



The life aquatic

Never one to shy away from a bracing dip, wild-swimming fanatic Jo Tinsley embarks on a watery safari through the country of Montenegro – seeking out silent mountain pools, turquoise rivers, the backwaters of Lake Skadar and a curious blue grotto on the Adriatic, in her quest to find the perfect swimming spot

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Swim one A dip in Durmitor's mountain eyes

After climbing steeply above the fjord (technically a submerged river canyon), the road snakes through a karst landscape: exposed limestone erupts through goat-nibbled grass, and bluff summits swirl with loops of strata. A concertina of 2,000-metre-plus peaks in the far north of the country, the Durmitor Massif is said to derive its name from the Balkan Romance-Vlach for 'sleeping-place'. Across the high plateau, 748 springs of clear mountain water carve out a honeycomb of caves and keep the lakes topped up.

Miljana Lalorio welcomes me into restaurant and guesthouse Ethno Village Nevidio, a semi-circle of huts with drystone

walls and steeply sloping roofs. Her aunt is in the kitchen, slow-roasting veal and root vegetables in parchment parcels – her own method. Her brother shows me to a long wooden table on the terrace. Within minutes boards appear bearing pots of local honey, a fresh clotted buffalo cream called kaymak, mountain bread and rolls of pršut (similar to prosciutto). Next come the veal parcels, followed by mutton that's been dried, smoked and boiled then salted until it falls helplessly apart.

'This place means everything to me, because our father left it to us,' Miljana tells me, as we walk together after the meal. We pause in front of a mural of her late father Dragan (Gašo) Lalović, a mountain guide who was technical leader of the first ex-Yugoslavian expedition to Mount Everest in 1996. 'All Montenegrins knew my father as a brave man who saved lives,' she says quietly. 'I feel proud when people come

here and know we are his family.' We walk back to the terrace, where her brother has laid out a tray of berry-filled pastries.

Later that afternoon, I push on into the national park, and by the time I reach Crno Jezero (Black Lake), the day is winding down. A family rolls wet towels into rucksacks, a man skims stones on the inky water, and a solitary swimmer makes for the opposite bank, taking slow and steady strokes. I wade in gingerly, brushing away floating pine cones and feeling the cool water inch up over my shoulders. Diving under, I kick along the gravelly floor, which is scattered with limestone pebbles and curious rings of grass, like garlands for freshwater mermaids. I swim out to the centre and float at the sun-warmed surface, looking up at the blunt head of Meded (The Bear, 2,167m), before heading back to bundle myself up in jumpers, skin tingling, just as the sun dips below the tree line. ➔

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Jo braves Crno Jezero (Black Lake), named for the effect of the brooding dark pines that surround it. Meded (The Bear) mountain looms above

Swim two River swimming like a local

The limestone of Durmitor is cut through with gorges, and the following morning I seek out one of its most impressive. Inside the nearby 2.8-mile Nevidio ('unseen') Canyon, surging water has sliced the soft rock so deeply there are points no sunlight can reach. Climbers from the city of Nikšić conquered the canyon in 1965, navigating shoots, eight-metre leaps and a 25cm pinch-point since named the Gate of Kamikazes. Peering down from a slender bridge, I can't see the water below, just a couple of exhilarated canyoning guides rinsing wetsuits in the valley. Further north, the feisty River Tara has carved Europe's longest and deepest ravine; at 1,300 metres deep, it's second only to the Grand Canyon. En route to my next swimming spot, I pull in at the vertiginous Tara Bridge. Above the gin-clear water and model-railway trees, I see tiny screeching figures zip-wiring.

The drive between Montenegro's highest peaks and its lowland capital, Podgorica, is similarly breathtaking. After the Tara Bridge, the road winds southeast, clouds clinging to the peaks and drifting over the tarmac, the air smelling of wild thyme and

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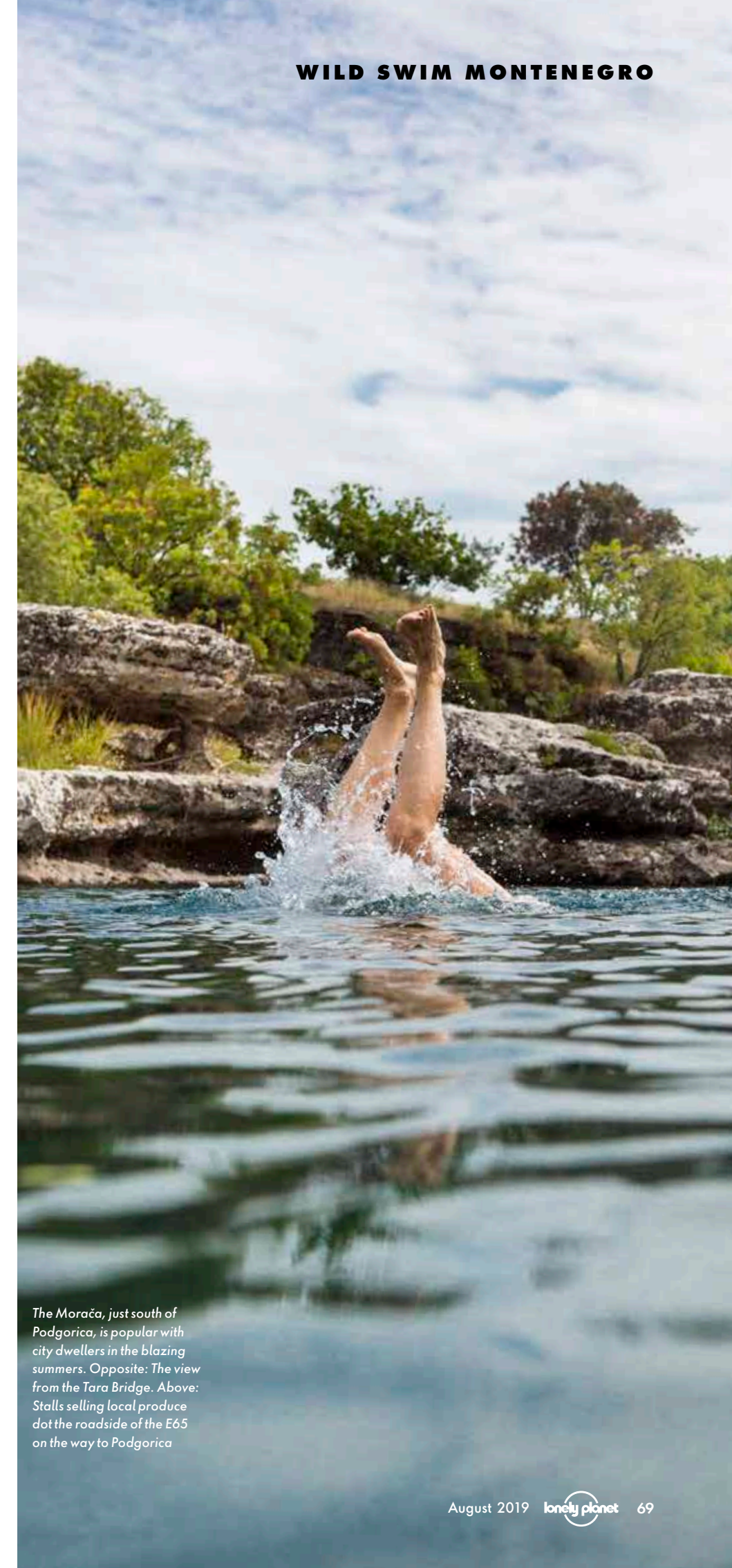
sage. Katun (tent-shaped shepherds' huts with pitched roofs reaching almost to the ground) pepper the higher grazing fields, and wooden stalls selling honey and raspberry syrup beckon from every bend.

Further on, the drive gets hairier as the E65 traverses an almost perpendicular canyon beside the foaming Morača. Poker-straight black pines grow at impossible angles, and chamois peer down from ledges. Eventually, the placated river empties into an astonishingly green valley, lined with vineyards and spinning-tops of cut hay. In the centre of this flatland, Montenegro's capital simmers.

'In summer, Podgorica reaches 40°C for days at a time. This is where people come to cool off,' says keen swimmer Vuk Djukić. He gestures at a deep limestone cleft filled with turquoise water beside Restoran Niagara, a restaurant just south of the city. All along the terrace, locals drink coffee in the shade.

'In Montenegro, we learn to swim young,' says Vuk, sharing stories of growing up in the city, of jumping off bridges and floating downstream on tractor tyres. He lights a cigarette and stares out over the water, which tumbles in an impressive waterfall just downstream. I ask Vuk if he'd care to join me for a swim, but he declines. 'I only swim when the water is warmer than 28°C,' he says with a smile, holding up his empty pint glass to the waitress.

I amble down to the water and sit on a submerged step, watching ducklings explore the pitted edges of the rock. Looking down, I'm amused (and a little horrified) to see hundreds of tiny fish gathering around me, nibbling at my legs. I push quickly away and swim out into deep water, then tread water as swallows swoop overhead, taking sips from the pool. Despite Vuk's reservations, it's far from cold, and I swim lengths of the flooded rift, letting the tension of the dicey drive slowly ebb away, before returning to join Vuk for that beer. ➡

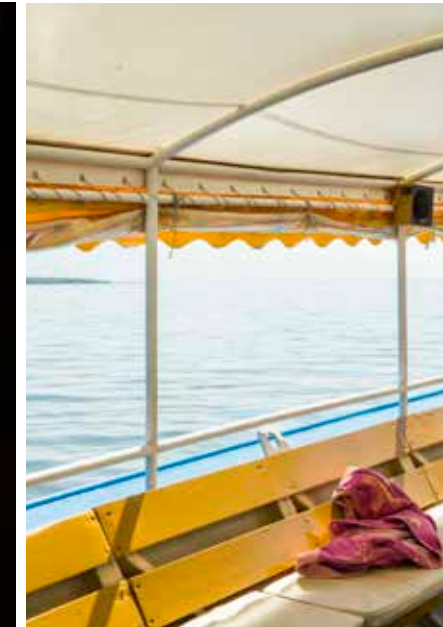


The Morača, just south of Podgorica, is popular with city dwellers in the blazing summers. Opposite: The view from the Tara Bridge. Above: Stalls selling local produce dot the roadside of the E65 on the way to Podgorica

'I jump into the milky turquoise water, and floating weeds wrap around my ankles disconcertingly'



From left: Priganice with soft cheese and honey; a flat-bottomed boat; Rašo Vukašević. Bottom: Lilies in Lake Skadar. Opposite: Virpazar harbour



Swim three The great lake getaway

South of Podgorica, the Morača spills into Lake Skadar, mingling with the waters of about 40 underwater springs to form one of Europe's largest lakes, dotted with islet monasteries and ruined fortresses.

I arrive early in Virpazar village on the eastern shore to find café owners brushing their steps and setting out chessboards. Skippers mill about the harbour, tending to traditional čun boats (pronounced 'choon'), shallow fishing craft that can navigate the lake's lily-choked channels.

Before setting out, I nip into Pješačac café for a second breakfast of priganice:

doughnut balls served with dice-sized cubes of soft cheese and honey, washed back with grappa. 'We drink grappa before we even brush our teeth,' says owner Rašo Vukašević, a gentle and expressive man in his sixties. Before tourists started arriving in the 1970s and 1980s, villagers made their living from fishing, he tells me. But his father was a hairdresser. 'The salon was where people came to gossip. We were always the first to know everything.'

Rašo sets me up with a skipper, Marko, and waves us off as we motor towards the lake. To our right a couple of kayakers are nudging the edge of the reeds, binoculars slung around their necks, perhaps seeking the rare Dalmatian pelicans – with wing spans of up to three metres – that nest beside the water. But my mission is to swim around Grmožur, an islet with a ruined

prison known as Montenegro's Alcatraz. When I'm poised on the side of the boat, Marko tells me that the rock has another nickname, Island of Snakes.

With trepidation I jump into the milky turquoise water, and floating weeds wrap around my ankles disconcertingly. I spot a snake – its head raised like a periscope – and make haste to the island, where I clamber onto the rocks, scattering seabirds. I imagine how it must have felt to be locked up so close to the shore but unable to swim. Only one convict ever escaped, using the prison gate as a raft; the guard responsible was made to serve out the rest of his time. I slip back into the water, aiming to circumnavigate the island, but the snake has made me nervous. I decide it's OK to leave some missions unaccomplished, and swim swiftly back to the boat. ⇨



Guide Natasha Koprivica.
Right: Lunch at anchor.
Below: Natasha diving from
her boat in the 'blue cave',
Plava Špilja. Opposite: Looking
back to Herceg Novi town on
the way to the Blue Cave



Swim four The wild (and wavy) one

Development has run rampant along much of Montenegro's 183-mile coastline, and my drive west, passing the fortified islet of Sveti Stefan and Budva, the 'Montenegrin Miami', is frustratingly congested. But there are tranquil corners, and the Luštica peninsula – a knuckle of low-rising land opposite the charming port of Herceg Novi – remains wild, jackals and boar roaming its overgrown olive groves. Guides Natasha Koprivica and her partner, Ilija Vuckovit, have been helping visitors explore this untamed stretch for the past three years.

'As children, we would roam free,' she tells me as we load their boat with flippers and cool-bags. 'We'd spend all summer in the sea, and winters skiing in the mountains.' We motor past the entrance to the Bay of Kotor and out to sea past tiny fishing villages. Battered by waves, the limestone cliffs are pockmarked with caves, and one of the most remarkable is Plava Špilja (blue cave).

The cave, Natasha tells me, has two entrances: a tall 'back door' and a low opening at the front through which waves roll, thudding off the back wall with an

echo. Ilija motors us through the back and we bob like a cork in the confused water. Sunlight refracts, lighting up the water and turning it an unexpected cobalt blue.

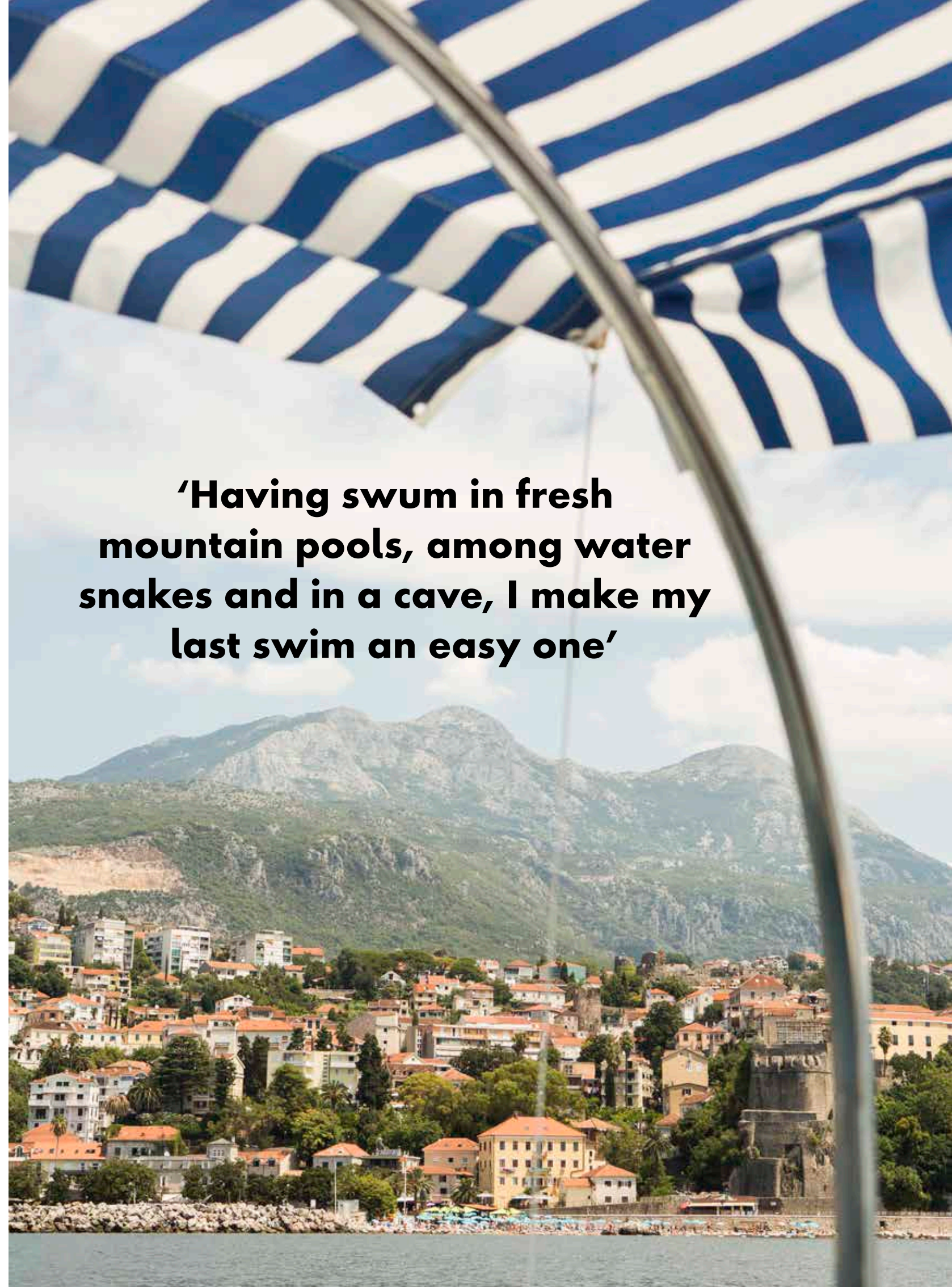
'It's even more incredible underwater,' Natasha shouts, diving off the front. I lower myself down the ladder, which lifts out of the water with each wave. The mood inside the cave feels jumbled, chaotic – the clattering of voices and echoing waves disorientating. But Natasha is right: below the water it's a whole other matter. I dive down where it's quiet and still, then swim towards the entrance through impossibly blue water. 'You can so feel the force of nature here,' Natasha says after we climb out, breathless. 'It really is amazing.'

On the way back, we pull in to Rose – a stone hamlet peering across the bay at the town of Herceg Novi. Boats bob beside its quay, while sunbathers shuffle between dips in the sea and sips of G&T. A man in his seventies climbs a ladder into the water and swims slowly between jetties. Having swum in fresh mountain pools, among water snakes and a cave, I make my last swim an easy one: an idle dip in the Adriatic. [📍](#)



JO TINSLEY swims in Brighton, in lower temperatures than the Balkans. Her trip was supported by Montenegro tourist board.

'Having swum in fresh mountain pools, among water snakes and in a cave, I make my last swim an easy one'



MAKE IT HAPPEN

Montenegro



ESSENTIALS

Getting there and away

EasyJet, British Airways and Air Serbia fly to Tivat, Ryanair to Podgorica, and Montenegro Airlines serves both. Flights take 2½ hours. Dubrovnik in Croatia has a greater range of flights, and there are buses from the city to Herceg Novi, Kotor and Podgorica (from £142; easyjet.com).

Getting around

Montenegro is small, with limited public transport, so hiring a car will give you the freedom to explore

its quieter corners – though its backroads are not for the faint-hearted. Tivat and Podgorica airports have all the usual car rental agencies (from £50 per week; rentalcars.com).

Further reading

Lonely Planet's *Montenegro* (£14.99) has plenty of inspiration and practical information to help you plan your trip, and montenegro.travel/en has great suggestions for places to visit.



Plan your wild swim safari



1 The late alpinist Dragan (Gašo) Lalović founded **Ethno Village Nevidio** (pictured above) in 2009. The nine cottages overlook one of the park's 18 'mountain eyes', and are simple, cosy and clean with pallet beds, open fires and thick rugs (£10.50 per person in a four-bed cottage, £13 in a six-bed). The family-run restaurant serves traditional dishes (mains from £6.90; etnosolonevidio.com).

2 **Black Lake** is actually two lakes: Veliko Jezero (Big Lake) and Malo Jezero (Little Lake), separated by a stony isthmus. They are one and a half miles from Žabljak, which has public-transport links. It costs £2.60 a day to enter **Durmitor National Park**, and you can pay at the car park halfway along this path. The park has 94 miles of well-marked trails and mountain huts, so it's worth considering the three-day (£5) or weekly pass (£10) if you want to explore more.



3 A couple of miles from Žabljak, Swiss-style **Hotel Polar Star** has a choice of bright rooms (£63) or studio apartments with kitchen facilities and a living room (£120 for four people). The bar/restaurant serves local dishes: buckwheat pancakes, Durmitor goulash and grilled trout (mains from £6.90). Swimmers can warm up in the sauna and steam baths (polarstar.me).

4 Do as the Podgoricans do, and escape to **Restoran Niagara** where the rivers Morača and Cijevna converge (pictured above) when temperatures soar. Take advice before you swim: in full flood it's dangerous, and it's also dry at times. The restaurant is quirky: white rabbits hop nearby and the interior has waterfalls.

5 Ask for pivo in Montenegro and you'll get a pint of pils from Nikšić. Until recently there have been few craft beers, but last year a flurry of microbreweries



opened. **PG Akademija Piva** in Podgorica brews six beers in vast copper kettles, which you can sample while tucking into enormous steaks, £20 for two, or piles of grilled trout, £13 (akademijapiva.me).

6 A short taxi ride from the centre of Podgorica, **Verde Complex** is a super-smart hotel and wellness centre with a 25m pool, three saunas of increasing temperature, steam baths, Jacuzzis and 'adventure showers'. Rooms are spacious with huge beds, the suites even more so (doubles from £89; verdecplx.com).

7 Rašo Vukašević and family operate a delightful café in Virpazar, but the real treat is their private **Pješačac beach**, accessible by boat. Above the sheltered beach, Escher-like stone stairs lead to covered dining areas and tables shaded by olive trees (organise a day trip, £18pp, via pjesacac.com).



8 **Hotel Majestic** is on a popular street in Budva, 200 metres from the Old Town, 50 from the sea. At night, you're in the thick of the action; in the morning, you'll hear the idle sounds of clinking masts in the marina. The characterful **Bar and Restaurant Hemingway** (pictured above left) features mid-century tub seats and a busy, backlit whisky bar. Make sure you reserve a terrace table; it's a prime spot for people-watching (mains from £20; majestichotel.me).

9 Take a boat trip along the Luštica Peninsula (pictured above) by motor or sail with friendly couple Natasha and Ilija. You can swim at **Blue Cave**, inside WWII submarine tunnels, and off jetties at the charming hamlet of Rose, as well as sharing long, delicious lunches at anchor in the pair's favourite bays (Blue Cave day trips from £21pp; private sailing with swimming and local food from £43pp; montenegrooutdoors.com).

WILD SWIMMING: A BEGINNER'S GUIDE

You don't need any special kit for brief dips in the wild, but a swimming cap will keep your head warm and make you more visible, and some people find a tow float reassuring. Like any outdoor activity, wild swimming has risks, but with the right preparation you can stay safe without losing the sense of adventure. Take care getting into cold water; give your body time to adjust before going in deep, and learn the risks of hypothermia and cold-shock. Dress appropriately for the temperature of the water – wear a wetsuit if necessary – and have warm, dry clothes ready for when you get out. Don't swim alone, or after drinking, and always check your entry and exit points. When swimming in the sea, check tide times and take local advice on currents and other hazards.