

BALKANS ON A BUDGET

The Complete Travel Guide 2026

Serbia · Croatia · Bosnia · Montenegro · Albania · Slovenia · North
Macedonia

Budgets · Transport · Where to Stay · Must-See Cities · Practical Tips

Free guide by
explorebalkansnow.com

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01 — Why the Balkans?

The Balkans are Europe's best-kept open secret. While most tourists queue for photos in Paris or pay peak-season prices in Barcelona, the Balkans offer medieval old towns, dramatic coastlines, and mountain ranges — for a fraction of the cost.

Albania's Riviera rivals the Amalfi Coast at a quarter of the price. Sarajevo's covered bazaar feels like stepping into a different century. Belgrade's nightlife is among the best in Europe. Montenegro fits mountains, fjords, and beaches into a country smaller than Connecticut.

In 2026, flight connections have improved significantly, visa requirements for most nationalities are minimal, and the tourism infrastructure — while still developing — is good enough to travel comfortably without overpaying.

Low cost of living — Average daily budget 30–60% lower than Western Europe

Minimal crowds — No queues at most historical sites, even in summer

Rich history — Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, Byzantine, and Roman layers in one region

Visa-free travel — EU, US, UK, and most Western passports need no visa

Easy to combine — Multiple countries reachable by bus in a single day

02 — Top Destinations at a Glance

Daily budget = accommodation + food + transport + one activity. Budget range assumes hostel/guesthouse for accommodation.

Belgrade	Serbia	€35–55	Nightlife, food scene, history, central hub for the region
Dubrovnik	Croatia	€60–90	Walled old town, Adriatic coast, Game of Thrones locations
Sarajevo	Bosnia	€30–45	Ottoman bazaar, war history, diverse culture, cheap food
Kotor	Montenegro	€45–70	Fjord setting, Venetian walls, dramatic mountain backdrop
Tirana	Albania	€25–40	Colourful, chaotic, cheap, and rapidly changing
Split	Croatia	€50–75	Diocletian's Palace, ferry hub, beach proximity
Ljubljana	Slovenia	€55–80	Walkable, green, castle views, excellent coffee culture
Mostar	Bosnia	€30–45	Stari Most bridge, old bazaar, short hop from coast
Budva	Montenegro	€40–65	Party atmosphere, sandy beaches, compact old town
Ohrid	N. Macedonia	€25–40	UNESCO lake town, Byzantine churches, slow travel
Novi Sad	Serbia	€30–50	EXIT Festival, Petrovaradin fortress, relaxed vibe
Skopje	N. Macedonia	€25–40	Bizarre architecture project, cheap base, easy flights

Tip

Combine Serbia + Bosnia + Montenegro in 10–14 days for a classic Balkans loop with minimal backtracking.

03 — Getting There & Around

Flights

Belgrade (BEG), Zagreb (ZAG), Ljubljana (LJU), and Tirana (TIA) are the main low-cost entry points. Ryanair, Wizz Air, and easyJet connect most of Western Europe. For flexible date searches, Aviasales often finds the cheapest combinations including multi-city routes.

Save money

Fly into one city, out of another. Belgrade in, Tirana out is a classic combo that avoids doubling back.

Buses

Buses are the backbone of Balkan travel. FlixBus, RegioJet, and local operators connect almost every city. Expect €5–25 for cross-border routes. Night buses save a night of accommodation — book 1–2 days ahead in peak season.

Airport Transfers

Taxis at Balkan airports frequently overcharge tourists. Fixed-price private transfers through services like GetTransfer or Welcome Pickups eliminate the negotiation. Price is agreed in advance — no surprises.

Car Rental

Essential for coastal Montenegro, rural Albania, and North Macedonia's lake region. Book in advance through aggregators like QEEQ or GetRentaCar for the best rates. Note: many rental contracts restrict driving across certain borders — check before booking.

Border note

Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia may require additional border crossing insurance. Ask your rental company explicitly.

04 — Where to Sleep

Hostels (€10–22/night)

Widely available in Belgrade, Sarajevo, Split, Ljubljana. Quality is generally high by European standards.

Guesthouses / Sobe (€25–55)

"Sobe" means "rooms" — family-run guesthouses are excellent value and more common than hotels in smaller towns.

Apartments (€35–80)

Ideal for stays of 3+ nights. Direct booking on Booking.com often cheaper than Airbnb in this region.

Budget hotels (€40–80)

Available everywhere. Three-star quality in the Balkans often matches four-star pricing in Western Europe.

Book early for Dubrovnik July–August (prices triple), Kotor summer weekends, EXIT Festival in Novi Sad (early July).

Best search tool

EconomyBookings aggregates hotels, guesthouses, and apartments across the region with competitive pricing. Use it alongside Booking.com to compare — the cheaper option varies by city and season.

05 — Food & Drink

Balkan food is hearty, meat-heavy, and incredibly affordable. A sit-down meal with a beer rarely exceeds €8–12 outside tourist zones.

Cevapi — Grilled minced meat sausages served with lepinja bread and kajmak. The national dish of Bosnia.

Burek — Flaky pastry filled with meat, cheese, or spinach. Breakfast staple across the region. Under €2.

Pljeskavica — Serbian-style burger, oversized, often spiced. Belgrade does it best.

Fresh fish — Essential on the Montenegrin and Croatian coasts. Order the catch of the day.

Rakija — Fruit brandy. Offered everywhere, often homemade. Refusing is mildly rude.

Baklava — Ottoman legacy dessert found across Bosnia, Serbia, and North Macedonia.

Budget hack

Pijaca (local market) + bakery for breakfast + sit-down lunch = under €10/day for food across most of the region.

06 — Money & Safety

Currencies

Serbia: Serbian Dinar (RSD) — cards widely accepted in cities

Croatia: Euro (EUR) — card-friendly everywhere

Bosnia: Convertible Mark (BAM) — carry some cash outside Sarajevo

Montenegro: Euro (EUR) — cash preferred in smaller towns

Albania: Albanian Lek (ALL) — cash essential outside Tirana

Slovenia: Euro (EUR) — fully card-friendly

N. Macedonia: Macedonian Denar (MKD) — some cash needed

Safety

The Balkans are generally safe for tourists. Petty theft in tourist areas (Dubrovnik, Split old town, Belgrade centre) is the main concern — the same precautions you'd take in any European city apply. Political tensions exist in some areas (north Kosovo, parts of Bosnia) but rarely affect tourists. Check your government's travel advisory before visiting Kosovo specifically.

eSIM & Connectivity

Local SIM cards are cheap but require passport registration at some providers. An eSIM activated before departure (via Airalo) works across all Balkan countries on a single data plan — activate it on your phone before you board.

Travel Insurance

Croatia requires EU health card or valid insurance for EU citizens. Albania and Kosovo have limited public healthcare — insurance is essential. EKTA offers affordable short-trip coverage specifically designed for European travel.

07 — Practical Tools

These are the tools and services that make Balkans travel easier and cheaper. All links available at explorebalkansnow.com

Aviasales	Flight search engine — finds cheapest routes including budget airlines	via our site
GetTransfer	Fixed-price private airport and city transfers, no meter	via our site
Welcome Pickups	Airport pickup with English-speaking drivers, price locked upfront	via our site
Kiwitaxi	Fixed-price taxi service between cities and airports	via our site
GetRentaCar	Car rental comparison across all major providers	via our site
QEEQ	Car rental with full insurance options included	via our site
EconomyBookings	Hotel and accommodation search across the Balkans	via our site
Airalo	eSIM for travellers — works in all Balkan countries	via our site
EKTA Insurance	Travel insurance for short European trips	via our site
AirHelp	Flight compensation if your flight is delayed or cancelled	via our site
Radical Storage	Luggage storage in major Balkan cities — per-hour pricing	via our site

All links Find all partner links and updated deals at explorebalkansnow.com — links are checked and updated regularly.

08 — Sample Itineraries

7 Days — Classic Western Balkans

Day 1–2	Sarajevo	Arrive, Bascarsija bazaar, war history, burek breakfast
Day 3	Mostar (day trip)	Stari Most bridge, old town, 1.5h bus from Sarajevo
Day 4	Kotor	Bus via Dubrovnik or direct — fjord, walls, sunset views
Day 5–6	Budva / Tivat	Beach time, old town, depart from Tivat airport
Day 7	Departure	Fly home from Tivat (TIV) or Dubrovnik (DBV)

14 Days — Serbia + Montenegro + Albania

Day 1–3	Belgrade	Arrive, Kalemegdan, Skadarlija, nightlife, day trip to Novi Sad
Day 4–5	Sarajevo	Night bus or flight — bazaar, history, food
Day 6	Mostar	Day trip from Sarajevo
Day 7–8	Kotor	Bus south — fjord, old town, mountain hiking
Day 9–10	Shkoder	Cross into Albania — lake, castle, relaxed pace
Day 11–13	Tirana	Capital chaos, colourful buildings, day trips
Day 14	Depart Tirana	Fly home from TIA — good Wizz Air connections

21 days? Add Croatia (Split, Dubrovnik), Slovenia (Ljubljana), and North Macedonia (Ohrid) to the 14-day route for the full Balkans loop.

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