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After touring Mamula Island, Montenegro's newest luxury attraction, fashion designer **Tony Ward** immediately inquired about shooting his cruise campaign at the boutique hotel, housed in a painstakingly restored fortress built in 1853 by Austro Hungarian general Lazarus von Mamula.

With its ornate stone balcony worthy of **"Romeo and Juliet"** and panoramic views of Boka Bay and its crystalline waters, one can understand why **Ward** would seize on the circular venue, which is sure to lure more jet-setters with its calling cards of privacy and pampering.

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Beirut-based Ward had also learned that the property, whose **32 rooms** and suites just started welcoming guests, was already the site of nuptials for a Lebanese couple.

"A lot of brides today look for destination weddings," said Ward, whose atelier dresses about 500 ceremonies a year. "And **[Mamula Island]** is a great destination: It's a place where you can have fun and enjoy your guests and everything, so brides can think of Montenegro as the next destination for a wedding."

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After swimming off Mamula's pebble beach, and touring its sun deck, pools, eateries and vast spa with its multiple "ritual rooms," Ward was the headline attraction at the fifth annual International Fashion Festival in nearby **Porto Montenegro.**

He paraded about 35 looks from his fall 2023 ready-to-wear collection, strong on cape-shouldered gowns and lavish embroideries.

About 1,200 people attended the two-day, invitation-only event, including high-end tourists, government officials, media bigwigs and local social-media stars, many of them dressed to the nines.

The festival, which attracted such sponsors as Hublot, Mercedes-Benz and the swanky Regent hotel, was also broadcast on national television in Montenegro, a small country prized for its rugged mountains, medieval villages and spectacular Adriatic coastline, dotted in summer with mega yachts.

Montenegro has vastly expanded its luxury attractions in recent years and events like the fashion festival also boost tourism, with the Regent enjoying a 98 percent occupancy rate and christening a new Bulgari boutique, its opening party partly overlapping with Ward's runway show a gemstone's throw away.

Ward began visiting Montenegro about 16 years ago at the invitation of his Russian clients, who spent summers in Budva, prized for its sandy beaches and high-octane nightlife.

Today he describes Montenegro as a "melting pot" of tourists from a variety of nationalities, including French, Swiss, British and Americans, in addition to those from nearby countries.

"Serbians and Montenegrins really appreciate this country. They realize that they live in one of the most beautiful corners in the world, and they want to take advantage of it," he said.

Ward and his team certainly did, dining al fresco at the recently refurbished and expanded Hyatt Regency Kotor Bay Resort, and at the Tivat boutique hotel La Roche — until a thunderstorm forced them to finish their meal indoors.

It was Syrian-born designer Rami Al Ali's first time in Porto Montenegro, and he saw the International Fashion Festival as a chance to recruit new clients, and reconnect with Russian ones, who are returning now that there are more daily **flights from Istanbul to Tivat airport.**

"It's attracting the crème de la crème of jet-setters looking for new, interesting destinations," the couturier mused. "It's like Monaco – but a modern, updated version."

Al Ali paraded a retrospective of his designs alongside many looks from his spring 2023 couture collection. He also dressed "Hotel Balkan" actress Sanja Popović and local influencer **Tijana Osmanagić** for the festival.

Agatha Ruiz de la Prada couldn't make it herself to **Montenegro** owing to national elections in her native Spain, but she dispatched her head of design Javier Carrera and communications executive Catarina Valente to represent her colorful, upbeat lifestyle brand.

De la Prada puts on as many as 70 fashion shows a year, finding it hard to say no to any invitation.

"We are an easygoing brand," Valente explained, noting that models are always encouraged to smile, give high-fives as they pass each other, or make heart emojis with their hands. "Agatha is very much against the femme fatale. She's all about the femme felice" — **felice being the Spanish word for happy.**

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