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Sarajevo: perfect city break where East meets West and a town steeped in history looks to the future

A three-day tour of Sarajevo reveals a city like no other, where cathedral and mosque, war-torn history and future hope, Eastern and Western culture, meet. Xenia Taliotis reports



Sarajevo as the sun sets , the faithful are called to prayer, and spices scent the air

“Allāhu akbar, Allāhu akbar, Ash-hadu an-lā ilāha illā allāh.” We arrive in Sarajevo as the muezzin calls the faithful to prayer, the light is ebbing and the sun is setting in swirls of dusky pink and orange sky.

It's Sunday and the soft breeze is spiced with cinnamon and smoked paprika from the cafés and ćevabdžinicas that crowd the labyrinth of 15th-century alleyways in Bašcaršija, the Ottoman bazaar in Stari Grad, the old district.

Every table is taken by groups sharing plates overweight with the local dish, ćevapčići (something like/nothing like kebab served with cheese and chopped onions), bourek, cakes the size of pyramids and džezva of grainy coffee.

The city feels more east than west and yet if you look up to the heavens you'll find spires stretching for their god alongside the minarets reaching for theirs.

The Jerusalem of Europe

Sarajevo is a city like no other, known as the Jerusalem of Europe because its cathedrals, main mosque and synagogue are within a few metres of each other. I would rename it Sarajevo the Survivor if I could, in recognition of how it has risen from invasions, fires, floods and bombs to stand as proud as its people, its eyes and hopes on its future even if its heart is shattered by its past.



The city centre shopping mall is part of a contemporary Sarajevo you may be less familiar with

Bosnia's capital is the starting point for my luxury escorted coach tour of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Our vehicle is a customised Mercedes Benz with wi-fi and extra leg room, we stay in four- and five-star hotels, and we're accompanied throughout by Karin, an exemplary tour director who acts as a personal concierge to each one of us, making sure we all have the holiday we've dreamed of.

Coach travel has suffered from the successful but unedifying TV programme Coach Trip, which takes groups of sweating and often swearing strangers on trips across Europe, but the difference between that and our experience is so vast as to be unquantifiable.



Aškenaška sinagoga, a Moorish Revival building and the last functioning synagogue in Sarajevo

A trip through history in Stari Grad

On the first day of our six-day taster of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia, Karin has booked a local expert, Dino Lemeš, to take us round. His tour is remarkable, his wit and wisdom keeping us all – a much-travelled/seen-it-all group – riveted. In three hours he walks us through the centuries, tracing the invisible footsteps of Illyrians and Romans and the still visible ones of Ottomans and Austrians, of Muslims, Christians and Jews.

We visit the 16th-century, multi-domed Gazi Husrev-Bey Mosque, the Morića Han (a fully functioning caravanserai where emerald, amethyst and ruby lanterns hang like jewels above us), wind in and out of medieval streets, and look into nook-and-cranny copper workshops.

Stari Grad is no museum piece but a vital, sophisticated hub. It's the city's beating heart, pumping locals and visitors, buyers and sellers through its arterial alleyways and for a few hours, we meld into that ebb and flow.



The Morića Han, Sarajevo's medieval caravanserai, now famous for carpets and coffee

From Ottoman to Austro-Hungarian architecture

Away from Bašcaršija we seem to find the point at which east meets west: a compass embedded in a pavement. We look east towards the Ottoman quarter before turning 180° and leaping through more than 300 years to take in the splendour of Sarajevo's 19th-century Austro-Hungarian architecture.

The most dazzling example of this is the neo-Moorish city hall, now the National and University Library of Bosnia-Herzegovina, which re-opened last year after having been razed by Serbian shelling in 1992 with the loss of two million books.

Then it's on to the Latin Bridge where, on 28 June 1914, Gavrilo Princip, a 19-year-old Bosnian Serb, shot Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary and his wife Sophie. Princip's bullets killed the couple and tore first through the fabric of the region and then through the fabric of Europe as nation after nation fell into the pit of hell that was World War I.



The Latin Bridge over the River Miljacka: the northern end is where Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in 1914

Reminders of war, symbols of the future

The Great War redrew the map of Europe and created Yugoslavia, a new multinational state that exploded into its own hell in 1992. Signs of the Bosnian War are as prevalent as the signs of rejuvenation. Look beyond the five-star hotels, glistening glass office blocks and elegant café bars that are springing up throughout the city, and you will see them.

You'll see them in the brutal Communist-era apartment blocks that have been brutalised further by bullet holes, in the young trees that line the roads – their predecessors having been chopped for firewood during the 1,425-day siege of the city – and in the 'Sarajevo roses', mortar-shell potholes that have been filled with red resin in remembrance of the 11,000 lives lost.



The buildings and roads are full of reminders of Sarajevo's war-torn past



The view from Kovači cemetery: reminders of the war are never far away

But the most poignant reminder is the Tunnel of Hope, the 0.8m-wide, 1.6m-high, 850m-long lifeline that linked the besieged city to Bosnian-held territories beyond the airport.

Armaments, newspapers, fuel and colossal determination and resilience made their way along that tunnel, carried by people who sometimes had to wade chest deep in water to get from one end to the other. It and they are the reason the city did not capitulate.

That night, local people welcome us into their homes and cook for us – as part of an initiative supported by our travel operator, Insight Vacations, and others. Our hosts are warm and gracious, happy to talk about the war, but happier still to talk about their future. We raise glasses of rakija, slam them back in one, and toast their aspirations – as big, bold and beautiful as their city.

Mostar and the Stari Most bridge



The Neretva river and the beautiful region of Mostar are a must-see on a trip to Sarajevo

The next morning a spectacular drive along the cool green Neretva river through limestone gorges and plunging valleys takes us to Mostar, a World Heritage site. En route we stop at the Zdrava Voda restaurant, which specialises in lamb roasted on a river-powered spit. The stopover is what Insight calls a “signature moment,” a treat arranged by the tour director. The meat is so tender that all it takes is a gentle nudge with a fork to knock it off the bone.

Mostar itself is a beauty, with a radiant example of rebirth in the shape of its magnificent 16th-century bridge, Stari Most – rebuilt stone by stone following its destruction during the war. Bridge-jumpers dive from its apex once they’ve collected enough money from spectators, and pretty cafés sit on terraces along the river banks.

The town stops you in your tracks, not least because the lanes are cobbled with luminous marble stones that are as slippery and smooth as silk. They arrest you, force you to look and see, to hear and listen, to imprint those immortal views not on to a memory card but on to your own consciousness. And to pledge to return. Amen to that. Allāhu akbar.



The 16th-century Stari Most bridge was rebuilt after being destroyed in the war and became a well-known symbol



The Bosniak Institute, in a renovated Turkish bathhouse, includes a library and art collection focusing on Bosniak culture

Xenia Taliotis is an editor and writer. She has edited magazines for Tesco, UBS, Barclays and American Express and writes on lifestyle, travel, business, finance and everything else in between. She tweets [@XeniaTaliotis](https://twitter.com/XeniaTaliotis).