

The crafts go marching on in the Accursed Mountains, a range that crosses Albania, Kosovo and Montenegro.
Photo: Slavko Velicki/istockphoto.com

CLOSE TO HOME

A NASCENT SKI CULTURE IN
EUROPE'S ACCURSED MOUNTAINS



Words **SCOTT YORKO**

AN old, rickety farm tractor is weaving circles on the tarmac of the Podgorica Airport. It's decorated with multicolor swirls and flames and some googly eyes spray-painted around the headlights. It appears to be lost, perhaps missing from a nearby parade. Then I see the wagon train full of suitcases trailing behind it and realize this is the international airport's official luggage transportation vehicle. I'm tickled by the novelty until I look a little closer and realize my ski bag is not on it.



With the winter infrastructure, the region surrounding the Accursed Mountains often goes unexplored for days at a time, and straggled vehicles are just part of the game. Luckily for the group, this van was fixed with some roadside pushing. (Photo: Bruno Medved/Radiotimelapse)

Irma, the airport lost and found attendant with a wide gap-toothed smile and ridge-line of eyebrows under dark curly hair, hands out some paperwork for my lost "sledding devices" and fills it to me before getting up from her tiny desk in baggage claim to walk out for lunch. "Do you think it will arrive in the next few days?" I ask. "I'm heading pretty far out into the mountains."

"Yes," she says with an even wider smile beneath a devilish eyebrow dip. "This is Montenegro."

I nod, pretending to know what she means.

STILL WITHOUT MY SKIS or gear, the drive from the capital city to the dreary outskirts doesn't start out scenic. Regional roads pass billboards advertising cured meats. Some blocky, dirt-stained buildings are only a bit higher than adjacent trash mounds. But then the newly built highway, barely three years old, traces the frosty blue Cijevna River into the belly of the Accursed Mountains (also known as the Albanian Alps). Dark granite rock faces plastered with snow shoot to the sky, enclosing the road in a vertical-walled canyon. After passing some medieval castle-like buildings, the range opens up to prominent 6,000-foot peaks in expansive terrain—most of it has never been skied.

Two hours farther on, the town of Plav is waiting at the foothills of the Bogčevića mountain area with peaks rising to 8,310 feet. This is the meeting point for the fourth annual Ski Tour Fest of the Balkans. Skiers and spillboarders from nine different countries have descended upon the mountainous, war-torn region of Southeastern Europe to build a ski-touring community from scratch in a land known more for its political turmoil than its backcountry pursuits.

Small cars are parked in a gravel lot next to a guesthouse and people in brightly colored Gore-Tex stand around chatting, smoking, their Skintex array of color contrasting the gloomy clouds overhead. One of them is Miško Čigaj, Balcje, a bald 34-year-old professor of philosophy, environmental activist and the festival's Montenegrin founder and ringleader.

Weeks earlier, he'd spoken over the phone about the Balkan region's complicated history, the long list of wars and the impact of the Ottoman Empire's conflict with Western Europe. "Our family's history is always connected with war in every previous generation and that's all people know this area for," he said. "We want to connect them instead with beautiful mountains and skiing."

Gigo sees the untapped potential of this region as an attraction that can bridge gaps across borders, finding

common ground with skiers from the area, while also laying the foundations for future ski-touring visitors and development. While this area is commonly referred to as the Balkans, a cloud hangs over the term, the aftereffect of the Yugoslav Wars in the 1990s that split apart families and left more than 140,000 people dead. Over two decades since the end of the war and the split of Yugoslavia in the 1990s into six independent entities—Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, and North Macedonia—Gigo and friends are trying to emerge from that shadow. Unfortunately, since Montenegro's independence in 2006, people have been hearing promises of foreign consortiums coming to the region to develop large-scale ski resorts, but widespread corruption, political inefficiency and social disengagement have kept some of the best skiing in Europe outside of the Alps untouched until now. But first we have to make it there.

Just as losing a ski bag with all your gear is a rite of passage, no ski trip to the Accursed Mountains is complete without getting a vehicle stuck in snow. We spend two hours leaving on the back of several loggopping two-wheel-drive vans with shock spraying us in the face. After a few thousand feet of high-centering, fistbating on bald tires and rocking and rolling, we finally make it to Maslo, a hamlet of half-finished guesthouses normally reserved for summer use. The plow pulls up to clear the road minutes after, but no one seems annoyed. It's just how it goes around here.

The next day's rain is another unwelcome surprise, especially since I'll be skiing in my jeans, the cotton T-shirt and underwear I've been wearing for four days, a trench coat I found in a closet, wool mittens knitted by a Slovenian grandmother and borrowed skis. But people show up, beacons beeping, ready to ski, even in the occasional trash bag.

"We had the best snow I've ever skied in my life last year," says a slender guy named Boris, a lifelong ski racer. "Those two-story houses over there were completely buried." He points as we glop past a grouping of shepherd huts on our way toward Three Border Mountain, where one can ski through Montenegro, Albania and Kosovo in a single afternoon. Thousands of bunkers exist in these hills, testament to the violent history of their strategic location. Controlling the mountains once meant controlling entry points to entire countries. The same terrain that made the area so coveted when it was a war zone is also what makes it so appealing to skiers—long, north-facing ridges with relentless fall lines that once acted as sniper sightlines also funnel snow into the valley.



The restaurant in Mošnjevo, Montenegro, features old school charm and new mountain energy under a single roof. Photo: Savo Nislić/Solutions4you

We gain the windy ridge of Three Border Mountain with no visibility, quickly retreating down on a mix of windboard and wet, heavy muck. "At Ski Fest, you have to start off with struggles so you appreciate every little good thing that comes along," Boris says, aware of this statement's cultural relevance.

Back at the Maslo restaurant—a stone-walled family residence the government commandeers periodically during times of war—the owner, Almir, is throwing a party for locals with money from the Ski Tour Fest to establish a positive association with winter ski tourism. Meat is on the grill, balloons line the doorway and old-time music plays, featuring accordion sounds and operatic ballads from every Balkan nation. Men sit and smoke while several generations of women hold hands and dance, then smoke as well.

But even this idyllic scene isn't immune to the looming specter of the politics that have kept skiing here a mere pastime. "We had to pay [read: bribe] the local government to clean the roads just for this week," Almir laments. Plans to build a highway and tunnel through the valley are what Almir considers "a project to take money from people and buy votes with temporary jobs," increasing pass-through traffic while skipping over local economies.

Ski Tour Fest, Almir says, is a step in the opposite direction. "We want people to come and stay for a few days and enjoy the nature, stay in guesthouses and eat our local food," he explains. "Now when we organize something like this... the people will trust us more than the local government. Three years ago, no one even came here in the winter."

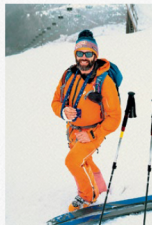
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With winter tourism infrastructure in the region still starting its growth process, you pretty much need to attend Ski Tour Fest to be able to backcountry ski here. That also means first descents are waiting to be notched with countless aspects still untouched by skis. During our last day in Bogičevica, my friend Tyler and I recruited a young Slovenian for a pre-dawn mission to climb and ski a prominent double-fall-line couloir with snow painted across the cliff band of a 2,370-foot mountain called Krš Bogičevica, a face we'd been staring at all week. After a few hours of sunrise skinning up a road past some boarded-up cabins, followed by an hour-and-a-half hoopack, we put our mark on a virgin 45-degree run—exposed pow turns up high and heavy pillow drops through the forest down low. The rewarding mission and snow conditions, along with my gear miraculously showing up the evening before, reinforced my stake in this place.



It isn't all gloom in the Accursed Mountains. A nice sunny window and even nicer tandem turns. Photo: Savo Nislić/Solutions4you

Even a baker wing couldn't keep this guy down at Ski Tour Fest.
Photo: Slavko Nikolic/Solutions4you



Ski Tour Fest brings together skiers from across southeastern Europe to sample untracked terrain and build community in one of the continent's least-skied ranges.
Photo: Slavko Nikolic/Solutions4you



THE MORNING AFTER ALMIR'S raucous dinner, rain has turned to fat, wet flakes. "Every winter should be white!" sings Almir at breakfast, ecstatic about the two inches of fresh that's fallen overnight. Folks hustle out the door and lap slushy spring turns off the summit of Dog Peak.

Balkan voices are classically low, flat and monotone, but today they're punctuated with shrieks of "Hopa!" and "Wood!"—the international sounds of stoke. "Pamet u glavu y pun gas" they yell while straight-lining patches of sticky snow. "Smart in the head and full gas!" These folks can really shred, arcing confident turns without wasting a single one.

Skiers hug each other at the bottom of runs. This isn't just adrenaline—they mean it. "You can get much closer to people here when they tell us, 'You are our brothers,'" says Iva, a tiny blond Slovenian anthropologist with a soft, high voice. "We don't hear that in Western Europe. There's this feeling in the Balkans that our countries should get back together."

BACK IN THE TOWN of Plav, Muslim prayer sounds at 3 p.m. near the spot where our driver ran over a chicken days before. Several people from our group gather in a field reading different countries' border rules on their ministry websites. The Slovenians have just realized they can't go straight to our next destination in Kosovo from Montenegro because they won't be able to go home through Serbia, which still doesn't recognize neighboring Kosovo as a coun-



Without another soul in sight, part of the Ski Tour Fest gang comes its signature in the Accursed Mountains.
Photo: Slavko Nikolic/Solutions4you

try because of ongoing conflicts. In Kosovo, the Serbians in our group cover their country's flag on their license plates with stickers and stash their cars at a secure place in town, unsure whether the vehicles would make it through certain military checkpoints.

The police and soldiers ask for three or four different identification documents when they pull us over at the Kosovo border. Handing my passport back into the van, a Kosovo border guard is too embarrassed to say my first name, which I'm told translates to "bastard" in Serbo-Croatian.

Four hours east, the hotel in Brezovica, Kosovo, feels weirdly vintage. It looks like a cinder block on its side with a creepy dungeon-like bathroom and suited old waiters who appear to have been there since the hotel was built. Kids on

a school trip wearing rental boots chunk through the echoing hallways with all their gear, ready to hike the bunny slope since only one of the seven lifts at the resort still works and it's mostly ridden up and down by sightseeing tracksuit-clad visitors with selfie sticks. I'm struck by the tromp of a sign outside of an apres bar that reads "Are You Ready For Progress?" Was this the ski future Gigo was imagining?

It's a 2,638-foot skin to the summit of Brezovica, which has no grooming or visible ski patrol. What is visible is a vast, fun slope of diverse terrain with cliffs and couloirs in every direction, steep wide-open pitches, well-spaced tree runs and giant snow-catching gullies that could be a distant cousin of those at Alta with denser snow. The top 1,200 feet of the Kosovo resort even skis through the neighboring country of Macedonia.



Weather changes quickly in this part of the world. After a few days of mild, warm weather, the skies break blues, revealing a canvas of white. Photo: Savoio Nicolai/Solutions4you

We skin past a stagnant one-seater lift with heavy icicles dripping from each chair. "I used to ride that 25 years ago," a blue-eyed Serbian named Uros says. There's no telling how long it's been since the bullwheel last spun.

Lapping untouched runs at an empty resort with new friends is a treat, though the question of whether skiing is making a comeback or a start remains unanswered. Gear itself is so hard to come by that most of the festival attendees pile into vans that evening to check out a black-market gear store in the front of some local guy's home. The selection of likely stolen goods is disappointing, with only a few outerwear kits of mismatched sizes and colors. "With the poverty here, I don't know anyone who's bought their gear in a ski shop," says a guy named Allen who runs an outdoor tourism company in the Durmitor National Park area. "Seventy percent of the population makes the minimum monthly salary of 400 euros. They're not going to buy 900-euro outerwear, let alone full-price skis."

More than a few reasons explain why, despite the abundance of terrain, there are probably no more than 100 backcountry skiers in all of the Balkans. Perhaps the big-

gest challenge is motivation. It's hard to get traction on any idea in a place where people have spent decades navigating empty promises. Change in a small country has to start small and Gigo has watched Balkan villages band together to stop big, corrupt corporations from going through with road and dam projects that don't benefit the local people. "It's enough to find at least 50 not-corrupted, not-brainwashed people to make real change," he says. He's seen this with the WGO he started, Nature Lovers Montenegro, which has raised money from the European Union to help save rivers from development projects and convert old Soviet railways into bike trails. "People need to see that there's economic opportunity in working with what they already have in the land, not relying on what some big company promises they'll do," he says.

Boris nods along. "This kind of event brings life into local communities, especially in winter," he adds. "There's so much room to grow a positive thing here, to build the ski community without waiting on these big resorts that will never come. At this scale, if just one local person from Plav sees the ski fest this year and gets into the sport, it's a success."

TOP TO BOTTOM

The Accursed Mountains trace a series of modern-day borders in southwestern Europe, making it easy to ski through multiple countries in a single day. Photo: Savoio Nicolai/Solutions4you

Wander Balkans is the only cat-skiing operation in the region, shuffling a growing number of guests into the mountains of Western Kosovo. Photo: Savoio Nicolai/Solutions4you



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Outside the small town of Peja in Western Kosovo resides the Balkans' only cat-skiing operation. On the final day of Ski Tour Fest, we pile into a snowcat that looks like a hot dog stand mounted on a piste groomer and ascend the steep ridge to 7,500 feet. It's Gigo's first time in this area of the country. Montenegrans weren't allowed to come here until their war ended in 2006. His head is on a swivel. "It's exciting to find all these new places so close to home," he says.

"We need more guides in Kosovo," says Bardhosh, the owner and operator of Wander Balkans, an adventure tourism guiding company that's been around for TK and TK. "More groups are starting to come and we have to turn them away."

It's another playground of features—cliffs, trees, mini-golf zones, chutes. One jagged peak looks familiar and I learn we're on just the other side of the ridge from Bogotëvica where the festival began. The guides are starting back into the Montenegrin valley, already making plans to turn the festival into a hot-to-hut touring trip next year with a several-day linkup hosted by local families in their shepherd cabins along the way. It's never been done before, but in the Accursed Mountains anything is possible. ■