

# Snapshots

## CURRENT EVENTS

Democracy and capitalism have taken over: Serbia and Montenegro was the last country to throw off communist-style rule when Slobodan Milošević was finally wrenched out of office in 2001. Although voting irregularities still occur in some countries, a return to dictatorship is unlikely anywhere in the region. Economically the picture is more mixed. The wars of the 1990s set Bosnia and Hercegovina and Serbia and Montenegro back at least a decade, and like Macedonia they are making only a stuttering recovery. Slovenia and Croatia were always the wealthiest parts of the region, and their export-oriented businesses have slotted easily into the capitalist system. Albania has probably the fastest-growing economy, though that's partly because it is developing from such a low base. Millions of people from the region work elsewhere in Europe and further abroad, and the remittances they send home are a vital part of local economies.

The big questions are whether Kosovo and Montenegro make the shift to full independence, and whether the region will be able to join the EU. Slovenia signed up to the club in 2004, but the other countries are lagging behind. Croatia was accepted for negotiations towards membership in October 2005 and Macedonia may join by the end of the decade. The danger is that if countries such as Bosnia and Hercegovina and Macedonia don't join, ethnic tensions might build up again and trigger more conflicts. It would be wrong to assume that the hatreds and suspicions behind the 1990s wars have disappeared. Many Serbians feel there's a Muslim conspiracy against their countrymen in Kosovo and Bosnia and Hercegovina, the main communities in Macedonia are still edgy, and Kosovo's Serb and Roma communities live with sporadic violence and harassment.

The greatest potential for a flare-up is in Kosovo. The majority Albanian population is increasingly unhappy about the UN protectorate they've been living under since 1999. The UN believes that Kosovo won't be ready for independence until minority rights are assured and a good proportion of the Serb minority return. It's a slightly dreamy ideal. Most of the Serbs that left don't want to live under Albanian rule, and there isn't much incentive to return to a territory with a moribund economy. Kosovo's economy remains in tatters partly because the final status of the region hasn't been settled – catch-22! Serbia's government will greet Kosovo's independence with extreme displeasure, to say the least. The good news, perhaps, is that the big international players are well aware of the dangers of letting the region tip back into aggression, and in the meantime ordinary people in former trouble spots go about their lives unthreatened by war.

## HISTORY

The Western Balkans is the product of a complex history, to put it mildly. The region hasn't been controlled by one government since the Roman Empire. Farming first came to the area around 6000 BC, and was well established by 4000 BC. By 700 BC the local population was growing as

The Southeast European Times ([www.setimes.com](http://www.setimes.com)) covers all the serious stuff: economics, politics and analysis plus exchange rates. It's handy in case local politics boils over...

*Homeland Calling: Exile Patriotism and the Balkan Wars* by Paul Hockenok explores the fascinating stories of émigrés who involved themselves in the wars back 'home'.

## TIMELINE 1000 BC

Illyrians settle in the Western Balkans

## 400 BC

Greek colonies founded along Adriatic coast

**WHAT'S IN A NAME?**

It wasn't easy thinking up a title for this book. *Former Yugoslavia and Albania* was technically true, but dull and somewhat passé. *Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia & Montenegro, Bosnia & Hercegovina, Macedonia, Albania and potentially Kosovo/Kosova* would have run all over the front cover and the next page as well. So how about *Western Balkans*? The problem with this title was that Slovenes don't see themselves as Balkan, and many Croats aren't wild about being called Balkan either. A politically correct title would have had Southeastern Europe in it, but *Southeastern Europe – The Western Half* doesn't really work. Then there was an idea for *The Eastern Adriatic*, but Macedonia doesn't have a coast. Ideas about southern Slavic states plus Albanian entities came and went. One wit suggested *Greater [insert country here] and the Occupied Territories*; some classicists suggested *Illyria*; and meanwhile the deadline for a title whizzed by. Stumped, we went back to *Western Balkans*. It's not perfect. The word Balkan is Turkish in origin (it means Mountain), which suggests the former Ottoman Empire's European territories. This does not include Croatia and Slovenia, or the heart of Montenegro either. So the title could have been *Western Balkans, Croatia, Slovenia, and Old Montenegro*. The good thing about *Western Balkans* is that most people around the world sort of know where we're talking about. More or less the former Yugoslavia and Albania, but not Bulgaria and Romania. We apologise to anyone aggrieved by the title.

increasing amounts of iron tools, horses and chariots helped to spread trade routes. By the time Celtic tribes drove south and mixed with the native Illyrian and Thracian tribes, there were Greek colonies along the coast of Albania and Croatia. The Roman Empire introduced decent roads and vineyards, and built towns and fortresses all over the region. Even so, there remained pockets in the mountains of northern Albania where the Illyrian tribes largely managed their own affairs. The first division of the region can be dated to AD 395, when the Emperor Theodosius split the Roman Empire into an eastern, Greek-influenced half ruled from Byzantium (later Constantinople) and a western, Latin-influenced half ruled from Rome. This division laid down the first fault line between the western and eastern churches, even before the original Serbs and Croats had settled in. The Roman Empire was weakened by economic crises and plagues around the time it was divided, and invading 'barbarians' repeatedly plundered the region.

**The Slavs**

The Avar, Goth and Hun invasions weakened the Roman defences along the Danube so much that the Slav tribes (farmers and herders originally from eastern Ukraine) were able to move south of the river during the 5th and 6th centuries. Then, in the 9th century, Christian monks such as Cyril and Methodius began to evangelise the Slavs; the earliest Christian communities had been mostly eliminated by the barbarian invasions. Cyril and Methodius developed the first Slavic alphabet, called Glagolitic, and translated Christian scriptures. One of Methodius' students based in Bulgaria developed another alphabet, called Cyrillic, based on Byzantine Greek letters. This gradually replaced Glagolitic over several centuries, and eventually became the alphabet of the Serbian and Macedonian languages.

Another divide in Western Balkan history occurred in the same era that Cyril and Methodius were sharpening their quills. The Franks took

over the northwest of the region and the Croats and Slovenes came under Western European cultural influence. The first independent Croatian kingdom appeared under Ban Tomislav in 924. In the rest of the region the Byzantine Empire was weakening militarily but still held a great deal of cultural influence. The first Serb principality was established under the Byzantine umbrella around 850, but it wasn't until the 12th century that Stefan I Nemanja established the first fully independent Serbian kingdom. His son Stefan II built Serbia into a stable nation, recognised as independent by the pope but still with religious ties to the Orthodox Church in Constantinople. Many of Serbia's great religious artworks date from this time, as artists combined the strict formulas of Byzantine iconography styles with local influences. The greatest Serbian ruler was Stefan Dušan (r 1331–55), who was crowned at Skopje and established the Serbian Orthodox Patriarchate at Peč in western Kosovo.

**The Turks Arrive**

The Seljuk Turks swept out of central Asia into the Byzantine heartland of Anatolia in the 11th century. Their successors, the Ottomans, established a base in Europe in 1354, and over the next century they steadily increased their European territories. The early Turkish sultans lived in shifting military camps for up to nine months of the year, and had the best-paid, most professional and most sober army in Europe. The Ottoman 'victory' (more of a draw in fact) over the Serbs at Kosovo Polje in 1389 completed the separation of the southern Slavs; the Catholic Slovenes and Croats remained beyond Turkish rule, while the Orthodox Serbs and Macedonians were now under it. The Turks had conquered almost the entire region by 1500, and continuing raids in the 16th and 17th centuries prompted the Slovenes to abandon the lowlands for safer areas, and to fortify their churches in the Julian Alps. The core of Montenegro remained independent under a dynasty of prince-bishops from their mountain stronghold at Cetinje.

Over time, some communities in Bosnia, Albania and Kosovo adopted Islam. The reasons for the conversion are complex. In Bosnia there had been an independent Christian sect called the Bogomils, and it seems that some Bogomils adopted Islam as a way of preserving their independence. For Albanians, conversion to Islam occurred more gradually and in more of a piecemeal fashion. A famous Albanian poet once said that the true religion of Albania is simply being Albanian. As late as 1900 there were families in central Albania who had Muslim names in their outside lives as they came into contact with Muslim government authorities, but used Christian names at home. In the mountainous north, some Albanian tribes remained Catholic while their traditional rivals embraced Islam. Many Roma communities also converted to Islam.

The Ottoman Turks encouraged the association between people and religion under the *millet* (roughly, 'national') system, where local laws were decided through religious authorities. Muslims answered to mullahs, Jews to rabbis, and Christians to priests. Serbs kept the dream of independence alive through romanticising the *hajduks* (bandits) who had taken to the hills to raid Turkish caravans, and through endless variations in epic poems retelling the betrayals which led to the end of their empire

The London-based Bosnian Institute has a good website for Bosnian history (one of the founders was historian Noel Malcolm). Follow the links from [www.bosnia.org.uk](http://www.bosnia.org.uk).

**AD 272**

Emperor Constantine the Great born in Niš, Serbia; converts to Christianity on deathbed

**5th & 6th centuries**

Slav tribes cross south of the Danube River

**924**

Ban Tomislav unites first Croatian kingdom

**1054**

European Christianity divides between Catholic and Orthodox churches

at the 1389 battle of Kosovo Polje. Some Serbs moved to the shifting frontier region between the Catholic Austrians and the Turks, which more or less coincides with the modern border between Bosnia and Croatia. This stark mountain region became known as Krajina, which means 'borderland'. The Serbs of Krajina were under constant pressure to convert to Catholicism, another theme in Serbian identity.

By 1700 the Turkish Empire was lagging behind the other great European powers. The Austrians pushed south and reconquered Croatia, and began eyeing territory further south.

### Divide & Conquer

The history of the Western Balkans in the 19th and 20th centuries is even more complicated. For more information on history in this period, see the country chapters. In broad strokes, the 19th century saw the bloody decline of Turkish power and the emergence of competing nationalisms. Pan-Slavism – the idea of uniting the Croats, Serbs and Slovenians under one flag – initially took off in Slovenia. The Croatian Bishop Josip Strossmayer was a strong proponent of Pan-Slavism, and founded the Yugoslav Academy of Arts & Sciences in 1867. An independent Serbian kingdom gradually emerged over the 19th century, expanding from its early base around Belgrade. The Austro-Hungarian empire claimed Bosnia and Hercegovina in 1878, and competition between Serbia, Greece and Bulgaria for the remaining Ottoman territories in Albania, Macedonia and northern Greece was intense. The first Balkan War, in 1912, pushed the Turks back to Constantinople, but the Greeks, Serbs and Bulgarians soon began fighting each other. The conflict continued into WWI, and devastated much of Albania and Macedonia. After WWI the Pan-Slav dream was fulfilled in the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, renamed Yugoslavia in 1929. Albania also emerged as an independent state, ruled by the self-proclaimed king, Zog. Both countries were largely rural, Ruritanian dictatorships with very little industry. Neither regime was able to resist the Italian and German invasions during WWII.

Something like 10% of the region's population perished during WWII, as fascist Croatian Ustaše fought communists and Serbs, the Germans fought communists and royalist Četniks, and Albanian factions fought the Germans, the Italians and each other. The Germans had installed the far-right Croatian Ustaše party as leaders of the Independent State of Croatia, which included modern Croatia, Bosnia and Hercegovina and parts of Serbia and Slovenia. The Ustaše's brutality towards Serbs in particular shocked even the Nazis. The Yugoslav communist party under Josip Broz Tito and the Albanian communist party under Enver Hoxha took power at the end of the war and dispatched most of their rivals by the bullet or sent them to prison camps.

### Communism

Yugoslavia and Albania were the only countries in Europe where communists took power without the assistance of the USSR's Red Army. This gave the communist party leaders an unusual amount of freedom compared to the other new communist regimes in Eastern Europe. The Yugoslav communist party was quick to collectivise agriculture, but by

the late 1940s they faced stagnant growth and dwindling popularity. Fed up with interference from Moscow, Tito broke with Stalin in 1948. The collectivisation of land was reversed in 1953, and within a year most peasants had returned to farming independently. The reforms were successful and the economy was booming in the late 1950s. Albania's leader, Enver Hoxha, looked on Yugoslavia's reforms with utter distaste, and kept true to the hard-line Stalinist path. The Albanian communist party controlled every aspect of society – religion was banned during a Chinese-style cultural revolution in the late 1960s – and the country became a kind of communist hermit kingdom.

Almost uniquely, Yugoslavs were able to travel freely to Western countries as well as in the Eastern Bloc. In the 1960s Yugoslavia's brand of socialism, with self-management principles, contributed to a struggle developing between the republics within it. Richer republics such as Croatia wanted more power devolved to the republics, while Serbia's communist leaders wanted more centralised control. The Albanian majority in Kosovo started to protest against Serbian control in the 1960s, which began the long cycle of riots, violence and repression that lasted until the UN took control of the territory in 1999. There was a saying that the end of the Yugoslav dream would begin in Kosovo and end in Kosovo, which turned out to be sadly true.

After Tito's death in 1980 the federal presidency rotated annually among the eight members of the State Presidency. The economy stalled as foreign debt mounted, and rivalries between the constituent republics grew. Serbian communist party boss Slobodan Milošević exploited the tensions by playing up disturbances between Serbs and Kosovar Albanians in Kosovo, and this allowed him to consolidate his power base.

### Things Fall Apart

As the democracy movement swept Eastern Europe, tensions grew between the central powers in Belgrade dominated by Milošević and the pro-democracy, pro-independence forces in the republics. Slovenia declared independence in 1991, and after a short war became the first republic to break free of Yugoslavia. Croatia soon followed, but the Serbs of the mountainous Krajina region set up their own state. Macedonia became independent without much trouble, but when Bosnia and Hercegovina followed suit the country fell into a brutal civil war between the three main communities: Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats. The war continued until 1995 and cost 200,000 lives. The Dayton Peace Accords divided the country into a federation, awarding 49% to the Serbs and 51% to a Croat-Muslim federation. In the same year the newly strengthened Croatian army conquered the breakaway Serbs' regions. Meanwhile, in rump Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro) the worst hyperinflation in history occurred between 1993 and 1995, when prices grew by five quadrillion percent – which is a number five with 15 zeroes after it. In Albania the communist regime was kicked out in 1992, and the country descended into a kind of free-market vacuum where anything was possible. Peasants stole animals and equipment from the old collective farms, people pillaged factories for building materials, and gangsters ruled major port towns. It all came to a head in 1997, when the collapse

Nikola Tesla, the brilliant Serbian inventor, was working on a 'death beam' when he died, the plans for which mysteriously disappeared.

In 1934, 12-year-old Jan Yoors ran away from home, joining a Roma clan. His books *The Gypsies, Crossing and The Heroic Present* explain Roma life.

After WWII Soviet leader Stalin wanted Yugoslavia, Bulgaria and Albania to be united into one communist federation. The Bulgarian leadership scuppered the idea.

Berlin wasn't the only divided city in Cold War Europe: after losing Gorizia to Italy, Tito built Nova Gorica on the Slovenian side of the border.

Emir Kusturica's film *When Father Was Away on Business* addresses Tito's brutal rule. Malik believes his father is away on business. The truth is much darker...

1346–55

Peak of Serbian Golden Age under Tsar Stefan Dušan

1389

Serbs fight Turks at Kosovo Polje; exact events unclear since

1443–68

Skanderbeg defends Albania against Ottoman Turks

1520–66

Height of Ottoman Empire under Suleyman the Magnificent

of pyramid banking schemes set off a violent uprising. The international community stepped in and Albania has since made a rather successful recovery, going from being a failed state to an up-and-coming potential EU candidate. In Kosovo, rebel Albanians began a guerrilla campaign against Serb forces in 1996, which eventually triggered NATO intervention in 1999. The territory has been under UN control ever since. Serbian strongman Slobodan Milošević was finally pushed out of power in 2001. The war in Kosovo had spilled over into Macedonia, where around a quarter of the population is ethnic Albanian. An accord promising more self-government for Albanian areas helped to restore peace. By 2002 the region was at last mostly peaceful, though there are still fears for future stability in Kosovo and Macedonia.

## PEOPLE

Only 60 years ago the Western Balkans was an overwhelmingly agricultural region with a couple of smallish cities. These days most people live in cities, but the ties to rural traditions are strong. Many men still like to brew homemade spirits in the suburbs, while women preserve fruits and make condiments the old-fashioned way. A certain amount of nostalgia for the certainties of life under communism remains, particularly among older people in poorer parts of the former Yugoslavia.

It's still a fairly macho culture. Men smoke and chat in cafés on Saturday mornings while women do the grocery shopping. Younger people are as hip to the latest hair products and MP3 downloads as anywhere in the world, but gender roles at home are quite traditional.

Millions of ex-Yugoslavs and Albanians work in Western Europe and hundreds of thousands have emigrated permanently. Just about everyone in the region has an uncle or a cousin who has left for Canada, Switzerland or Australia. The wars of the 1990s and high unemployment sparked another wave of departures. Not surprisingly, very few migrants have moved into the region, except for people returning from exile or work overseas. Illegal migrants have used the region as a final staging post for the journey into the wealthier parts of Europe, but there has been a crackdown on this in recent years.

## RELIGION

If there's one defining characteristic of the Western Balkans, it's the diversity of faiths. Belgrade once had a Tibetan-style Buddhist temple, built by Kalmyks from southern Russia. Even among those who only celebrate religious rituals at weddings and funerals, most align themselves with their ancestral faith. The most religious area of the Western Balkans is probably Kosovo, while Slovenia and Albania are perhaps the least religious. Precise figures are almost impossible to pin down, but out of a total population of about 26.8 million people in the Western Balkans, roughly 37% are Orthodox, 25% are Catholic, 25% are Muslim and about 13% belong to other faiths or profess no religion.

The biggest Orthodox Church in the Western Balkans is the Serbian Orthodox Church, with adherents in Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Croatia. The Macedonian Orthodox Church split from the Serbian church as recently as 1967, and has the allegiance of about 66% of the

Macedonian population. The Albanian Orthodox Church, also a 20th-century creation, is followed by about 20% of Albanians, mostly in the southern half of the country.

Croatia and Slovenia are predominantly Catholic, as are the Hungarians of Serbia's Vojvodina region. About 12% of Albanians in both Albania and Kosovo are Catholic too – Mother Teresa of Calcutta was born into an ethnic Albanian family in Skopje, Macedonia.

The Muslim population is divided into a number of groups. The two biggest groups are the Sunni Muslims of Bosnia and Hercegovina and southern Serbia who speak Slavic dialects, and the Albanians of Kosovo, Albania and Macedonia. There is also a small Turkish Muslim community, mostly in old Ottoman towns such as Prizren in Kosovo and Bitola in Macedonia. There are a number of smaller Muslim groups such as the Bektashi, who have their world headquarters in Tirana. Bektashi Muslims hold the Prophet Mohammed's son-in-law Ali in particular esteem, and usually allow members to drink alcohol. Roughly 15% of the people of Albania follow the Bektashi sect.

There is a smallish number of Protestants in the region, mostly ethnic Hungarians in Serbia's Vojvodina region. The majority of the Jewish population was murdered by the Third Reich in the 1940s, though one happy exception was Albania, where the small Jewish population actually grew during WWII as Jewish people sought refuge there. Many abandoned synagogues are falling into disrepair.

## ARTS Literature

The oldest form of Western Balkan literature, if literature is the right word, is the tradition of epic poetry which survives in the Dinaric Range from Croatia to Albania. The country bards who memorise vast verse epics work in a tradition dating back before Homer. In Serbia, Bosnia and Hercegovina and Croatia the poems are recited to the accompaniment of the *gusle*, a one-stringed lute. Epic poetry was the most important way of recording historical events and figures for centuries: the 1389 battle of Kosovo Polje features in Serbian epic poetry, and some historians believe the heroic myths associated with the battle (which was more or less a draw) came from the epic poetry tradition. Serbian epic poetry was first written down by the 19th-century writer and linguist Vuk Karadžić, whose works were brought to a wider audience through translations by Goethe and Walter Scott.

Contemporary Albanian author Ismail Kadare wrote a short, humorous book about the epic poetry tradition in *The File on H*. Kadare is Albania's most famous novelist, and a perennial candidate for a Nobel prize for literature. He won the inaugural Man Booker International Prize in 2005.

Other famous authors from the region include the Bosnian Ivo Andrić, who won the Nobel prize for literature in 1961 for works such as *Bridge over the Drina*. Milovan Djilas of Montenegro was a senior figure in the early days of Yugoslav communism who was on the verge of becoming president in 1954 when he was suddenly expelled from the party. His book *The New Class: An Analysis of the Communist System* landed him in

Thousands of ex-Yugoslavs pay 'homage' to Tito at www.titoville.com. The site includes songs, speeches, portraits, medals and honours, biographies of his many mistresses and Tito jokes.

Unhappy with the conflicts during the break-up of Yugoslavia, the villagers of Vevčani in Macedonia voted to declare their home an independent republic in 1991.

The film *No Man's Land* sees a Serb and a Bosnian soldier trapped in a trench. More complications occur when the media and UN blunder in.

*Sarajevo Rose: A Balkan Jewish Notebook* by Stephen Schwartz traces the remnants of a lost Jewish world, which intermingled with the other faiths of the region.

*The Culture of Lies* by Croatian dissident Dubravka Ugrešić mercilessly examines the little dictators and macho blather of the 1990s.

1808

The term 'Balkans' invented by a German geographer

1815

Serbia wins de facto independence

1878

Serbia and Montenegro recognised as fully independent; Austro-Hungarian empire takes over Bosnia and Hercegovina

1912

First Balkan War begins; Albania declares independence

jail for arguing that communist regimes had created a small, exploitative class of senior party leaders rather than an egalitarian utopia. It created a sensation when it was first published in 1955. A later book, *Conversations With Stalin*, is a classic reportage-style book on Djilas' meetings with the Soviet dictator in the 1940s, and also led to jail time.

### Architecture

The region's architecture is as varied as its history. The Roman amphitheatre at Pula in Croatia is one of the best preserved in the world, while the Euphrasian Basilica at Poreč earned a World Heritage listing for its preservation of Byzantine and classical elements dating back to the 4th century. Croatia's Adriatic coast has many Venetian-influenced buildings, while Slovenia's architecture shows links with Austria. Serbia's Vojvodina region has Hungarian-influenced elements, particularly in the Art Nouveau buildings in Novi Sad. The Turkish influence in mosques, *madrassas* (colleges for learning the Koran), *hammams* (public baths) and domestic architecture spreads from Macedonia to Albania, Serbia and Bosnia and Hercegovina. Berati in Albania has a particularly fine set of Ottoman-era neighbourhoods. Sarajevo and Mostar in Bosnia and Hercegovina have a delightful mix of Ottoman-style structures, Orthodox churches and Habsburg-era public buildings. Baroque and Gothic architecture mostly appears in Slovenia and Croatia. These two countries also have a strong legacy of Romanesque architecture, continuing long after this style had been supplanted by Gothic design in other parts of Europe.

Religious buildings have often been singled out in the Western Balkans conflicts. Hundreds of mosques, churches and monasteries have been vandalised or destroyed, as recently as 2004 in Kosovo.

The Western Balkans also has an unmistakable communist influence – it's not much appreciated now but one day architecture critics may be raving about Skopje's magnificent ensemble of 1960s concrete and praising the clean lines of Podgorica's apartment blocks. The weirdest communist building in the Western Balkans must be the Pyramid in Tirana, Albania, built as a museum and shrine to dictator Enver Hoxha.

### Music

Candidates for the oldest living musical traditions in the Western Balkans are the old Slavonic hymns of the Serbian Orthodox Church and southern Albania's polyphonic singing. Croatia's four-voice *klapa* music is another unusual a capella tradition. The various Islamic dervish orders have traditions of religious chants on mystical themes. One regional curiosity is *blehmuzika*, Serbian brass music influenced by Turkish and Austrian military music. It's often played by Roma bands at weddings and funerals. Other folk traditions include Macedonian *gajda* (bagpipe) tunes, accompanied by drums, and Serbian peasant dances led by bagpipes, flutes and fiddles. Kosovar folk music bears the influence of Ottoman military marching songs, with careening flutes over the thudding beat of goatskin drums. Bosnia's traditional music is *sevdah*, a melancholy form sometimes described as the Bosnian blues. Slovenian folk music features accordions and flutes made of wood, clay and reeds, and central European rhythms such as the polka and waltz are popular.

Strangely enough, pop music is one link from the old Yugoslav federation that hasn't been broken. Female popstresses with voluminous blonde hair and enough make-up to camouflage a commando battalion are preferred over their (sometimes) more toned-down international counterparts. Popular Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian artists have a bigger audience than imports from other European countries throughout the former federation – 'from Triglav to the Vardar', to quote an old Yugoslav anthem. The videos are often celebrations of big hair and vaguely saucy themes that remind visitors of the glory days of 1980s videos. 'Turbo-folk', pop music mixed with folk, is popular everywhere. Hip-hop is also building a strong following all over the region, with skinny white kids in leisure suits throwing shapes and dissing rivals seemingly everywhere – Eminem has a lot to answer for. More challenging types of music also have a strong base among the substantial urban bohemian community. Internationally, the best-known alternative band from the region would be the Slovenian veteran industrial collective Laibach, who released an album in 1990 of nothing but different versions of the Rolling Stones' *Sympathy for the Devil*.

### Visual Arts

Serbian and Macedonian medieval architecture is mostly on a provincial scale compared with Orthodox Christian centres such as Kiev and Moscow, but in fresco painting local artists rivalled anything produced in the Orthodox world. Many of the classic frescoes painted in churches and monasteries from the 10th to the 14th centuries were hidden by whitewash applied by the new Turkish rulers (which inadvertently helped to preserve them), and obscured by dense layers of smoke and candle residue. The frescoes in the churches of Sveti Pantelejmon near Skopje and Sveti Kliment in Ohrid display a skill for expression that predates the Italian Renaissance by 150 years. Albania also has a largely unknown tradition of fine Orthodox art, exemplified by the icon painter Onufri, who has a museum dedicated to his colourful, expressive work in Berati.

In the 20th century one important Yugoslav art movement was Zenitism, from the word 'zenith', which fused French and Russian intellectualism with Balkan passion. Belgrade's Museum of Contemporary Art has a particularly fine collection of Zenitist works which are now back on display – the gallery was purged of works by non-Serbian artists by a Milošević appointee in the 1990s.

Socialist realist art (art dedicated to glorifying the worker and the achievements of communism) had only a brief heyday in Yugoslavia, where artists were allowed to return to their own styles in the early 1950s, but it lasted right up until the early 1990s in Albania. Tirana's National Art Gallery has a salon devoted to socialist realist works.

In sculpture, the best-known artist from the region is Ivan Meštrović, born into a poor farming family in Croatia in 1883. He taught himself to read from the Bible, and went on to create some of the finest examples of religious sculpture since the Renaissance. Though he emigrated to the USA, around 60 of his works are scattered around the former Yugoslavia, including the *Monument to the Unknown Hero* in Belgrade.

Brenda Brkusic's *Freedom from Despair* is a riveting film that mixes documentary footage with reenactments to tell the story of Croatia's struggle against ex-Yugoslavia.

Dozens of Tirana's grey Stalinist buildings have been painted in vibrant colours – one has appeared on the cover of *Art in America* magazine.

Tirana-born, Paris-based artist Anri Sala is revitalising the video art scene with entrancing, engaging works (often dealing with the boundaries of language).

1918

Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes formed; renamed Yugoslavia in 1929

1941

Hitler invades; Croatian fascists take power in puppet state

1945

Tito forms new socialist Yugoslavia

1967

Albanian cultural revolution attacks all religions

## ENVIRONMENT

While reasonably heavily populated, the natural environment of the Western Balkans has some outstanding wilderness areas with wildlife in numbers rarely seen elsewhere in Europe. The area around the borders of Albania, Montenegro and Kosovo is one of the least touched alpine regions on the continent. Rural populations have been falling over the past 60 years, and while this suggests there may be less pressure on the terrestrial environment there has also been a shift towards industry-scale logging and mechanised farming.

The wars of the 1990s had a mixed impact on the environment. Wolves were reported to be roaming into parts of Croatia's Dalmatia region, where they hadn't been seen in decades, as the conflict in the Serb-populated Krajina region caused farmers to desert the land and unprotected herds of livestock presented an unusual feeding opportunity. The planting of land mines has meant that regions of Bosnia, Croatia and Kosovo have become de facto wilderness areas. But the growth in city populations as a result of refugee movements (and the postcommunist freedom to leave collective farms in Albania) has put urban environments under tremendous strain. For tips on lessening your impact when visiting sensitive environmental areas, see *Responsible Travel* (p18).

### The Land

A wide belt of mountains parallel to the Adriatic coast covers about 60% of the region; it's often made of limestone and has long valleys, dramatic gorges, vast cave systems and oddities such as disappearing rivers. The Dinaric Range along Croatia's coast has partly sunk into the sea, creating an incredibly convoluted network of islands, peninsulas and bays. A knot of fault lines in the southern part of the Western Balkans sometimes causes shattering earthquakes, such as the 1963 quake, which demolished Macedonia's capital, Skopje. The region's highest mountain is Triglav (2864m) in Slovenia's Julian Alps, while the second highest is Korab (2751m) on the border of Albania and Macedonia. The Pannonian plain along the Sava and Danube Rivers in Croatia and in northern Serbia was the floor of an ancient sea up to 2.5 million years ago, and has rich sediments up to 150m deep.

For information on national parks in the region, see the individual country chapters.

### Wildlife

The Western Balkans is a refuge for many of the larger mammals that were almost eliminated from Western Europe 150 years ago. The rugged forests of the Dinaric Range from Slovenia to Albania shelter wolves, red deer, roe deer, lynx, chamois, wild boar and brown bears. Wolves, in particular, are sometimes targeted for eradication campaigns because of their impact on livestock. The forests of the region are roughly divided into a conifer zone, beginning between 1500m and 2000m, and including silver fir, spruce and black pine; broad-leaved beech forests, which occur lower down; and a huge variety of oak species below this again. Birds of prey found in the region include griffon falcons, kestrels and peregrine falcons. The great lakes of Ohrid and Prespa in the far south of the region are havens for Dalmatian pelicans, herons and spoonbills.

The more populated shores of the Adriatic coast have endangered populations of golden jackals, red foxes and badgers, while bigger predators such as wolves and brown bears have largely been eradicated. Classic Mediterranean species such as junipers, heaths and olive trees grow well in the high summer temperatures of this area. The Adriatic shore also used to be home to the endangered Mediterranean monk seal, which grows up to 3.5m long in adulthood, but a recent comprehensive survey of habitats along the Albanian and Croatian coasts suggests they may no longer inhabit the region. Monk seals prefer isolated caves and tend to desert their young if disturbed. On a happier note, the number of bottlenose dolphins seems to be growing again in Croatia's Gulf of Kvarner.

The Pannonian plains of northern Bosnia, northern Serbia and Croatia's Slavonia region are mostly devoted to agriculture, but still have pockets of broad-leaved temperate forest. The banks of the Danube and Sava Rivers have riverine forests of alder, ash and willow. The grasslands are inhabited by hares and rabbits, while raptor birds such as goshawks hunt them from the skies.

### Environmental Issues

The Western Balkans was almost entirely agricultural until after WWII, when communist party central planners decreed rapid industrialisation on a massive scale. As in other communist-controlled regions, the damage caused by industrial waste wasn't recognised for many years, and pollution from lignite (brown coal) power plants and other industries is still the biggest environmental concern today. Albania's communist party members had a particular liking for seriously big industrial plants. The humungous Steel of the Party metallurgical plant in Elbasani emitted so much filth that it poisoned the surrounding valley and made agriculture impossible. Towns and cities all over the Western Balkans have problems with air, soil and water poisoned by messy industrial plants.

Albania's authorities also tried to tame the natural landscape to their grand visions. Thousands of hectares of hillsides were terraced in a campaign to turn the hills into fields, with predictable results for soil erosion. The Yugoslav authorities, though, could be surprisingly sensitive to environmental issues; nomadic sheep- and goat-herding was banned in 1951 by the Law on Soil Erosion, which was hugely unpopular at the time. Tito's regime also created a network of national parks and protected areas.

Air pollution is a concern in cities such as Belgrade, as it is in most big cities around the world. The worst place for air pollution in the region is Prishtina in Kosovo. Here the lignite-burning power plants at Obiliq on the city's outskirts were built only to supplement power supplies from Serbia. However, when Kosovo became a UN protectorate, it was farewell to Serbian electricity. The power plants now work full time to supply the city's needs, and a bad cough in Kosovo has become known as an 'Obiliq cough'.

Refugee movements and an exodus from rural areas have caused rapid and unplanned urban growth in cities like Sarajevo, Tuzla, Belgrade, Prishtina and Tirana, with all the attendant problems relating to sewage, waste disposal and water supply. Sewage outflows in some coastal resorts is also a problem, particularly in the summer when volumes literally surge.

The Neue Slowenische Kunst (New Slovenian Art) movement ([www.nskstate.com](http://www.nskstate.com)) offers a challenge to totalitarianism which spans theatre, music and the visual arts.

Having sex on a Croatian beach can earn you 30 days in jail – compared to up to three years behind bars in Italy.

The Albanian Green Party website ([www.tegjelberit.org](http://www.tegjelberit.org)) has information in both Albanian and English. There's a quarterly newspaper accessible through the site.

1978

Albania breaks with China and achieves near-total isolation

1989

Slobodan Milošević abolishes Kosovo's autonomy

1991

Slovenia, Croatia and Macedonia declare independence; wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Hercegovina begin

1992

Communists lose power in Albania

The disappearance of communist rule has caused some damage in parts of the region. In Albania, uncontrolled logging has become a problem in a country where such activities would previously have earned the culprits a life sentence in the chrome mines. There was also once a complete ban on fishing for trout on the Albanian side of Lake Ohrid, as this was a special privilege of the party elite. When the party fell from power, uncontrolled fishing took off with a vengeance, threatening an already endangered species.

The wars of the 1990s caused environmental damage, though it's churlish to compare this to the human cost. The NATO bombing campaign against Serbian forces in 1999 used shells tipped with superhard armour-piercing depleted uranium (which can vaporise on impact and form airborne particles), and there is estimated to be 10 tonnes of this by-product of the nuclear industry scattered over Kosovo. NATO also blew up dozens of petrochemical plants, chemical factories and oil refineries, with wildly unpredictable environmental consequences. One of the worst examples was the destruction of two chemical plants at Pančevo, northeast of Belgrade, which released huge amounts of ethylene-dichloride, mercury, polychlorinated biphenyl and other toxic chemicals and metals into the environment.

## FOOD & DRINK

The cuisines of the Western Balkans mix and match Mediterranean, central European and Turkish influences, making use of the wealth of superb produce from this agriculturally rich region. When locals eat out, it usually means Italian food (pizza and pasta are practically local dishes) and hefty servings of lamb, chicken or fish. There is a legion of local cheeses barely known outside the immediate area, and an excellent range of fresh fruits in season: grapes, cherries, apples, peaches, pears, plums, melons, figs and quinces. In the colder regions cabbages, walnuts and root vegetables such as turnips are used. Local dishes tend to be fairly simple, relying on abundant quality produce to present tasty meals. Eating hours across the region are much the same as the rest of Europe. There are many local terms for restaurants and eateries, from Croatian *gostionica* (restaurant) to Albanian *byrektorë* (bakeries selling *burek*, stuffed filo pastry); see the country chapters for details.

## Staples & Specialities

*Burek* or *byrek* sold in bakeries is the classic Western Balkans breakfast snack and is usually eaten with yogurt. *Bureks* have a range of fillings including cheese, meat, potato and mushrooms. Appetizers include locally smoked hams, pickled vegetables and feta-style cheeses. For lunch and dinner, the most common restaurant dishes are various types of grilled meats – the most famous being *ćevapčići* (grilled spicy kebabs) and *ražnjići* (shish kebab, called *qebap* in Albanian areas), found all over the region. Kebabs are often served with spongy Turkish-style bread and sliced onions. Stews are popular, often cooked slowly over an open fire, with favourites such as *bosanski lonac* (Bosnian stew of cabbage and meat). Croatia offers an array of fish stews. Goulash made with paprika is a hearty dish found in regions bordering Hungary. Coastal Croatia, Albania, Montenegro and the littoral of Slovenia have seafoods such as

## FLAVOURS TO SAVOUR

Had any *ajvar* with a glass of *salep* lately? Here are a few regional rarities to watch out for:

**Ajvar** Macedonia's national relish, made from red peppers, aubergine, paprika, olive oil, onion and garlic.

**Hurmasica** A Bosnian dessert made from filo pastry with cream and lemon.

**Jukvi** A breakfast pancake made from semolina, which is cooked and dried and then recooked with water and milk.

**Kajmak** A dairy dish made from clotted cream, ranging from buttery when fresh to like a soft cheese when matured. Very popular in Serbia – incredibly rich and strangely addictive.

**Krema snežna rezina** Sweet cream slices that quickly disappear from the shelves of bakeries at Slovenia's Lake Bled.

**Kukurec** A rather fearsome dish made from sheep intestines stuffed with chopped liver.

**Raca** Pig's head or knuckles, fried in herbs and served cold in slices. A real man's food.

**Riblj paprikaš** A spicy Slavonian fish stew flavoured with paprika.

**Salep** A drink made from powdered wild orchid root and hot milk, quite hard to find.

**Sheqerpare** Balls of sweet dough baked in butter, popular in Kosovo and Albania.

**Tartufe** Truffles from the hinterland of Croatia's Istrian Peninsula, sold sliced or prepared into oils and pasta sauces.

**Tufahija** Apples filled with walnuts and almonds, doused in syrup, dusted with cinnamon and topped with *kajmak*.

shellfish, scampi, calamari and fish stews with sea bass, bream and hake. Salads with diced cucumber and tomato drizzled in olive oil and sprinkled with herbs accompany many main meals.

## Drinks

Every country has its favourite locally made beer (*pivo* or *piva* in Slavic languages, *birra* or *birrë* in Albanian), challenged on the shelves by major international brews such as Heineken and Fosters. Two local beers worth looking out for are Karlovačko *pivo* from Karlovac in Croatia and Nikšičko *pivo* from Montenegro. Most beers are lagers, though there are some dark stouts and ales available. In the harder stuff, there is an incredible array of spirits called *rakija* in Slavic tongues and *raki* in Albanian, which is usually distilled from grapes but also comes in a range of varieties made from or flavoured by other fruits, including mulberries, pears, strawberries, cherries and apples, and also walnuts. The alcohol content is generally between 40% and 70%, so not surprisingly it's drunk from special little glasses. Macedonia's local variant is *žolta* (yellow) *rakija* with wheat added during a secondary fermentation – even more than most *rakijas*, it kicks like a mad mule. The most common fruit *rakija* is made from plums, and is variously called *šljivovica* (Croatia, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Serbia and Montenegro) or *šljivovka* (Slovenia). This is the national drink in Serbia, where something like 70% of the plum harvest goes into its production. The drink appears at any excuse for a celebration, from Christmas to birthdays to anniversaries. Albania's liquor of note is Skënderbeu *konjak*, a surprisingly smooth and subtle brandy. The region also has a range of herbal liqueurs, from Albania's very curious Fernet to Serbia and Croatia's rather medicinal-tasting *pelinkovac*.

The region produces a huge array of wines, from 10L plastic containers of basic country plonk to refined whites and reds matured in oak. Slovenia alone has something like 400 wine producers, most with less than 10 hectares of vineyards. Slovenian wines are fairly similar to northern Italian and Austrian wines, with an emphasis on aromatic dry whites.

The Dalmatian coast faces a host of environmental challenges but Sunce, a Split-based environmental organisation, has risen to the occasion. Track its efforts at [www.sunce-st.org](http://www.sunce-st.org).

*The Best of Croatian Cooking* by Liliana Pavić and Gordana Perker Mosher is just what it says it is.

California's popular wine grape Zinfandel descends from the ancient Croatian varietal Crljenak, which now exists in such small numbers that no pure Crljenak is made.

1995

Croatian army overruns separatist Serb territories, 150,000 civilians flee

1995

Dayton Agreement ends conflict in Bosnia

1997

Revolution and anarchy in Albania

1999

Kosovo becomes UN protectorate after NATO anti-Serbian bombing campaign

Many Slovenian towns have a *vinoteka* (wine shop) selling local varieties such as Sipon, Traminac and Beli Pinot as well as better-known varieties such as Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon. The late harvest or *izbor* dessert wines are more expensive but can be spectacular.

Croatia's wine producers are divided into the inland Slavonia region, where 93% of wines are whites, and the coastal Dalmatian area, where 70% of wines are reds. Graševina, a gentle golden-hued white similar to Riesling, is the most widely grown variety in Slavonia. The Dalmatian coast wineries are increasingly growing Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon, but some unusual varieties grown here include Plavac Mali from the Dubrovnik region, which produces dense bunches of blue-skinned berries. One crisp, cleansing Dalmatian white is Pošip.

The rest of the region is lagging behind in producing fine wines. Vineyards are mostly geared towards the mass production of cheap wines, and while there's been a slow switch from low-quality, high-yielding varieties to premium local and French varieties, the local industries still have a long way to go. Macedonia has vast vineyards but production is dominated by one company, Tikveš. It makes the popular table wine T'ga za Jug, named after a famous poem *Longing For The South*. Boutique wine producers such as Bovin are just beginning to appear in Macedonia's vineyard heartland in the Kavadarci-Negotino region. Serbia's workhorse red grape is Prokupac, a dense, robust red with high sugar levels, often blended with French varieties such as Gamay and Merlot. In Serbia the Fruška Gora region is a major wine producer, and a very pretty one. One rich, earthy red variety, which repays cellaring, is Vranec (Macedonia) or Vranac (Montenegro). Fine wines from Hercegovina include Žilavka (white) and Blatina (red). Albania's wine industry is fairly small, but offers some real curiosities such as red Kallmet from the northern Shkodra region.

Besides alcohol, coffee is the main social lubricant. The Ottoman aristocracy introduced the caffeine habit in the 16th century, and coffee houses have been pillars of local communities ever since. Turkish-style coffee is traditionally the most popular, though Italian- and Austrian-style brews are probably more popular now in the big cities. Turkish coffee is prepared by heating finely ground coffee beans and water slowly for 15 to 20 minutes. In Serbia, Kosovo and Albania the custom is to mix sugar with the coffee powder and water as well. The coffee is then served in a small cup with the obligatory layer of froth on top, plus a glass of water and perhaps a biscuit or piece of Turkish delight as well.

### Vegetarians & Vegans

There are lots of vegetarian options in home recipes, but most restaurants tend to serve meat dishes. There are some delicious Turkish-style vegetable dishes to be had, such as roast peppers and aubergines, cauliflower moussaka and vegetarian *bureks*. Many entrées are vegetarian as well. On the other hand, vegetarian soups are sometimes flavoured with smoked ham. Many traditional and top-end restaurants will have several vegetarian dishes, but generally vegetarians will fare better in summer. In winter there may be little on offer besides nuts, chips and omelettes. Pure vegans will struggle at restaurants and may do better shopping at local food markets.

Serbs sometimes call a dose of potent *rakija* 'a glass of chat', and back it up with the old saying 'Without *rakija* there is no conversation'.

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