary focus of the holiday will be birds, reptiles and other wildlife, as well as the stunning scenery and unusual geography. It is timed to coincide with the spring migration of birds returning from Africa and the Middle East to Europe.

Food & Accommodation Included in the Price

All meals and accommodation are included in the cost of this holiday except for lunches on Days 1 and 8. We will be staying in comfortable villa-style accommodation, the lovely Villa Miela; most rooms have private facilities, with the exception of two rooms, which share a bathroom. Our stunningly located villa has a terrace and an (unheated) outdoor pool.



Clockwise from top left: terrace at Villa Miela, swimming pool, Villa Miela location & one of the bedrooms
©courtesy of Villa Miela.

Transport

During this tour, our transport will mainly be by long wheelbase Land Rover, which will allow us the flexibility to travel on the roads and tracks around the area.

Please assist our tour leaders in ensuring that there is a rotation of seats around the tour vehicle(s) to allow each tour member to enjoy approximately equal time in the front. In order to be fair to all

participants, we regret that we are unable to guarantee a perpetual front seat to those who might suffer from motion sickness or other concerns.

How to Book Your Place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website.

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