

# Sons of the Black Mountains

An impenetrable Balkan borderland, its slopes and peaks still largely unexplored... welcome to Montenegro's wild and wonderful backcountry

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**T**he weather forecast for Montenegro was too good to be credible. It was scary. Three metres of snow were predicted for the next two days alone, with yet more precipitation to come during the week. It was the end of January, and we were driving on a brand new highway from Skopje International Airport in Macedonia, through Kosovo. It was a provisional one for that matter, as the provisional country of Kosovo, still pleading for full recognition, is being dug up for an even grander road construction on concrete stilts the size of skyscrapers. It felt like a spring day, with blue skies as we headed for the border town of Peja (pronounced 'petsh').

Kosovars were indulging in their all-year pastime, hosing driveways and pavements, while passing construction vehicles and transcontinental trucks smothered them in dust. From Peja a winding road over the mountain pass would take us through a few miles of yet-not-quite defined borderland, letting us first believe that Montenegro, a country of 600,000 orthodox Slavs and Muslims, cannot be bothered putting up a manned crossing. It would have been a practical decision considering that we were the only car around.

My friend Metodi from Skopje had gone to great length to prepare for this trip. We had rented a brand new 4x4, with a set of good snow chains nestling between our bags and skis in the boot. Vanja Pejovic, our local Montenegrin guide, was waiting for us in the town of Kolasin, close to a mid-sized ski resort of the same name. It sports two chairlifts and four pomas, serving forested pistes between

► **Andreas scales Istoni Vrh (2,445m), an impressive peak in the Durmitor National Park, Montenegro**





1,420 and 1,973m altitude. We wanted to ski in the resort, then scale the Prokletije Mountains – or ‘Albanian Alps’ – followed by the peaks of Durmitor National Park, with Bobotov Kuk, at 2,522m, the highest.

▲ **Wilderness starts here: skiing off piste in the Savin Kuk ski resort (1,515m)**

### DELUGE OF BIBLICAL DIMENSIONS

Montenegro, a Mediterranean country famed for its Venetian coastal towns and its wide-stretched, sandy beaches, is not easily associated with winter sports. Yet its high mountains separating it from Albania, Kosovo, Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, and its prodigious snow fall in winter, predestine it for skiing. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why the Ottomans never managed to conquer these haughty, pugnacious and unusually tall mountain people (our youthful, impish mountain guide Vanja, at six-foot-seven, quite clearly no exception).

The Norwegian army officer, travel writer and Olympic skier Henrik Angell (1861-1922) was the first to recognise Montenegro’s skiing potential. At the end of the 19th century he came to Montenegro to teach the locals how to ski. He is still remembered as being the father of skiing and his book, *The Sons of the Black Mountains*, is a bible for enthusiasts.

As we showed up on our first day at the ski resort, the weather report proved only partly right. Yes, there was indeed an incredible amount of precipitation, but alas it was in the form of rain. A deluge of biblical dimensions washed down the roads and mountain slopes, asking too much of our windscreen wipers. We pulled up at the empty car park, fully dressed with goggles and all, and looked with disbelief through the windows hammered with rain.

*We set our tracks over 1,000 vertical metres, whooping with joy*

The chairlifts were dutifully moving, but not even we would have been crazy enough to sit down on them. A day of sightseeing was decided, visiting some of the local 16th century monasteries and Cetinje, the quaint former capital two hours’ drive away, complete with a castle and host of 19th century ambassadorial town houses. Rain continued the next day, when we visited Lake Skadar and the capital Podgorica. The sauna and Erminia’s excellent cuisine in Hotel Brile in Kolašin certainly helped to prop up our spirits. However, two days of forced house arrest and a slightly less gloomy forecast for the next two days persuaded us to move on to Durmitor National Park, where we had rented a lovely chalet with a crackling log fire and solid central heating.

### POWDER PARABOLA

The ski resort of Savin Kuk (1,515m), complete with chalets, hotels, bars, restaurants and a large, well-endowed supermarket, straddles a mountain of the same name, with two chairlifts in high alpine terrain taking skiers close to the peak at 2,143m.

Rain was increasingly turning into snow in the morning, covering roofs and roads with thick, fluffy duvets of white. Skiers were out in great numbers, frolicking on beginners’ slopes and joyfully tobogganing every elevation in the village. The chairlifts weren’t operating yet as a swarm of PistenBullys attempted to tame the morning snow.

The weather was clearing up and we decided to skin up the ridge to the left of the resort with our touring skis, along a sheer rock wall, Čista Strana, towards Istočni Vrh (2,445m), a huge snowy expanse suspended over precipitous cliffs.

The hike was not overly steep, yet increasingly difficult. As we were to find out, the rain over the past two days had affected the whole mountain, top to bottom. When the temperature finally dropped, a solid ice sheet had formed,



▲ **Conquering the Dolomite-like Subci (2,309m), a row of 13, ice-cruled rock needles**



► **Powdery bowls and chutes abound once the Mediterranean sun has worked its magic**

only thinly disguised by a mere 15 centimetres of fresh snow. The powder slopes we craved for were more likely to resemble the Hahnenkamm downhill after a World Cup race: rock hard. We even had to enamour our skis with crampons to avoid slipping – an unnerving thought bearing in mind we were skittering above a 500m drop.

The strenuous task of gaining altitude under such adverse conditions was made more pleasant by the spectacular vistas opening up around us. Surrounded by forested plains, the Durmitor range – carbonate rock like the Alps – forms crags and peaks reminiscent of the Dolomites.

When the skins came off three hours later, we skied Mlijecni, a wide 30° bowl forming a perfect parabola. Our fear that the descent would be similarly hazardous proved unfounded. There was sufficient snow for gaudy powder skiing, yet not enough to present any serious avalanche risk. We set our tracks over 1,000 vertical metres, whooping with joy as snowcocks flew off with a rattle and chamois fled in panicky leaps when we crossed their pass.

Returning to the resort we equipped ourselves with day passes and tracked the forest clearings and chutes, straddling the blue and red runs in the lower sections.

The main chairlift was closed from the mid-station up, as a collapsed cornice had rendered the high-altitude black runs un-skiable. A few hundred cubic metres of chunks and debris had clogged up the pistes. Yet we persuaded the pisteurs to let us continue to the top station, from where we tracked one couloir after the other in bliss. Off-piste skiing right off the ski lift, how good is that?

On our last day in the Durmitor we started a six-hour hike from the Black Lake, 5km from the resort, along the Lokvice valley towards Trojni Prevoj, or the ‘Triple Pass,’ located between Bandijerna (2,409m), Zupci (2,309m) and Bobotov Kuk (2,522m), the highest peak in Montenegro.

It was a lot of uphill-downhill, and we had to take off our hiking skins quite a few times until our final ascent towards Zubci, the ‘Teeth’ – a row of 13, white-glistening, ice-cruled rock needles. Again, it was a difficult ascent, with icy slopes so hardened that our crampons were only scratching on the surface.

From the summit saddle we could take in the whole of Montenegro, with the Prokletije Mountains staring majestically and alluringly in the south.

What a wild, impenetrable borderland – its slopes and peaks still unexplored by skiers and hikers. It will have to wait for another day. For now we enjoyed the bowls and chutes as they turned ice-free and cottony by a smiling Mediterranean sun.

### FACTFILE

**Fly into Skopje or Pristina with Wizz Air ([wizzair.com](http://wizzair.com)), and look for deals with Swiss and Austrian airlines too on [skyscanner.net](http://skyscanner.net). Kolasin ([kolasin1450.com](http://kolasin1450.com)) and Savin Kuk ([montenegro.travel](http://montenegro.travel)) day passes cost €15 for an adult, €11 for a child. Hotel Brile ([brile.co](http://brile.co)) has doubles from €70 per room, half-board. For chalets in Savin Kuk, visit [airbnb.co.uk](http://airbnb.co.uk) and [booking.com](http://booking.com); expect to pay from €300 to €700 per week, depending on size. Vanja Pejovic ([montenegromountainguide.me](http://montenegromountainguide.me)) charges €150 per day. He speaks English fluently.**