

GATEWAY TO THE BALKANS

OVERVIEW

Tour Date: 12 July 2017 – 9 Aug 2017

Duration: 29 days

Tour Cost (\$AUD): \$18,950

Single Supplement (\$AUD): \$4,560

Price based on twin-share lower deck
Upgrade to Main Deck \$825 pp twin share

Following on from our hugely popular Soul of the Balkans tour, we now introduce our brand new Gateway to the Balkans. This is a magnificent 29-day journey that starts in little-visited Bulgaria before moving into Serbia and Slovenia. The cruise section, for which we once again board MS Emanuel, takes us to the sparkling gems of the north Croatian coast without the hordes of boats that gather on the country's southern shoreline.

We begin in the Bulgarian capital Sofia. The distinctive yellow paving that meanders through the central city cannot hide the vestiges of centuries of Ottoman domination. We then travel west and cross the border into Serbia and onto the beautiful city of Nis before moving onto the Serbian capital, Belgrade. Bombed by NATO forces in 1999, Belgrade is today a self-assured, vibrant and eclectic city that leans to the east and to the west. From here we head to Novi Sad, an architectural wonderland and maze of cobbled streets and alleys. We then move into the snow-covered Slovenian Alps that surround the 'lake of poets', Lake Bled. Here in this impossibly beautiful environment we spend three glorious nights perched right on the lake itself. We then head to the cosy Slovenian capital, Ljubljana before driving to Croatia's amazing Roman town of Pula, where our private cruise ship *MS Emanuel* is moored. From here we spend a glorious 11 days criss-crossing between remote islands, extraordinary towns and the delightful National Parks of the Dalmatian coast. Finishing our exhilarating cruise in Split, we then move on to the magnificent area of Plitvice Lakes. Here some 16 lakes are connected by a series of waterfalls and cascades that combine to create an unparalleled vista. At least as rich in history, culture and natural beauty as our acclaimed '*Soul of the Balkans*', our long awaited '*Adriatic Adventure*' is now a reality.

Tour Fitness Level: Moderate

GATEWAY TO THE BALKANS – JULY 2017

TOUR ITINERARY

12/07/2017 Australia – Singapore

Check-in at your chosen Australian airport for the flight to Singapore with Singapore airlines and connect with your onward flight to Europe.

Depart Singapore on Singapore airlines SQ26, 23.55

13/07/2017 Singapore – Frankfurt – Sofia (D)

Arrive Frankfurt 06.40

Depart Frankfurt Lufthansa LH1426, 09.50

Arrive Sofia 13.00

One of the most ancient cities in Europe, Sofia has always been on the crossroads of eastern and western international routes. The city was named in the 14th century after St Sofia church. Today numerous archaeological, cultural and historical monuments from its rich Thracian, Byzantine, Roman, Slav and Turkish history have been preserved among modern edifices. This blend of the new and old adds a charming quality to the capital.

Grand Sofia

Sofia

14/07/2017 Sofia (BLD)

This morning we explore the city of Sofia as we traverse its famous yellow pavements. Very quickly and at almost every turn we feel an innate mix of east and west. In the afternoon we head up to nearby Mount Vitosha, the oldest national park in the Balkans Peninsula. This alpine silhouette dominates the capital from every angle.

15/07/2017 Sofia – Nis - Belgrade (BLD)

Leaving Sofia, we soon cross the Bulgarian/Serbian border as we head to the town of Nis. Crossing over a narrow gorge we enter Nis, which was the birth place of Constantine the Great. Here we visit the unique Tower of Skulls. During the Battle of Cegar in 1809, the Serbian Duke of Resava ignited the Ottoman's gunpowder store killing 10,000 Turks and at the same time 4,000 Serbs. Nonetheless the Ottomans prevailed and as a reminder to the residents, built a tower to house nearly a thousand Serbian skulls killed during the battle. However today the Tower of Skulls is a glorious reminder for the great Serbian rebellion. We also visit one of the best preserved Nazi concentration camps in Europe. Between 1941 -1945, this camp held 30,000 Jews, Roma and Partisans. It was also the largest mass breakout ever attempted from a Nazi concentration camp. After lunch we drive to Belgrade.

Marriott Hotel

Belgrade

16/07/2017 Belgrade (BLD)

Today we start to explore Belgrade on foot as we traverse the wonderful pedestrianised boulevard of Knez Mihailova that leads to the ancient Kalemegdan Citadel. The fortress was originally built as a defence against the Ottomans, who after seizing it, adapted it for their own defensive outpost. We then reach the Savamala district that traverses the river before reaching the House of Flowers. This is Tito's marble mausoleum that sits inside the winter garden. Inside the House of Flowers there is a fascinating display of gifts to the former leader from ordinary citizens of Yugoslavia and also heads of states from around the world. We then enter

the wonderful military museum that houses a collection of weaponry which includes cluster bombs from the 1990s NATO bombing of Belgrade.

17/07/2017 Belgrade (BLD)

This morning we head to within a few kilometres of the Bosnian border to Sargan and Mecavnik villages. Here we board the Sargan 8, a narrow gauge heritage railway that runs from Sargan to the pretty village of Mokra Gora. The construction of the railway was started in 1921 and finished in 1924. The idea behind the construction of the Sargan 8 was that, since trains couldn't climb steep hills, a railway should be built in a way that would enable trains to reach the top of the mountain. Accordingly, the track was built in a figure eight pattern that meanders in loops around the entire mountain, slowly ascending towards the peak. The ride finishes near the surreal wooden village of Mecavnik

18/07/2017 Belgrade – Novi Sad (BLD)

This morning we skirt the Danube as we make the short drive to Novi Sad, capital of Vojvodina, the northern Autonomous Province of Serbia. Meaning 'New Garden', this small city of 350,000 is simply one of Europe's historical treasures that rivals Prague and Cesky Krumlov. The centre abounds with buildings from profoundly different periods and includes gothic, baroque, secession and neoclassical.

Hotel Centar

Novi Sad

19/07/2017 Novi Sad – Lake Bled (BLD)

After breakfast we start our journey to Lake Bled. Following a corridor between the Danube and the Tisa rivers, we reach the town of Subotica. A rich cultural heritage with lavish buildings this multicultural yet distinctly European city exudes charm. After lunch we cross into Slovenia and onto Lake Bled.

Hotel Jelovical

Lake Bled

20/07/2017 Lake Bled (BLD)

Lake Bled is an emerald-green lake, surrounded by the highest peaks of the great snow-covered Julian Alps, dotted with a lush tree-lined islet that reveals a church spire above the water. On the other shore there is a steep cliff where a formidable medieval castle stares down into the sparkling water. This morning we circumnavigate the lake and in the afternoon we explore the castle, whose view to the lake has inspired poets and writers for centuries.

21/07/2017 Lake Bled (BLD)

Today we take a cable car to the top of Mount Vogel. At 1,800 metres, Vogel provides sweeping panoramic view across the Julian Alps.

22/07/2017 Lake Bled – Ljubljana (BLD)

This morning we leave Lake Bled for the short journey to the Slovenian capital, Ljubljana. In the afternoon we begin to explore the city.

Hotel Central

Ljubljana

23/07/2017 Ljubljana (BLD)

Ljubljana is one of the most liveable capital cities in Europe thanks to a severe restriction on traffic in the city centre. The Ljubljanica River meanders through the metropolitan heart where beautiful terrace cafés and restaurants sit atop its leafy banks, flanked by elegant alabaster bridges and pyramids, all unique minimalist architecture of the Slovenian master Jože Plečnik. Ljubljana, even during the Tito

years, provided Yugoslavia with its doctors, professors and writers and today the city remains the spiritual and intellectual heart of the country.

24/07/2017 Ljubljana – Pula – Board MS Emanuel (BLD)

After breakfast we drive to the Croatian border and onwards to the Istrian Peninsula. We then enter the famous Roman town of Pula. This afternoon we board our cruise ship, MS *Emanuel*. With just 18 cabins, *Emanuel* is the perfect size for visiting the small ports and coastal towns of the Adriatic.

25/07/2017 Pula (BLD)

This morning we visit the nearby Brijuni Islands, an archipelago only a few miles north of Pula. Here, Tito had one of his favourite residences which was visited by statesmen from all over the world as well as famous artists and Hollywood actors. The whole archipelago preserves traces of 5,000 years of human history. In the afternoon we start to explore Pula which was founded in the 10th century BC. Pula boasts a wealth of Roman architecture culminating in a remarkably well-preserved Roman amphitheatre, occupying the very heart of the city. One of the city's more famous inhabitants was Irish writer James Joyce who lived here in 1904 with his wife Nora.

26/07/2017 Pula – Opatija (BLD)

This morning we set sail for Opatija which is just 13km from the major port city of Rijeka. A former Viennese seaside resort, Opatija possesses an enviable location along the coast, nestled between forested hills and the sparkling Adriatic.

27/07/2017 Opatija – Grgur – Rab (BLD)

Leaving Opatija, we set sail for the island of Grgur, where sheep graze on lush green vegetation and beautiful coves indent the shores. Yet this idyllic setting belies an infamous past. During the communist years the island was a women's prison and the remains of the penitentiary camp and some 50 bunkers set in karst landscape can still be seen. After our visit here we continue to the island of Rab which sits in the middle of the Gulf of Kvarner and has been occupied since 350BC. During the summer months concerts and street exhibitions create a wonderfully vibrant atmosphere.

28/07/2017 Rab – Mali Losinj (BLD)

After breakfast *Emanuel* heads to the most inland point of the Adriatic Zadar – Kornati Sea, Mali Losinj. The 33km wide island is adorned with countless natural attractions, and dolphins are often seen swimming in its numerous coves. As well as being known for its medicinal plants, there is a dizzying array of historical sites which testify to a turbulent past.

29/07/2017 Mali Losinj – Zadar (BLD)

This morning we set sail for the heart of the Adriatic and the city of Zadar, located on a small peninsular on the Dalmatian coast. Although Zadar is a vibrant city with a historic old town and cosmopolitan cafes, it is not overrun by tourists. Here an extraordinary history that is laced with a real treasury of archaeological and monumental treasures of all periods unfolds. Tonight we hear the city's most famous voice, the amazing Sea Organ of Zadar – a series of pipes cut into the promenade which make music with the movement of the waves.

30/07/2017 Zadar – Kornati National Park (BLD)

By midday we reach the nautical paradise of Kornati. A kaleidoscope of islands, reefs and inlets, which range in colour from white to ochre. On a visit to the islands, George Bernard Shaw wrote: 'On the last day of the Creation, God desired to crown

his work, and thus created the Kornati Islands out of tears, stars and breath.' These predominantly rocky islands hide great cavities, caves, gullies and crevices. Though vegetation is scarce, the steep cliffs are home to various bird species such as peregrine falcons, common swifts and shags.

31/07/2017 Kornati National Park – Skradin (Krka National Park) (BLD)

Sailing through a 200m karst canyon along the Krka River and surrounded by limestone hills, the *Emanuel* reaches the small town of Skradin. This is where the western foot of the Dinaric Alps falls into the sea and where spectacular waterfalls define the landscape of Krka National Park.

01/08/2017 Skradin – Zlarin (BLD)

Separated from the mainland by the Sibenik channel and known as the 'Golden Isle' for its unspoiled beauty, Zlarin is an island of pines, sandy beaches, idyllic coves and a beautiful traditional village. Zlarin's inhabitants were the first coral fishermen in the Adriatic and this has borne a centuries-old, unique culture, based upon harvesting coral and turning it into jewellery and ornaments. Today, fishing and sailing are still the island's major industries.

02/08/2017 Zlarin – Omis (BLD)

As we continue to sail south, we reach the Omis Riviera, at the very heart of the Dalmatian coastline. In the past the town was notorious because of the pirates of Omis, whose ships were a centuries-long symbol of retaliation, courage and strength. Indeed, evidence of a proud and turbulent history can be found on every corner of ancient Omis.

03/08/2017 Omis – Pucisca – Split (BLD)

Today we set sail for Split, stopping en-route in small bays and inlets for some swimming in the crystal-clear waters of the Adriatic. Early in the afternoon we arrive in Split, the second-largest city in Croatia and a UNESCO World Heritage site. At the historical centre, and within walking distance of the port, is the huge palace of the Emperor Diocletian. Dating from the end of the third century AD, it was one of the last palaces of the Roman Empire.

04/08/2017 Split (BLD)

After breakfast we visit the nearby town of Trogir, with its serpentine medieval streets and imposing Kamerlengo Fortress. On our return we start to explore the old city of Split, beginning with the warren of medieval buildings that is contained within the walls of Diocletian's Palace. We then continue along the beautifully restored promenade as we make our way to the open-air marketplace.

05/08/2017 Split – Plitvice Lakes

This morning we bid a fond farewell to the *Emanuel* and her crew as we board our coach for the journey to Plitvice Lakes. The National Park is comprised of sixteen lakes which are inter-connected by a series of waterfalls that are set in deep woodland populated by deer, bears, wolves, boars and rare species of birds. The National Park covers a total area of 300 square kilometres and the lakes join together over a distance of eight kilometres. This beautiful national park was granted UNESCO status in 1979.

Plitvice Hotel

Plitvice Lakes

06/08/2017 Plitvice Lakes

Today we enjoy a full day exploring Plitvice Lakes, beginning with a walking tour of the upper area of the lakes. After lunch we use small boats to cover the lower lake area.

07/08/2017 Plitvice Lakes – Zagreb (BLD)

Zagreb is often bypassed as people make for the Croatian coast. Yet this exciting city is an invaluable window into Croatian culture. This morning we explore the lower town and its medieval quarter and in the afternoon we visit the undulating upper town with its labyrinth of cobbled streets.

Esplanade Zagreb Hotel

Zagreb

08/08/2017 Zagreb – Frankfurt – Singapore

Early this morning we transfer to the airport for our flight home.

Depart Zagreb Lufthansa CityLine LH1405, 06.50

Arrive Frankfurt 08.50

Depart Frankfurt Singapore Airlines SQ25, 12.30

09/08/2017

Arrive Singapore 06.50

Connect with the flight to your chosen Australian city.