

**At the bottom of this deep valley runs the Komarnica River. Will its fate be like so many others, tamed by a wall of concrete? Or can it, like the Vjosa, be protected?**

Frothing, sapphire water roars its way between silvery limestone cliffs, three hundred metres high. Leafy ferns and squat, scrappy beech trees cling to the side of these walls **like there is no tomorrow**. Above the [water](#), dragons and damsels soar on warm air currents, battling for control of air space and flowers with wasps, beetles and bees. Swifts and swallows dive and swirl higher still, egged on by the calls of their young. Far below, beneath the ripples and eddies, an abundance of aquatic molluscs, bivalves and other invertebrates which have been present since the Miocene continue to thrive in these waters.

This is the scene you would have witnessed had you entered the Nevidio Canyon, a two kilometre section of the **Komarnica River**, a thousand years ago. Kanjon Nevidio translates as “The Unseen Canyon”; indeed this is how it stayed, untouched by man, until very recently. It was only in 1965 that a team of local mountaineers hiked the entire length, planting the first daring footsteps of any human.

As I climbed, swam and stumbled my own way through the canyon decades later, I couldn't fathom the wonder these intrepid explorers must have felt at discovering this pristine ecosystem. Never had I felt so lost in space and time as this; folklore and ecology blurred together to create a mind-numbing sense of timelessness.

But as I gazed up at the streak of blue peaking between the limestone slabs, a visceral anxiety ploughed me, one that is shared by many Montenegrins. The Komarnica is imminently set to be dammed, its biodiversity and ecological integrity drowned for good by a reservoir held up by hundreds of metres of concrete.

**“Dams are not the bringers of green energy people think”**

“Dams divide, rivers unite. The government is brainwashing our people; the dam must be stopped.”

These harsh words of warning are in stark contrast with the smooth tones of jazz which cushion the atmosphere of the trendy open-air bar where we are sat. Milica Kankaraš is a musician, activist and all-round environmentalist.

I met her in the sweltering capital of **Montenegro**, Podgorica. Anyone who has visited in August like I did will know the pleasure of a city situated in a bowl of mountains, blocking any benign breezes and concentrating the heat like a magnifying glass. As I stepped off a bus and strolled past a pharmacy, its neon green sign signified a cool **42C**.

We were sitting at a table next to a riverbed which, when not dried up by the late summer sun, brings a gentle flow of water stemming from the Ribnica River. The bar is a popular

meeting place for artists, musicians and other free-thinking souls – the perfect place to receive an introduction to the plight of the Komarnica.

“Dams are not the bringers of green energy and prosperity people think,” says Milica Kankaraš.

Recent decades have seen a spree of dam construction across Europe, particularly in the Balkans with their abundance of mountains and fast flowing rivers. Driven by political greed to make money from hydropower, dams drastically alter river ecosystems. By stopping the **flow of water**, they also stop the natural flow of nutrients downstream and block any migrating fish trying to swim upstream to breed. The reservoirs also flood surrounding habitats, altering soil constitutions and vegetation; one study on the River Minho in Portugal showed a drastic decrease in plant diversity in the areas surrounding a dam. This lack of diverse vegetation reduces suitable habitat for terrestrial species too, meaning the impact of dams goes further than just altering water flows.

What’s more, the energy generated by dams is tiny compared to that of wind or solar, the construction process takes longer and, once built, dams rely on rainfall – an evermore unpredictable phenomenon with current climate change. Further still, far from being green alternatives to fossil fuels, the reservoirs created by dams actually add greenhouse gases to the atmosphere; as flooding large areas of land leads to the breakdown of microorganisms, starting chemical reactions which produce methane.

The political situation in Montenegro is dire; corrupt officials are seeing the dam construction as a fine opportunity to receive international investment. However, the project to build the Komarnica dam, a major part of the state’s National Energy Development Strategy, is shared between two corporations: **Elektroprivreda Crne Gore and Elektroprivreda Srbije** . The latter is Serbian, meaning much of any potential revenue will seep across the border. Meanwhile the government tells locals the dam will create jobs in construction and tourism, offering 2,000 euros in compensation to those who will be relocated. Whilst this may seem a meagre amount in return for losing your home and livelihood, this is a sum many local farmers have never seen.

### **Empty promises of prosperity**

The next day I would discover just how effective the government’s dubious narrative really was. After a night in a hostel and a morning spent exploring the old town powered on by strong locally brewed espresso (half the shot was sugar, a combination of glucose and caffeine which equates to rocket fuel) and burek (a Balkan pastry gloriously stuffed with homemade cottage cheese), I found myself on a bus winding its way along hairpin bends towards Montenegro’s mountainous north.

After jumping out at a remote crossroads without any phone signal, I waited for my lift. I was to be camping at a small homestead, Eagle's Nest, so named for the pair of golden eagles which can be seen nesting on the canyon cliffs over which the restaurant sits. Business is a family affair here, and I had been offered a lift by the owner's father Milan. He turned up a short while later, bumping along the gravel road in a battered **BMW** and greeting me with a welcoming, toothy grin. I got in and he proceeded to enthusiastically tell me about the local area (I can only assume) in Montenegrin (of which I understood nothing), colourful Slavic intonations punctuating his jovial exclamations.

At one point he stopped the car on the track and ran round to open my door. I got out and, following his pointing finger and proud gaze, realized what he had been chattering about.

"Kanjon Nevidio!" he exclaimed, a deep-rooted pride evident in his voice.

"Divno!" I replied, utilizing one of the handful of words of his language I knew.

**"Incredible."**

And it was - forest-topped limestone cliffs stood either of an unseen abyss of hidden diversity far below. My first meeting with the **Komarnica** was only made more spell binding when I got to Eagle's Nest. After another few kilometres along a track clinging to the cliffs, I was warmly greeted by the owner, Bato, and his wife. Although I had arrived in the middle of a busy lunchtime shift, Bato took the time to show me the best camp spot and excitedly pointed out the golden eagles' nest. The restaurant itself was situated on top of the cliffs and had an incredible view over one end of the canyon which guests could admire from hay bale sofas.

The tourism industry has only recently reached this part of rural Montenegro, a developing Balkan nation, many of whose rural population scrape by as subsistence farmers, much as their forebears had for hundreds of years. It was easy to romanticise the place; colourfully painted wooden houses dotted the landscape, whilst horses and carts regularly replace cars to ferry hay and other goods between farmsteads. The Durmitor mountains lurk in the background, their indigo, snow-capped peaks whispering ancient tales of folklore. Wolves, bears, lynx and boar still roam the forests, apex predators which manage rare, intact European ecosystems but are the cause of much grievance for pastoralists when their fancies turn to livestock. Education and infrastructure are only just beginning to wind their way up to these parts; life remains hard for many who live here.

"You see that canyon?" Bato asked me.

**"300 metres deep.** Every day my grandmother used to climb down to fetch water and carry it back up with her. Every day, through summer and winter, through sun, rain and snow. Life is not easy here, you know. Very difficult. Our village, we need water for tourism,

and tourism for jobs. Without jobs, we are just farming and living the way my grandparents did, and their grandparents before them.”

I peered over the rocky edge of the cliff, loose stones tumbling down, bouncing off the trunks of shrubs and trees which dared to grow in the face of such adversity. Although I’m typically all for high octane activities, I could barely fathom descending into the canyon in one piece, let alone reascending carrying litres of water. Now pipes supply Bato and his customers with water, but his words made me realize how the prospect of economic uplift is a hope that many cling on to here.

One of the promises sold to villagers is that of the dam bringing new jobs in construction and operation. But the harsh reality is that most locals do not have the education or experience, meaning the salaries will leave the area. Moreover, the noise and destruction caused by the building works will destroy the natural peace and beauty which the tourists come for; such was the case in another town, Plužine, further down the river when the Mratinje Dam was built in 1975.

### **Lost in bureaucracy**

“The dam is economically, socially and environmentally nonsense.”

**Kirsi Hyvaerinen** is a Finnish-born sustainable tourism expert who has been living and working in Montenegro since 2006. She lives locally, having fallen in love with the natural tranquility of the area and, after 6 years in the capital city, decided to make it her home. She met me at Eagle’s Nest and we talked whilst perched on a rock overlooking the canyon, joined by her two rescue dogs Vanja and Puppy who periodically interjected with yips and snuffles to give their opinion.

She tells me that the Komarnica is an official candidate to become an Emerald site and has a high chance of becoming a NATURA 2000 site, part of a network of protected areas of special conservation interest thanks to their ecological diversity and integrity . The valley also has the potential to become part of the **UNESCO-protected** Durmitor National Park, however neither of these concessions will be made if the dam is built.

What’s more, no honest Ecological Impact Assessment (EIA) has been done; the ecological data for the EIA was 30 years old, leaving species counts and ecosystem measurements wildly out of date. The project is set to cost over 300 million euros, but a lack of funding has delayed the start; Kirsi believes this is a gross underestimate of the costs and that the project, if started, will most likely grind to a halt, leaving the area in a no-man’s-land of disruption and construction.

“Montenegro is a prime location for solar power, receiving up to 11 hours of sunshine per day in summer,” she tells me.

“Equipped with solar panels, individual households could directly benefit from the local climate instead.”

In her experience, sustainable socio-economic alternatives are very obvious, and ignored. The area already belongs to the transnational Via Dinarica and as we walked back passing the **Canyon Nevidio**, Kirsi also explained the national network of the Top Trails, a national network of cycling trails allowing users to create their journeys through mountains, lakes and coastlines.

“Rural tourism with local households has, especially post-pandemic, good opportunities in organic agriculture, adventure travel, camping, hiking, cycling, canyoning, horseback riding, wildlife conservation tourism... all with family entrepreneurs,” she explains.

“Young people do not need **hydropower plants**. What they need is good management of the destination, rooted in the local communities and their benefits. This takes a strategy, with an action plan and accountable people, good communication, education, accessible roads, and modern marketing. None of this is currently happening here yet, despite the potential.” In September 2022 a complaint was submitted to the Bern Convention, the first international treaty on nature conservation. Despite support from the Convention, progress is slow and halting the dam construction remains a bureaucratic headache.

### **A warning of what may come**

The next day, after a night thick with the chorus of cicadas and syrupy light of a full moon, I rose early to be met by Dejan, a local river guide and activist. A Montenegrin, he has been guiding visitors through the mountains and rivers for years; today I was joining a group through the Nevidio Canyon. Canyoning, also known as gorge scrambling, involves hiking, scrambling and swimming your way downstream through a river. In our case, we donned 7mm wetsuits to shield our cores against the icy waters which tumbled down from the Durmitor massif to the north and plunged in.

Two hours were spent in the ravine, the cliffs sometimes becoming so narrow that you had to squeeze sideways to fit through. Boulders followed pools followed cliffs, several metres high, to be jumped off, the rocks slippery under foot and hand as I continued to scramble through. The sensation of your body being submerged in freezing water whilst your head roasts in 30C only added to the strange, otherworldly feel of the canyon. Only the occasional plastic bottle caught in an eddy burst the bubble of untouched nature, floating sentinels of the human world encroaching on this hidden paradise.

After a final leap down a waterfall, suddenly the cliffs widened and a brilliant sunlight filled the pool where we now gathered. We had traversed the **Nevidio**, seen the Unseen. After a climb up the cliffs and hike along the rocky path, we returned and re-entered the human

world. Part of Dejan's tour experience for guests is to treat them to a hearty Montenegrin lunch after their adventures. As we sat chatting, everyone was in similar awe to me at the natural beauty of the rivers and mountains. Clearly the touristic value here lies in preserving the ecosystems.

After lunch, I hitched a ride with Dejan across to another town, Plužine. When the Mratinje Dam was built, it flooded the area and created Piva Lake. Upended locals were promised the lake would bring in tourists and jobs, but it seems that these never materialised in any tangible number.

As we bounced along a track through the mountains in a well-used Jeep, Dejan tells me more about his love for the region. An avid astrophotographer, he founded the [NGO Nikta](#), dedicated to protecting the country's night sky.

"Montenegro is the only country in the world where you can see the Milky Way whilst standing in the capital city," he proudly tells me.

I was privileged to see Montenegro's stunning night sky firsthand the previous few nights; thousands of stars studding a backdrop of deepest, inky black. You would not be blamed for thinking you had found yourself in the middle of a desert, thousands of miles from any town or city.

"I started researching light pollution and its effects on ecosystems and humans alike after really getting into astrophotography," continues Dejan.

"I want to get Montenegro a Dark Sky Park status; then we can benefit from tourists coming to see our nature, and people are incentivized to protect it."

What was most obvious as Dejan talked was his immense pride in the Komarnica and Montenegrin nature. He dappled insights into the socio-political situation and local history with colourful stories of outdoors adventures. The Komarnica is his home and livelihood; if dammed, he loses both.

The conversation abruptly stops when we reach Piva Lake, my final destination in [Montenegro](#). A bright blue mass of water, surrounded by a dirty, grey stain runs along the valley sides, like the scum line after you pull a bath plug. Rocks, rubble and discarded planks of wood lie rotting at the water's edge. The reservoir massacred much of the virgin forest that once lay either side of the river.

The water was a strange, milky blue. It seemed somewhat in discord with the deep jade of the forest high above. The bare, exposed rock between the lake and the trees served as a visual reminder of the current disconnect between humans and nature; an ecologically dead no-man's-land continually expanding, scarring the landscape. This, it seemed, was the end of the line for these valley forests.

**A warning of what is to come if the Komarnica is dammed.**

Source: [Suston](#)