

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 – Dubai

Check-in at your chosen Australian airport for the flight to Dubai with Emirates.

13/07/2017 Dubai – Sofia (D)

Depart Dubai, Fly Dubai FZ 757, 10.50

Arrive Sofia 12.45

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 (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.

Grand Hotel

Nis

16/07/2017 Nis – Novi Pazar – Belgrade (BLD)

Today head into the heartland of the Serbian medieval state. The cultural capital of Raska/Sandzak region, Novi Pazar. Meaning 'new marketplace' Novi Pazar is the Jerusalem of Serbia. Here Islam and Orthodox Christianity shake hands beneath the Golija and Rogozna mountains. After lunch we leave this delightful valley and head north to Belgrade.

Hotel Moskva

Belgrade

17/07/2017 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.

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 – Dubai (B)

This morning we have some free time before we transfer to the airport for our flight home.

Depart Zagreb Fly Dubai FZ 794, 13.50

Arrive Dubai 21.25

Connect with the flight to our chosen Australian city.

09/08/2017

We arrive back in Australia today.

GATEWAY TO THE BALKANS

There was a war in the Balkans in 1994. Is it safe to go there?

What makes this journey so fascinating is to witness how the Balkans has moved on since the war. What makes this journey so haunting is to witness the scars of a war that was so recent. Today people in the Balkans are friendly and welcoming and the area is very secure and safe.

If I travel alone, do I have to pay the single supplement?

If you do not want to share a room with another person in the group, you will have to pay the single supplement. However, if you are willing to share we will team you up with another passenger of the same gender in the hotels and on the boat. If a match-up is not possible, we will upgrade you at our expense.

Is it possible to upgrade the cabin on the Emanuel?

Generally there is little difference between the cabins apart from their location. All cabins have private facilities. We do offer an upgrade from lower to main deck at a cost of \$825 pp twin share.

Do the crew members on the Emanuel speak English?

Most staff members on board *Emanuel* have a working knowledge of English. Also on board is a ship coordinator who speaks fluent English and therefore we have no language barriers.

Does the Emanuel have credit card facilities?

No. However, payment can be made in Euros, USD and local currency.

Are there laundry facilities on the Emanuel?

The boat has a full laundry service and is generally fairly cheap.

How much spending money do I need for the entire trip and what currency should I bring?

Because almost everything is included, an amount of 700 Euros would be ample. Money should be taken in cash and with small denomination Euros. ATMs are also available in all countries.

Do I need vaccinations for this journey?

No vaccinations are mandatory on this route but we would recommend you seek advice from your doctor. Tetanus should certainly be up to date at all times.

Is the water safe to drink en-route and what is the general standard of hygiene?

We err on the side of caution on all of our tours and advise travellers to drink only bottled water. This is easy to obtain everywhere. The standard of hygiene is surprisingly high along the entire route.

I would like to stay on in Europe after the group departs. Is this possible?

It may be possible to extend in Europe; likewise it may be possible to stop over in Dubai on the return journey. Our consultants will be happy to provide details. If you wish to take up this option, all arrangements must be confirmed before leaving Australia.

Do we need any visas?

The whole journey is delightfully visa-free.

A lot of companies have many expensive optional extras on their tours. Do you?

We don't believe in a lot of expensive 'optional tours'. Our itineraries are designed to make the best possible use of time and to include all the must-see sights, plus additional surprises. Therefore practically everything is included in the tour cost.

What is the standard of the hotels?

The hotels are generally 4 to 5-star quality, comfortable, clean and all with en-suites. Many of the hotels we use are unique boutique properties located in the centre of the cities or towns.

Are there internet facilities en-route?

All hotels we use have internet facilities and many have WiFi.

Do mobile telephones work?

Telstra and Optus mobiles work throughout the entire journey. You will need to ensure you have global roaming. Contact your service provider for further details.

How much should we tip the guides and porters?

There is no need to tip guides or porters as all tips and gratuities are included in the tour cost.