

<http://www.independent.ie/life/travel/europe/sarajevo-a-simmering-new-city-break-31309127.html>

Sarajevo: A simmering new city break

Bewitched by Bosnia-Herzegovina

Tanya Sweney PUBLISHED 21/06/2015 | 02:30





Tanya Sweeney ducks under tunnels and sashays down alleyways in Bosnia-Herzegovina to find a simmering new city break.

It's not often that one gets woken by the Muslim call to prayer at 5am, flings open the hotel curtains and sees crisp Alpine hills.

But that's precisely the sort of city that Sarajevo is: a simmering mass of delightful contradictions. Old meets new; Eastern and Western cultures divinely collide. Yet amid these bracing vistas, reminders of war are rarely far from view. Muslim cemeteries dominate the cosy landscape; as unsettling as they are beautiful.

Mention to anyone that you're spending four days in Sarajevo, and reactions are likely to range from the impressed to, well, perplexed.

Unlike its next-door neighbour Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina has yet to become a careworn tourist spot for European visitors (Koreans, meanwhile, have been beating an enthusiastic path to Sarajevo for some time). The city's tourism scene is very much a work in progress, a nascent industry showing much promise. But this lack of pretension, or even preparation, is a good thing. The chips-with-everything brigade seems so very far away.

Generally speaking, regions that have seen conflict and war recently, and at close range, boast their own unique energy. Berlin, Beirut and Belfast all crackle with renewed vim and youthful vigour. Sarajevo is well on its way to joining the ranks, too, but for now, as travel experiences go, it's as novel, as surprising, as bold and as humbling as it comes.



A marketplace in the city

You're likely to find pockets of creativity and the buds of a vibrant hipster scene around the Srednja skola primijenjenih umjetnosti (the Sarajevo college of art, at Gimnazijska 11).

Further down the Mijacka River that cuts through downtown Sarajevo, there are landmarks inextricably linked with the city's compelling, tragic history. The Latin Bridge is within spitting distance of the spot where Franz Ferdinand was murdered by Gavrilo Princip, thus igniting World War I (the latter survived a suicide attempt by jumping into the three-inch deep river and taking a dodgy cyanide pill).

Further down the river, the Vrbana Bridge is the backdrop for the enduring tale of the 'Romeo & Juliet of Sarajevo'. Bosko Brckic (a Serb) and Admir Ismi (a Muslim) were shot in 1993 as they tried to flee the besieged city.

Evidence of Bosnia's poignant history is everywhere, but the Sarajevo Tunnel (or the 'Tunnel of Hope') is the best place to access a potted history of the siege; arms and fuel were transported through the 850m-long lifeline deployed by those in Bosnian-held territories. It's here, essentially that Bosnia's survivalist spirit is writ large. Locals haven't forgotten the conflict, yet they are stoic.

"The new generations will be burdened by older generations," reflects our 30-something tour guide, Dino Lemes. "Why bother crying over your dead brother or son? We just move on."

It's not all about conflict and memorials, of course.

The old, Turkish-style area of Bascarsija is the perfect place to get lost in labyrinthine streets, air thick with the smell of local burek pastries and strong coffee. Bosnian coffee and Turkish delight is as local an experience as you'll find. Many cafes pulverise roasted coffee beans into a fine powder, brewing it in a copper-plated pot with a long neck (*adzezva*).

The result is a frothy but potent coffee with plenty of kick.



4 Sobe Gospode Safije

Tours operated by British company Insight Vacations also offer a 'Signature' experience that mainlines right into the essence of the city. As part of a first-class coach tour that takes in vast swathes of the Dalmatian coast, visitors can not only visit the homes - often in former communist blocks - of local people in Sarajevo, but feast on their homemade fare. Far from seeing tourists as an intrusion, these locals relish the chance to meet visitors and open up about their lives.

It's an authentic and unusual experience offered by a company that clearly believes that there's more to a travel experience than gazing at landmarks.

After feasting on authentic dishes like Bays soup, stuffed vegetables and baklava with our affable host, Amila, we tap right into the rhythm of life beyond the city's better-known spots. It's not a typical tourist experience, and it leaves our group humbled,

awed, and all the better for it. It's clear that Bosnia's redoubtable people are one of its greatest draws.

Of course, Sarajevo is teeming with stuff to see, too: Stari Grad, the old district that serves as the city's epicentre, is teeming with 15th-century alleyways that lead to the Bascarsija neighbourhood and the bustling, immaculately preserved Ottoman bazaar, for example. At its 16th-century peak, over 12,000 shops populated the area; it has scaled down somewhat since then, but is no less buzzy (it's also a great spot to try some Turkish coffee).

The Gazi Husrev-Beg Mosque (named after one of the city's great patrons), is also a magnificent and imposing building to behold. It is framed, curiously enough, by cathedrals and synagogues, yet more evidence of the city's hodge-podge landscape.

Sarajevo's past couldn't be more rich and absorbing, and with a story already on every corner, its future is going to be every bit as intriguing to watch unfold.

My advice? Get there soon - before the masses make a move.



Beautiful Bosnian countryside

What to pack

Irish visitors don't need a visa to visit Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the currency is the convertible Mark (though many places accept cards). Women should pack a

headscarf if they plan to visit mosques. Temperatures are high during the summer, but weather is changeable, so dress in layers.

Getting there

Tanya travelled as a guest of Insight Vacations (*insightvacations.com*) on a portion of their Imperial Capitals & The Dalmatian Riviera tour. The full tour (15 days) starts from €2,795 per twin share and includes Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Hungary and Austria. Insight Vacations offers 113 journeys to more countries across Europe than any other operator.

Where to eat

4 Sobe Gospodje Safije (pictured above) specialises in Bosnian-European fusion. Zdrava Voda nestled in the Jablanica hilltops between Sarajevo and Mostar, uses a river-powered spit to roast whole lambs. Bosanska Kuca is the place for cevapcici - grilled sausages and diced onions stuffed into pita, and a prime slice of local down-at-heel fare.

Irish Independent